

Night Talk



Nightwood — a unique feminist theatre with a non-traditional perspective

A Very Fertile Imagination

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Susan G. Cole, a political and feminist writer, is senior editor of *NOW* magazine and author of *Pornography and The Sex Crisis*. She was a Director of Nightwood Theatre from 198x-89 and is the playwright of *A Fertile Imagination*.

Night Talk: This play is quite a departure from your usual writing. For one thing, it is a comedy. Perhaps the first thing people will ask is: "Is Susan Cole funny?"

Susan G. Cole: (laughing) I hope so! The play is, anyway. Everyone seems to be working to make it funny. For me, I spend most of my time researching and writing about things that are very upsetting to people. Once a year I would get involved in the Five Minute Feminist Cabaret and would be reminded of how good it felt to be entertaining people instead of upsetting them. It's not that the other work does not have to be done and that I would stop doing it either, because you can't blind yourself to the pain of what women go through in our lives, but then again there's a space for opening out to something, you know, more futuristic and ... funny!

NT: Could you take us through the evolution of the play, from concept to full-production?

SGC: Well, about four years ago my partner and I were going through some of the things that are touched on in the play — we were trying to figure out how to have a baby together. The situation was awfully frustrating but there were also things that were intrinsically funny. I had been participating in FemCab and I said that I would do a five minute monologue [on the subject]. And ... people

really laughed! It seemed to cross a lot of different sensibilities and communities. That's what I remember most. It wasn't just one particular group of people who were touched by it, many were — anyone who ever wanted to be pregnant; lesbians; lesbians who didn't want to be pregnant; women who had been pregnant; even men, too. I think it was Kate Lushington who said "I think there's a play here". And I thought that that was ridiculous, that I was not a playwright, and that I would never be one.

But she said "Why don't you do a few scenes in *Groundswell*?" and [eventually] we did that workshop [in 1989]. Well, I sat at the back of the theatre and thought "Great! I can entertain people and I don't even have to be up there doing it!" That's the best part. Let them do it all!

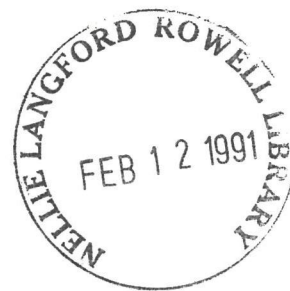
NT: "Collaborative" is a word that is often used to define Nightwood. Has this held true for you?

SGC: Yes, it does anyway, but also play writing in itself is collaborative and I hadn't known how it worked. I had no idea. I was accustomed, as a journalist, to turn a story around pretty quickly. I would write 2-3,000 words and perhaps a cantankerous editor might diddle a bit with it. But never had I had any kind of intervention like I experienced in that workshop. The actors — *the actors* — came in and the first thing they said was "Well, we think the play starts at the second scene" and threw out my beautiful first scene. Out the window! *Out the window!*

— cont'd on page 3; see Cole



Early sketch by Teresa Przybylski for poster design.



Inside :

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*A Word, or two,
from the
Artistic Director*

"Everything's coming up roses and daffodils..."

A strangely springlike optimistic phrase to be playing through my mind in the deep midwinter as the world prepares for war in the Gulf, but the old Ethel Merman song is what runs through my head whenever I think of **Susan G. Cole**, author of *A Fertile Imagination*, long time Board member of Nightwood Theatre, and frequent host of the *Five Minute Feminist Cabaret*. There she was in her tuxedo, one of Ethel's "boys" lipsynching and highkicking her way to the rousing finale of the very first Femcab. And now, a mere eight years later, Nightwood Theatre is on the brink of a major production of her first play, *A Fertile Imagination*. Such is the gestation of a new playwright.

The artistic team assembled to bring her fertile imaginings to the stage is a heady mix of old and new faces. **Kate Lynch**, our beloved Constance from last season's *Goodnight Desdemona*, (*Good Morning Juliet*) by Ann-Marie MacDonald, returns to play Del the ascerbic columnist ("Ms Manners for the militant set"). **Robin Craig**, accomplished comedienne recently seen in *Bag Babies* at Theatre Passe Muraille, plays Del's lover Rita who wants a baby. Long term Nightwood Associate and Play Group member **Patricia Idlette** plays Marge the sperm courier, Ms Martel the chilly lawyer, and everybody else. The poster has



been designed by **Teresa Przybylski**, a fine new artist member of Nightwood's Board. Lighting designer **Lesley Wilkinson** (*Desdemona*) joins set and costume designer **Christine Plunkett** (*Groundswell '89*) to enhance the creative crew. And of

course, writing this on the eve of the first rehearsal day, I am filled with a burgeoning excitement, since this will mark the first show I have directed for Nightwood since my appointment in 1988.

Nightwood has always believed in artistic collaborations, and I come to *Fertile* fresh from one of a very different kind. *Cinderella: The Real Story*, my feminist reworking of the familiar tale, just completed a successful run in Edmonton, commissioned by Northern Light Theatre and directed by their Artistic Director **Gyllian Raby** with music by **Darcy Phillips**. Sparked by late night conversations during the *Desdemona* stop-over in that city, our rapport conquered time and distance to bring to life some thoughts on women and power in the guise of an old style British Panto.

Thanks to **Jim Warren, Conrad Coates, Maggie Huculak, Karen Woolridge, Janet Burke**, Play Group member **Jennie Dean**, and **Andy Massingham** for their sterling and foolish workshop contributions in the Fall.

Happy New Year, and as her pet parrot urges a reluctant Cinderella: "Imagine life the way you want it - and wish!" and may all your imaginings be fertile in 1991.

- **Kate Lushington**

Costume sketches
by designer
Christine Plunkett



Coming Events

A Fertile Imagination
Previews \$10 Jan 30 -Feb1
Opening Feb 2 - Feb. 24
Tues-Thurs \$14
Fri-Sat \$16; Sun mat PWYC
at The Poor Alex
296 Brunswick Ave.

**The 9th Annual
Five Minute Feminist
Cabaret**
March 11, 1991

The Colour Collective
Animated by Kate Lushington and Djanet Sears. April 1991
Nightwood Studio

Nightwood Gala Event
April 1991

Do The Thing Right!
Focussing on work by Ahdri Zhina Mandiela, Diana Braithwaite and Monique Mojica. Nightwood's contribution to the International Women's Playwrighting Conference. May 1991
Nightwood Studio

The Nightshift
 - emphasises the collaborative crucible rather than the lonely garret as a means to theatrical creation. Come join an informal group of writers and directors who will meet on a regular basis at the new space to read work and shoot the breeze, keeping the juices flowing after the Groundswell excitement abates. Watch for readings of new work by Margaret Hollingsworth, Diana Braithwaite and Robin Endres in February.

Board News ...

The Board and staff of Nightwood met for a retreat in October at the Kempenfelt Centre near Barrie. Discussions around our definition of feminist and anti-racist theatre, as well as the financial constraints of our artistic ambitions, were frank, open and very useful.

During a special meeting about the artistic vision of Nightwood, it was agreed that the title of Artistic Coordinator be changed to Artistic Director, to better reflect the duties of the position.

The Annual General Meeting, held in November, reported that Nightwood's deficit had been *reduced by half*. The news of this financial success was received with much joy and relief, and a determination to eliminate the thing altogether.

We are also relieved that Wendy Elliott, Djanet Sears and Sophia Sperdakos have agreed to extend their terms as Board members until June 1991. How-

ever, at that time their terms, and those of others, will expire. This means that there will be a number of vacancies on the Board. Nightwood has several committees: Planning, Fundraising, Nominating, and a new one – Communications (which is looking at the visual image of our company and how we communicate it). If you would like to join this dynamic and provocative company, on the Board or on a committee, please call the office for more information.

– Phyllis Berck

New Director: Teresa Przybylski joined the Board in the fall of 1990. She is an accomplished architect and set designer, most recently designing the sets and costumes for YPT's *Mirror Game*. Teresa also designed Nightwood's new office and rehearsal space and the poster for *A Fertile Imagination*. Teresa is also a member of the Play Group and the Communications Committee.

Cole Interview cont'd

Founders

Cynthia Grant
 Kim Renders
 Mary Vingoe
 Maureen White

Board of Directors

Kay Armatage
 Phyllis Berck
 Wendy J. Elliott
 Patricia Idlette
 Astrid Janson
 Marion MacKenzie
 Shirley Netten
 Teresa Przybylski
 Judith Ramirez
 Djanet Sears
 Jo Anne Sommers
 Sophia Sperdakos

Staff

Kate Lushington
Artistic Director
 Kate Tucker
Business Manager
 Jennifer Trant
Administrator
 Kim Brown
Co-op Student

Playwright-in-Residence

(through Ontario Arts Council)
 Diana Braithwaite

And I suddenly realized what was going on here. I mean, it was out of my hands – but in a good way – because I also learned that it couldn't be finished without this process. So we worked very well together.

We were very fortunate to get Robin Craig and Kate Lynch back to complete the process because they had really given a lot to it [in *Groundswell*]. I think that kind of continuity helps.

NT: Re-writing is going on almost daily. Can you remove yourself from the personal nature of it?

SGC: Well, I would say yes... but it's hardest for me when they want to cut the jokes... then I go out of my mind. But if something doesn't ring with the right emotion, I'll believe them. But there are some things I'll stand behind – it hasn't happened that often. You want to know something about this whole process? There is an enormous amount of intelligence going into this thing. The actors are very astute, they're having a lot of input; (I already mentioned Robin and Kate); Patricia Idlette is playing *four* different roles and she's been able to turn them around, every time; the director,

Kate Lushington, is really skilled at getting at the ideas and making them clearer. You get a sense of a real think tank going on here. And yet the emotions of the play are very strong. It has the right combination.

NT: Do you have any words of wisdom for other women who are first time playwrights?

SGC: You have to give it over. You have to work with people you trust so that when it comes time for the circle of creation to be completed, you can let them do it. (The other thing is: always over-write. You never know what they're going to like!)

NT: Why should people see *A Fertile Imagination*?

SGC: I can guarantee that they have never seen anything like this in their lives! I really believe that it puts a different spin on the issue of reproductive choice; it is unique. If people want to have a laugh and see some extraordinary performances, the Poor Alex is the place to be.

– interview by Wendy J. Elliott

Summerfolk previews February 13, opens Feb. 14, and runs until Feb. 23 (dark Tues. Feb. 19), at the Studio Theatre, Harbourfront, at 7:30 pm, Sunday Matinee 2 pm. All shows are free: call the Box Office: 777-0276 to reserve your seat.

Join us after the matinee on Sunday February 17 for coffee and cookies and an informal discussion with Lynda and two guests about the director's process.



Reminder:
We've moved!

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Night Talk Publisher:
Wendy J. Elliott

Lynda Hill Traded to Equity Showcase Theatre for Future Considerations!

Well, all right, that's not strictly true, but now that I have your attention, I would like to explain why the invaluable Lynda Hill, Director of November's outstanding Groundswell Festival, will not be around Nightwood Theatre for six weeks or thereabouts. On January 2, 1991, Lynda began rehearsals for Maxim Gorky's play *Summerfolk*, in a translation by Edward Gilbert and John Tillinger. A classic of modern world theatre, the four act play is a long way from the kind of one-on-one work with contemporary Canadian women playwrights that has been the basis of Lynda's career to date. She will be dealing with a finished script thus concentrating her considerable energies on refining her process as a director, from research on the playwright and his society to auditions, work with designers and of course staging for a cast of 19 – a situation she may rarely meet again in the recession-bound Canadian theatre.

This of course is both the joy and challenge of Equity Showcase Theatre. No one who works on a showcase production gets paid - causing obvious difficulties in scheduling when participants must continue to accept paying work to keep body and soul together. With a mandate for the development of actors and directors, not playwrights, Equity Showcase provides administrative

and moral support for their productions, from publicity, rehearsal space and a technician to cookies and a ready supply of jokes, shoulders to cry on and ears for listening.

In a perfect world, young, talented directors like Lynda Hill would test their mettle on a variety of plays - from new works to the classics to collective creations - and would be paid to do so. In this world, only Equity Showcase Theatre could offer her such an enormous undertaking as directing *Summerfolk*. I hope you'll come and see it - I'm sure it will reflect the qualities that all her work displays - a fierce intelligence, a lively sense of the theatrical and a strongly committed point of view.

– Christine Moynihan

For Rent

Nightwood Studio

Rehearsal/Meeting/Exhibition Space
Approx 36 x 20 feet
Clean, bright, high ceilings
\$200 per week

For more information,
call Nightwood office.

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- Please put me on your mailing list
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 - newsletter
 - box office
 - _____

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Nightwood Theatre, 317 Adelaide St. W., 6th Floor, Toronto, ON, M5V 1P9