FEMINIST THEORY AND NIGHTWOOD THEATRE

by Shelley Scott

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for Study of Drama
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Shelley Scott 1997
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.
Feminist Theory and Nightwood Theatre
Shelley Scott
Doctor of Philosophy 1997
Graduate Centre for Study of Drama
University of Toronto

Abstract

The thesis examines a selection of theoretical issues pertaining to feminist theatre, focusing on Toronto's Nightwood Theatre for its examples and context. The Introduction provides a brief history of the company, which has been active since 1979, and the methodology, which summarizes issues in feminist theory as applied to performance, as well as examples from the production history and administrative structure of Nightwood from 1979 to the end of 1996. The first chapter offers a more extensive discussion of the history of Nightwood by problematizing the definition of feminist theatre. Nightwood is viewed from the perspective of liberal, cultural and materialist feminism, as outlined by Sue-Ellen Case in Feminism and Theatre (1988).

Subsequent chapters address issues in feminist theory as they relate to feminist theatre in general and Nightwood in particular. The second chapter addresses the debate between cultural and materialist feminism on the representation of Woman as the subject of feminist theatre. Chapter three deals with collective creation as a feminist model, also making reference to the importance of the collective in the development of Canadian theatre. The final chapter focuses on postmodernism and gender performance.

These chapters demonstrate how Nightwood's productions and administrative
structure have reflected the changing nature of feminism, and feminist theatre, since the late 1970s.

The conclusion is that Nightwood has restructured both its methods of operation and the nature of its creative work in response to pressures from within (the interests of Board members and Artistic Directors, the political goals of socially-conscious audience members) and also from without (financial constraints, the evolution of feminism as a social movement), and that this dialectic is inherently feminist in being open-ended and adaptive. The thesis provides an overview of some feminist issues in theatre, as well as a practical discussion of how these issues have been addressed by a noteworthy company. In addition, it presents an original and unprecedented synthesis of materials and information about Nightwood Theatre.
My sincere thanks to my thesis supervisor, Michael Sidnell, and to the members of my committee, Richard Plant and Ann Saddlemeyer. My thanks also to Ann Wilson for her helpful comments, and to Luella Massey for computer assistance.

The women who currently run Nightwood -- Leslie Lester, Alisa Palmer, and Soraya Peerbaye -- have been very helpful and accommodating and I would like to thank them. My gratitude also to the women I was able to interview: Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders, Kate Lushington, and Diane Roberts. As I hope I make clear with this thesis, I admire all of these women for their contributions to Nightwood and to Canadian theatre.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents and friends for their support, and I would like to dedicate this work to Bill, for everything, always.
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter One:** Liberal, Cultural and Materialist Feminism and Nightwood Theatre ..... 19
  1. Feminism .............................................................................................................. 19
  2. Feminist Theatre ................................................................................................. 32
  3. Nightwood Theatre ............................................................................................ 47
  4. Feminist Theatre Theory ................................................................................... 62

**Chapter Two:** The Representation of Women and Nightwood Theatre ................. 74
  1. Cultural and Materialist Feminism ..................................................................... 74
  2. Semiotics ............................................................................................................. 81
  3. A Female Form .................................................................................................. 88
  4. Representation .................................................................................................. 92
  5. Nightwood ......................................................................................................... 97

**Chapter Three:** Collective Creation and Nightwood Theatre ............................... 121
  1. Nightwood as a Collective ................................................................................ 125
  2. Collectives and Canadian Theatre .................................................................... 148
  3. The Collective in Feminist Theatre ................................................................... 158

**Chapter Four:** Postmodernism, Feminism, and Nightwood Theatre ....................... 177
  1. Postmodern Feminism ....................................................................................... 181
  2. Postmodernism and Feminist Theatre ............................................................... 189

Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 217

Nightwood Chronology ................................................................................................. 221

Bibliography ................................................................................................................ 238
Feminist Theory and Nightwood Theatre

Introduction

Nightwood Theatre is the longest running feminist theatre company in Canada and "(...) the most influential feminist theatre company in Toronto. . . ." 1 In her review of the 1990 collection *Fair Play: Twelve Women Speak: Conversations with Canadian Playwrights*, Maria Dicenzo writes "... it becomes clear from reading this collection that Nightwood Theatre has played a crucial role in getting women's plays produced." 2 In addition to its importance within Toronto, Nightwood has played a national role by soliciting scripts for its annual Groundswell festival of new works. Since Nightwood's inception in 1979, the company has produced collective creations and plays by single authors, mounted tours, collaborated with other companies, and sought out many ways to encourage new work by women.

Because of its unique status as a women's theatre company spanning the period from 1979 to the present, Nightwood can be examined as something of a microcosm for developments in feminist theatre, which is in turn influenced by the evolution of feminism as a social movement. There is a significant body of feminist theory which can be applied, either directly or indirectly, to theatre, and Nightwood provides an excellent opportunity for illustrating the intersection of feminist theory and practice.


In Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own, Lizbeth Goodman has discussed the origins of British and American feminist theatre in the counter-cultural movements of the late 1960s. She writes that, by 1968, public demonstrations were being recognized as more effective than private group discussion sessions and that this led to early feminist performances (24). The existence of a diverse fringe theatre movement allowed for the development of splinter groups concentrating on women's issues (25). Since then, there has been a new generation of women playwrights each decade, championed by women's companies, producing collectives and directors. In Canada, Cynthia Zimmerman has argued that women's theatre arose from the nationalist movement in theatre and a general environment conducive to the exploration of issues and social change: "... in the early seventies in Canada it was the nationalist movement that was the proud parent" (17). Both Goodman and Zimmerman recognize that women's performance developed within the context of broader social forces; Michelene Wandor has written that any time there is a movement toward social change and greater freedom, women will seize that window of opportunity to create new forms of resistance (Zimmerman 17).

Yvonne Hodkinson has charted a similar evolution in her discussion of women in theatre. In her Introduction to Female Parts: The Art and Politics of Women Playwrights, Hodkinson notes that, after the vote for women was won in 1920, the women's movement seemed to lose its impetus (12). Not until the 1960s did women start confronting social and psychological patterns of oppression, a period marked by the publication of landmark American studies like The Feminine Mystique (1963) and Sexual Politics (1970). In Canada during this period, playwrights like Beverley Simons, Aviva Ravel and Patricia Joudry began
integrating a feminist sensibility and exploring female psychology in their work. Ground-breaking plays such as *The Fairies are Thirsty* and *Jennie's Story* portrayed women's oppression by patriarchal institutions, particularly the Catholic church. Hodkinson notes that many female playwrights, such as Diane Grant, Wendy Lill, and Carol Bolt, began by looking back at women's history; she finds it revealing that so many feminist plays deal with historical settings and figures and describes this process as one of "...unravelling women's past as a first step to understanding present day Canadian women" (14). Hodkinson articulates an important feminist principle, that autonomy means being born into a world where one has a meaningful past and can therefore make choices for the future.

Theatre historian Denis Johnston refers to the late 1960s and early '70s as the golden age of Canadian theatre, a time when a new and exciting wave of alternative theatres sprang up across Canada, especially in Toronto (3-4). These small, experimental companies, such as Theatre Passe Muraille, were reacting against the domination of the established regional theatre system by foreign productions. While the initial inspiration for the new companies came from the international avant-garde -- companies like the Living Theatre in New York, for example -- their motivation quickly came to include a passionate nationalism.

Internationally and locally, alternative experimental theatre was co-existing with women's theatre: in 1968, Winnipeg's feminist Nellie McClung Theatre was formed; in 1969, New Feminist Theatres were founded in New York and Los Angeles; in 1972 the Women's Theatre Council was formed in New York by six playwrights including Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy, Rochelle Owens and Megan Terry; in 1977 Sistren was founded in Jamaica and, in England, Monstrous Regiment was collaborating with Caryl Churchill.
Toronto got its first feminist theatre company in 1974, when Diane Grant and Marcella Lustig founded Redlight Theatre. Their first, and best known, production was *What Glorious Times They Had*, written by Diane Grant. A humorous and episodic portrait of early Canadian suffragette Nellie McClung, it was originally produced by Redlight Theatre at Bathurst Street United Church on May 8, 1974, directed by and starring Diane Grant as Nellie and also featuring Francine Volker, who would later go on to extensive involvement with Nightwood. Another important Redlight production was Margaret Hollingsworth's *Alli Alli Oh* (1977) first commissioned and produced by Redlight Theatre in March 1977, and directed by Volker.

In 1979, Nightwood was founded by four women wanting to create work for themselves in the Toronto theatre community. Nightwood can be considered part of what Denis Johnston calls the "third wave" of small theatres in Toronto, those established in the late 1970s and early 1980s which proved more durable than their immediate predecessors (219). Johnston suggests that the failure of the "second wave" companies was their inability to define a permanent mandate, to present themselves as offering something different from the original alternative theatres like Passe Muraille (257). Certainly, Nightwood's longevity can be attributed in part to its unique and evolving mandate, which has always dealt with the production of women's art but has adapted the means and manner by which this is done. It will be a significant project of this thesis to chart the on-going dialectic of choice and chance that has influenced the development of Nightwood's mandate.

Nightwood was founded at the same time, and in conjunction with, the Theatre Centre, an artist-run facility established in 1979 to provide rental space and facilities to its
members and other independent companies. The Rhubarb! annual festival of new performance was begun by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre at the Theatre Centre's original Danforth location (1979-80). Nightwood teamed up with Buddies in Bad Times to present Rhubarb! for three of its years (1980, '81, and '82). Nightwood was credited with introducing a wider variety of styles to the festival, including performance art (Gilbert 43), and many of the artists involved with the earliest Rhubarb! festivals went on to work with Nightwood over the years.

Nightwood was created as a company at the time of the staging of their first production, *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, adapted from a Canadian novel. It was advertised as a Nightwood Theatre production and ran Sept. 6-15, 1979 at the NDWT Side-Door Theatre (now the Annex Theatre on Bathurst Street). From their first few productions, Nightwood's on-going concerns were established: in 1979 *The True Story of Ida Johnson* introduced an enduring interest in literary adaptation; the 1980 production *Glazed Tempera* was a non-narrative, imagistic look at a public figure; and in 1981, *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* introduced multicultural/anti-racist work to Nightwood's mandate. This early work, which involved both the collective process and collaboration with outside companies and projects, would continue to define Nightwood's production history.

When one is constructing a history based on material evidence, the status of the playtext within a company's mandate is significant. In some cases, the fact that a written text was never generated is irrelevant to the goals of the theatrical project, which might have had to do with the development of the performer, establishing ties with a certain community, or
the exploration of an issue. A number of Nightwood productions began as monologues or short pieces in the annual fundraising event the Five Minute Feminist Cabaret (FemCab), a revue-style evening of entertainment originated by Women's Cultural Building in 1983. Later, a piece could be given a staged reading at the Groundswell Festival, which Nightwood initiated in 1986 and holds each year to showcase original works by women. Still later, it may have received a full production by Nightwood or possibly some other company entirely; in most cases, however, Nightwood has been savvy about retaining some co-producing credit while sending out performers or performances into the larger theatre community.

Lizbeth Goodman comments that "drama" is often associated with a certain degree of literary integrity, which much feminist theatre does not necessarily aim to achieve. The focus is instead on the more active elements of theatre: interaction between written text and performance, extra scenic communication between performers and audience, and the dual role of theatre as both art form and platform, a medium for social change (9). In Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada, Robert Wallace celebrates what he defines as non-text-based theatre in Quebec, where "... culture is not a canon to be learned, but a project to be undertaken... a spirit to be continually awakened" (49). He goes on to say that: "For many who work in the fringe, theatre no longer is centred on the playwright, nor on the creation of a body of dramatic literature, indigenous or otherwise" (185). In many cases, projects initiated by Nightwood would fall into this category of culture-building, resulting in little in the way of literary evidence, but nonetheless important within the context.

---

3 The Coloured Girls Project is a good example. Initiated by Artistic Director Diane Roberts, it was scheduled for public performance in the spring of 1995, but instead became an in-house workshop involving Roberts and a team of creators and facilitators.
feminist movement.

For many years Nightwood defined itself as a producer of collective work, although the creations were usually assigned to a principal author; in the case of Smoke Damage this was the source for a legal dispute, discussed in Chapter Three, which demonstrates some of the hazards and confusions of trying to develop new ways of working. The collective way of working has continued to be associated with Nightwood's mandate, even though the company has focused on scripted works by single authors since the mid-1980s. This is an example of how the dialectic between external perceptions and the actual work produced, operates in defining Nightwood as a company.

In the very beginning, Nightwood was four women who worked together, bringing in other actors, designers, and so on for each individual project, as needed. Despite being named for a feminist novel and being an all-women company, they did not set out to do feminist theatre, but rather to explore what they called imagistic theatre, and indeed, early shows like Glazed Tempera were far more about multimedia exploration than women's issues. The founding members have said that it was largely other peoples' responses to the fact of four women working together -- the assumption that they must necessarily be doing feminist work -- that shaped their development in that direction.  

As other projects developed and more people became involved, as grants were applied for and received, a concrete organizational structure was set in place. By 1982, Cynthia Grant was consistently referred to as the Artistic Director and a Board of Directors was in place. In 1985, the organization of the Board was re-structured: a volunteer Board made up of

---

approximately ten women, including a President, Vice President, Treasurer and Members, met on a monthly basis to discuss policy issues, and paid staff ran the organization on a day to day basis. Staff have traditionally included the Artistic Coordinator (or Director), an Office or General Manager, and a variety of temporary personnel hired through various project grants, summer employment programs and so on. Like most theatre companies, Nightwood has tended to be associated with its Artistic Director. For the first decade, this person was one of the founding four, who rotated titles and responsibilities amongst themselves. In 1985 Mary Vingoe became the Artistic Coordinator and Linda Brown was hired as Office Administrator. The following year, Cynthia Grant left Nightwood to form the Company of Sirens. In 1987, Maureen White took her turn as Artistic Coordinator. Of the founding four, only Kim Renders did not hold this position.

The real break with the past came in 1988 when Kate Lushington was hired as Artistic Coordinator, replacing Maureen White. In this transitional phase, none of the founding members was involved at the organizational level. Kate Lushington ushered in a new, and arguably more politicized, era at Nightwood. She worked with Diane Roberts, as Artistic Associate, to enlarge Nightwood’s mandate to include anti-racism work and to become more inclusive for women of colour.

The directorship changed hands once again in 1993, as Lushington was replaced by a new governing team, made up of Diane Roberts and Alisa Palmer as Artistic Directors and

5 Currently the Board does not use titles such as President, but instead designates two women as Co-Chairs. In addition to the Artistic Director, Nightwood has also hired Associate Artists and, in 1996, an Associate Producer.
Leslie Lester as the Producer. This team approach in many ways returned to the origins of Nightwood, as the three women initiated projects and took on outside responsibilities that appealed to them. Throughout its history, what Nightwood is and what work it does has been largely determined by two factors: first, what the Artistic Director(s) were interested in doing, and second, who else chose to get involved. Each of the founding members initiated projects, directed, acted, wrote scripts and generally found imaginative ways to create theatre projects for themselves, under the umbrella of Nightwood. Likewise, Lushington directed, wrote or acted in a number of the key productions during her tenure. So far, Alisa Palmer has written and directed the first production mounted by Nightwood since her team took over (Wearing the Bone, 1994) and Diane Roberts has initiated a workshop (The Coloured Girls Project, 1995) and directed their most recent mainstage production (Mango Chutney by Dilara Ally, 1996). As always, the administration of Groundswell (and FemCab, in the years it has been done) has fallen to the Artistic Director(s) as well, assisted by some combination of temporary staff.

The Nightwood season generally grows out of a multi-staged process that takes advantage of its in-house vehicles for generating new works, Groundswell and the Feminist Cabaret. A good example of this process is Susan G. Cole's play A Fertile Imagination. Cole, one of the editors of NOW Magazine, served on Nightwood's Board from 1986 to '88. She performed an autobiographical monologue at the Feminist Cabaret in 1987, which she then went on to develop into a full-length play, aided by an Ontario Arts Council Playwright

---

6 Diane Roberts left her position as Artistic Director in the spring of 1996. Nightwood is currently run by Artistic Director Alisa Palmer, Producer Leslie Lester, and Associate Artists Soraya Peerbaye and Jay Pitter. Kate Tucker is the Financial Manager.
Recommender grant in 1988/89. A *Fertile Imagination* was produced at the Poor Alex Theatre by Nightwood, February 1 to 24, 1991, directed and dramaturged by Kate Lushington and with a cast made up of Kate Lynch, Robin Craig, and Patricia Idlette. The production was highly successful and was nominated for two Dora Mavor Moore Awards. The play was then remounted at Theatre Passe Muraille, January/February 1992 with Kate Lynch, Robin Craig and Yanna McIntosh, directed by Layne Coleman.

This example illustrates how Nightwood is defined by the people who become involved with it in one capacity and then move on to another. Because Cole sat on Nightwood's Board, she had the opportunity and encouragement to do something for one of their fundraising events (FemCab). From there, the seed was planted to develop a play, which in turn involved Kate Lushington (the Artistic Director) and Patricia Idlette (also a Board member). Kate Lynch had been in the cast of a previous Nightwood production, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, and Robin Craig would later appear in the 1993 Groundswell reading of *Charming and Rose: True Love*, also directed by Kate Lushington. Throughout this history, many such interconnections will be apparent. In the January 1995 Nighttalk newsletter, Alisa Palmer wondered how a theatre company is perceived in the public eye when no show is going on, and pointed out that, since *Wearing the Bone* closed two months previously, more than 200 people had circulated through Nightwood's studio and office, rehearsing, reading scripts, and meeting as the Artistic Advisory committee: "Nightwood Theatre is the foremost women's theatre in Canada. Our numbers prove our strength and the award winning quality of our art, all the art that comes from our artists, proves our commitment."
The nature of "history" is always problematic, beginning with the kind of materials left behind for the researcher to use in her reconstruction. For the most part, what is preserved are the official materials demanded by government bureaucracy and funding agencies: grant proposals, fundraising letters, financial ledgers, lists of people who have donated money or corporations who have refused to do so. The paper accumulated over the years speaks volumes about how much time and effort a company must devote to raising money and the importance this holds for their survival. Furthermore, it returns us to the accident/intention dialectic as it relates to the building of a theatrical season, indicating how much the company's choices are dependent on the granting of funds by external bodies, and the influence, subtle or overt, those bodies exert on the works produced. Projects are abandoned because no money was forthcoming, and it is difficult to speculate how a project that was not realized might have altered the direction of history had it ever seen the light of day.

There are also considerations particularly relevant to the funding of a feminist company. For example, is the mandate of the company, as stated on government grant application forms, altered to reflect what the writer thinks the granting agency wants to hear? Perhaps the impulse is to downplay the company's feminism in order to avoid the potential disapproval of a conservative agency. Or, in this time of increased awareness of inclusion, perhaps being a company with a socially-aware mandate is beneficial, allowing the granting body an opportunity to appear supportive of minority culture. Diane Roberts has specifically addressed this phenomenon: "...there's been a lot of pressure put on the funding bodies to incorporate a more inclusive vision of people of all nations and colours that are
represented in Canada . . . We, Nightwood, have an advantage in that we've been working with artists of colour for some time -- it's not just the flavour of the month around here. I hope it won't be that in the funding bodies either -- I hope they continue to seek out advice from the communities, which is their mandate" (Glen 38).

The definition of minority culture is a central one for Canadian theatre history, given that its current development is dated from the alternative theatre movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. As the companies once considered alternative became increasingly well-established, an even more alternative group of theatres, such as Nightwood and Buddies in Bad Times, came to occupy that minority position, shifting the definition of minority from criteria of nationalism and aesthetics to issues of gender, race and sexuality. In his study of Canadian theatre, Producing Marginality, Robert Wallace finds promise only in the small fringe companies that embody marginal perspectives. Wallace calls for a restructuring of the grant process, "... a reappraisal in which the social networks that have constructed the mindset that controls the systems of power relations that define Canadian theatre are identified and held accountable" (162). For Wallace, there is a vital need to fund fringe companies like Nightwood because they are currently the only source of theatrical experimentation and critical commentary. 7

Whether one defines Nightwood as part of a larger or a smaller fringe, it still occupies a marginal position within Canadian theatre, particularly in terms of government funding. The three largest theatres in Canada are the recipients of some of the biggest government

---

7 On the other hand, in his review of the book, Robert Nunn has argued that Wallace's definition of fringe theatre is too narrow and that companies like Passe Muraille still represent an alternative, risk-taking vision: Canadian Theatre Review 70 (Spring 1992): 93.
grants: in 1995-96, the Stratford Festival had a budget of $25 million, with $1.9 million of that coming from the three levels of government; the Shaw Festival and Canadian Stage Company projected funding of $1 million and $1.8 million respectively. 8 Compare this with Nightwood's annual budget, which includes funding from the Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council and is just under $200,000 (Glen 38). One of the issues that defines women's theatre, and which is directly related to marginalization, is the question of assimilation and separatism. Rina Fraticelli, an influential figure in Canadian feminist theatre, has written persuasively about this dilemma:

Why, we are asked, can't women simply bring their aesthetics, sensibility, vocabulary and even politics to bear on the cultural community through existing art institutions -- in a non-compliant and direct way, of course? Why, when there are no longer formal barriers to full and equal participation, do we choose to ghettoize ourselves and our work in such a 'restrictive manner?'...

Women's lack of authority in the Canadian theatre does not stem from our lack of positions of authority. It is the reverse: we do not hold or have no access to positions of authority because patriarchal society views women as intrinsically lacking in authority. And to believe that the full emancipation of women will be accomplished through the fulfilment of affirmative action quotas is a little like believing racial integration will rid the world of racism (15-16).

Women's contributions cannot merely be added on to pre-existing androcentric structures, since the structure will alter the work but not be reformed in turn. Women have always made, and continue to make, culture, but it is erased, suppressed, marginalized, and appropriated by a theatre industry which is overwhelmingly male-dominated (Fraticelli 17).

The existence of a company like Nightwood, which is run by women and for the express purpose of encouraging women's work in a supportive environment, allows the work to develop in a very different context.

Kate Lushington, in her article "Fear of Feminism," makes the analogy that both Canadian theatre and feminist theatre need the same encouragement and protection. Why, she asks, are people so terrified when women claim their true voice and equal participation in culture as women? "Feminism is not just a matter of doing non-sexist plays or replacing the boys at the top by girls. Feminism, rather, is a search, a constant questioning of accepted beliefs and hidden assumptions. It's not a state, not an imperative, but a process, a dynamic" (11). As valuable as it may be to have more plays written and directed by women within mainstream theatre structures, the on-going project of feminism and feminist theatre is far more wide-ranging and complex, and some of this project can only be carried out within the space of a women's theatre company, such as Nightwood.

This study of Nightwood Theatre will provide a context for its work and history by placing it within the tradition of feminist theatre. The role and development of Nightwood within the feminist and theatrical communities of Toronto will be examined, as well as broader theoretical questions of aesthetics and representation.

My project has been twofold: summarizing relevant issues in feminist theory and also charting a chronological and developmental history of Nightwood. This is evident within each chapter, as the discussion shifts from theoretical questions to examples from Nightwood and back again. This has been the purpose of the work, to let the two halves co-exist and not necessarily force them to combine. The discussion is seldom linear or straightforward, and
at times one half takes precedence over the other. I believe this shifting balance has been central to carrying on the appropriate kind of discourse and to maintaining the dialectic of intention and external forces, which I see as the defining paradigm of Nightwood and feminist theatre. I have regarded my process as a sort of intertextual reading, approaching theoretical texts and theatre documentation for what they could tell me about each other. I have also considered myself an active reader, constructing a new text from pre-existing texts which had not previously been applied to one another.

My own process in writing the thesis has been similarly divided between synthesizing and summarizing some of the literature written on the subject, and conducting primary research into the records of Nightwood. While Nightwood has been the subject of articles and its productions have been discussed and reviewed, no chronology existed. Nightwood's own records, in binders, boxes and files, at the administrative office and in the homes of previous Artistic Directors, were not catalogued, itemized, complete or particularly organized. Much of my time was spent going through all of these materials -- play programs, minutes from Board meetings, funding applications, correspondence, newspaper reviews, scripts, and so on -- ordering, reading and constructing my own history of Nightwood.

Such a history is necessarily selective and incomplete, although I have been as precise as possible given the materials. Questions and discrepancies were sometimes cleared up through personal interviews with the women in charge of Nightwood over the years, but sometimes memory failed and details were lost. I see this as an inevitable hazard of the study of theatre, ephemeral by nature and often poorly documented. Add to this the absence of adequate staff resources to deal with archives (although attempts were certainly made), moves
from one location to the next, and limited storage facilities, and one is left impressed that Nightwood has done as well as it has in preserving and respecting its history.

In the first newsletter published after Palmer, Roberts and Lester took over as the leadership team in 1994, they included a statement that reveals their conception of how Nightwood functions: "... we're enthusiastic to take up the challenge of maintaining Nightwood's dual role as a leading producer of feminist art and as an important resource for women artists. ... Nightwood Theatre has provided a forum for women to explore the complexity of our relationships to each other, to society and consequently to history. Its identity today is a culmination of accident, serendipity and willful efforts to have a say in the development of women's culture. We're intrigued by the challenge of seeing the whole pattern, Nightwood's past, present and future, in order to support the contribution that each individual constituent, each artist or script or decision, can make to the whole." Their statement shows an awareness of the history of feminism and of the company and I hope, with this thesis, to engage in this project as well.

In Chapter One, three political categories of feminism -- liberal, cultural, and materialist -- are introduced. These categories, which are defined in detail within the chapter, are convenient tools for analyzing how feminism can find very different expression in various theatrical contexts, but are never an end in themselves. In fact, the central importance of using such categories is in the exploration of difference; originally developed as a means for feminists to sort out their divergent positions on political issues, they are thus an important first step in acknowledging that feminism is not a monolithic system of thought. As we shall see in Chapter Four, the project of identifying how feminism constructs its own orthodoxies
and outsiders is of crucial contemporary relevance, and the use of the initial three categories throughout the thesis helps to make the process of this increasing diversification clear. In Chapter One, I chart the development of feminist theatre and outline how the three types of feminism manifest themselves in performance, turning to Nightwood for examples. Finally, I explain the application of feminist theory to theatre, and introduce the field of feminist theatre theory as an identifiable subject area within which this thesis operates.

In Chapter Two, the types of feminism identified as cultural and materialist are examined for the ways in which they construct woman as the subject of her own experience and how this is reflected onstage through the semiotics of representation. Again, examples from Nightwood are discussed.

In Chapter Three, Nightwood's experiences with different models of feminist collectivity, applied to both production history and administrative structure, are explored. The importance of collective creation to Canadian theatre, and to the development of feminist theatre, are also discussed.

In the fourth and final chapter, I turn to examine postmodern theory as it applies to feminism and theatre, and analyze Nightwood's production of Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) as a site where all three converge. Postmodern feminism is explored as a category which might move beyond the paradigm of liberal, materialist and cultural feminisms I have been using throughout the thesis.

The Conclusion is followed by a brief Chronology of Nightwood productions. The Chronology can be considered in a number of different ways; for example, the involvement of certain individuals or the development of on-going projects can be traced through various
stages, from an appearance at Groundswell to a later production. Many names familiar in Canadian theatre, such as Judith Thompson, Anne Anglin, and Maggie Huculak, are evident, as are numerous examples of collaborations with other companies, placing Nightwood within the community of Toronto theatre. On the other hand, the subject matter of many of the productions is obvious from their titles and indicates the specifically feminist nature of much of this material, work which was born out of and nurtured within Nightwood's unique context.
Chapter One: Liberal, Cultural and Materialist Feminism and
Nightwood Theatre

1. Feminism

An important first step in working with feminist theory is defining the various political types of feminism. Sue-Ellen Case, in her ground-breaking 1988 book Feminism and Theatre, spends a lot of time defining and exploring three different kinds of feminist theatre: liberal, cultural and materialist. Although much has been written about feminist theory since, Case's categories have been adopted to some degree by many theorists, even if only to disagree with them, in order to define the position from which they are beginning. Many feminists, including Case, will caution against seeing these categories as strictly exclusive; there can be considerable overlap and a feminist might find that one position may be an appropriate response in certain cases but not in others. As Gayle Austin points out: "In compensating for a past in which political biases were generally not clearly expressed and therefore 'invisible,' there is a danger of creating a present in which political lines are too clearly drawn" (4). In fact, many feminist theatre practitioners would not employ these terms at all, preferring a more generalized conception of a "feminist" as anyone interested in and supportive of their work. This attitude might be particularly appropriate in a theatre context,

1 See also Gayle Austin, Jill Dolan and Alison Jagger.

2 A good example is Shannon Bell (73), who arrives at her understanding of postmodern feminism by way of these earlier categories.
which is by nature collaborative and where one might have to work with a variety of people drawn together more for their artistic skills than for their politics; in such a context, anyone reasonably open-minded and compatible might be considered "feminist enough."

I have adopted the categories because I think they are useful analytical tools for discussing Nightwood's work, how it achieves particular aims, and why those aims change. When referring to feminism or feminist theatre, it is easy to sound as if one is discussing a monolithic and coherent system, rather than a broad amalgamation of many positions and many creative endeavours. The development of feminism has been a process of acknowledging and embracing the differences between women as well as common causes; using adjectives like "liberal" or "radical" serves as a qualifying and cautionary reminder that quite different attitudes and opinions may all claim to be feminist. Since part of the project of this thesis is to chart the evolution of Nightwood and its relationship to feminist theatre, and since Case's categories represent some of the first theorizing of feminist theatre in the early 1980s, they are an appropriate place to begin looking at Nightwood as a feminist company and charting the process by which definitions are increasingly problematized. The idea of process is particularly important here, since the creation of theatre, the working out of feminist issues, and the act of defining oneself as an artist and a feminist, are all very much an on-going process; in this sense, the categories serve to suggest the particular direction and nature of the process, as opposed to describing a finished product.

According to Case, liberal feminism developed from liberal humanism and stresses women's parity with men, basing itself on "universal" values. While this type of feminism is widely adopted when dealing with hiring and funding, issues critical to theatre practitioners,
the liberal position has not lent itself to theoretical inquiry, and feminist theory tends to focus on the other two types.

Liberal feminism can be defined as an attempt to alter the existing social system from the inside, without dismantling the system as a whole. Typical liberal feminist projects involve getting more women politicians elected, improving access to jobs and education for women, and working towards legal reform. The liberal feminist position emphasizes equality between the sexes and downplays difference, aiming instead for a more equitable distribution of power within the current social order. In terms of theatre, a liberal feminist approach would involve creating more job opportunities for women theatre workers and pointing out the current inequities between the sexes in positions of power; Rina Fraticelli's influential report on the status of women in Canadian theatre, which was released in 1982, is an excellent example. Liberal feminist theatre might be concerned with criticizing the portrayal of women characters in plays by men, with an eye to exposing stereotypes and bias and the paucity of strong roles for women actors. Heather Jones writes from the liberal position when she argues that encouraging production of any and all plays by women, regardless of whether or not they could be defined as feminist, serves a feminist aim (86).

Liberal feminism is clearly applicable to Nightwood's mandate, which has always emphasized creating opportunities for women theatre workers and providing a venue for new works by women, but has not always insisted on using the word "feminist." The development of Nightwood was very much affected by Rina Fraticelli's report, The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre, which starkly revealed the minority of women in positions of power and the small percentage of plays by women being produced in Canadian theatres. Nightwood
quoted from this report in their publicity materials of the time and in applications for funding, emphasizing that their mandate and programming choices helped to correct the unfair imbalance.³

Especially in the early years, Nightwood emphasized its commitment to women and women's work, without highlighting the word "feminist." Some of their early productions, while issue-oriented, could not be described as specifically feminist either: in 1981, for example, *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* (*Memorias del Mañana*) dealt with Latin American history, while the 1982 production *Mass/Age* was billed as "a multi-media spectacle of life in the nuclear age." Nonetheless, Nightwood was unique in being run by women and employing a large number of women in positions of power within the company. Kate Lushington has been quoted as saying that there will only be real change in theatre when mediocre women have as many opportunities as mediocre men -- the implication being that the women who are currently employed and produced are exceptional in every sense of the word (Hunt 27).

Certainly, the significance of Nightwood as a place where women can find opportunities is often an issue of access to money; in an article entitled "Alternative Visions," Janice Bryan, an actor involved with the 1988 Groundswell festival, is quoted as saying in reference to feminist theatre: "It provides support for women economically and moral support. It is not necessarily political but it is economical" (Bailey 219).

In contrast to the liberal approach, cultural feminism bases its analysis on sexual difference and the separation of gender categories. In Case's paradigm, cultural feminism (which is also sometimes called radical feminism) addresses a "female aesthetic," and seeks a

separate women's culture in order to provide feminist alternatives in theatre and other art forms, often in the belief that such a culture has existed throughout history, originating in ancient matriarchal societies. Radical feminist theatre seeks to bring women's biological and sexual experiences to the stage, allying this biology with spiritual states which supposedly bring women closer to nature than men. Radical feminist theatre often involves rituals which celebrate these biological cycles, women's intuition, fertility, bonding, and nurturing. Women's experiences and qualities are cast in the spiritual arena, rather than in the context of socio-political history (4).

In terms of theatre, cultural feminism is associated with many companies that run as women-only collectives and produce work dealing with women's issues, such as At the Foot of the Mountain or Montreal's Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes. It is also manifested in much performance art which, again, is centred largely around expressing the female body in new ways (Forte 259). Those who do not ascribe to cultural feminism charge it with being essentialist, that is, with operating under the assumption that there are such things as essentially female qualities. Postmodern feminist theorists like Judith Butler reject this belief, arguing instead that "female qualities" are learned behaviours, constructed and maintained by a system of binary opposition which cultural feminism upholds ("Performative Acts" 281).

Nightwood's commitment to the collective process and rejection of a strictly hierarchical structure reflect cultural feminist values, as do a number of its productions. For example, Smoke Damage, which was written by Baguta Rubess in 1983 in collaboration with an all-female collective, has many cultural feminist qualities. The story of a group of women travellers who uncover the history of the European witch hunts, the play draws
explicit connections between the common oppression of women in previous ages and contemporary times, and then links this with the repression of a separate, women's culture and the oral transmission of women's knowledge (the skills of the midwife, for example). The play contends that women were oppressed in the past and continue to be oppressed because they are women; at the end of the play, two of the characters plan to hijack an airplane and force the Pope to stand trial at Nuremberg, accused of "the annihilation of three centuries of women" (88). The ideal of Nightwood as an independent, woman-centred company has been presented as an alternative to fitting women's work into the structure of male-dominated theatres. In an article in the Toronto Star, Kate Lushington is quoted as saying: "Finally, we don't have to change something because somebody else tells us to. We want power -- not huge power -- but just enough power to be able to put on a play the way we want to. That's what Nightwood is all about." 4 While Lushington's comment is not meant to be separatist, the implication is clear that women must have the space and the means to create from an independent vision. Sometimes this has been fulfilled through the very existence of Nightwood as a women's theatre company, and sometimes it has been explicitly expressed in the creation and content of a particular play, such as Smoke Damage.

According to Case, the third type of feminism is materialist, a system of analysis which places an emphasis on the material conditions of women's lives, examining how factors such as race and class intersect with gender to determine the position of different women in different historical periods. While cultural feminism tends to be transhistorical, materialist

---

4 Vit Wagner, "By women, for everybody: Nightwood Theatre is 'very much a feminist process',' 17 Mar. 1990: H2.
feminism is very much rooted in the specific circumstances of women within their own cultural milieu. Materialist feminist theatre could tend towards issue-based theatre that situates its debate within a specific set of references, identifying itself as socialist or Marxist feminist, for example, or defining itself in terms of the race or ethnicity of its practitioners. Materialist feminism might also tend more toward what has been called postmodern feminist performance, a style which points out and plays with questions of subjectivity and gender identity, defining them as constructs and fragmenting much of what is traditionally considered theatre. Materialist feminism, to quote Jill Dolan, "deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations" (Feminist Spectator 10).

Nightwood has embodied the materialist position most obviously in its commitment to producing work by women of colour and in opening up its organizational structure to women of colour. Feminism became increasingly concerned with issues of race in the late 1980s, as women of colour charged feminism with being run by and for middle-class white women. Nightwood responded by launching SisterReach, an anti-racism campaign aimed at opening the company up to a wider community.5 Plays like Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots (1990) by Monique Mojica and The Wonder of Man (1992) by Diana Braithwaite came to represent the new face of Nightwood. These plays attempt to construct new identities for their subjects which take into account the conditions of race, class, nationality, sexuality and other culturally specific factors, in addition to and inseparable from the construction of gender. Because the women who worked on these productions ~ as theatre practitioners and

5 The first mention of the new anti-racist mandate was in Nightwood’s newsletter Nightwords, vol. 1 no. 1 (Fall 1989).
members of various communities -- were active in the creation and transmission of new cultural values, they affected the audiences who came to see them, inspiring them to initiate projects of their own. This is addressed in an interview with Djanet Sears by Jill Lawless, in which Sears is described as a long-time arts organizer and a powerful force at Nightwood, responsible for its "admirable diversity." Sears is quoted as saying:

I've been to board meetings and argued policy, helped out with shows, directed shows, chosen shows. But mostly my contribution was just placing certain people in the same orbit. There are a lot of people who are part of my world, so when I joined Nightwood the circle of Nightwood opened. That's the interesting thing about any predominantly white organization wanting to invite in people of other cultures. You can't do it just because you think that's what you should do. And you can't expect other people just to fit in. You must not only have people of colour in the hierarchy of your organization -- you must expand your ideas about your organization. You have to rethink everything, your whole structure. Structures fit some people, but not all people. And with Kate [Lushington] I sensed that openness... I don't find Nightwood limited to a single dialectic, which is a very difficult thing to find.6

Their commitment to a materialist approach to feminism has largely come to define Nightwood, particularly since the anti-racism mandate was implemented. More than a cultural feminist inclusion of all women, Nightwood has adopted a materialist project of targeting specific women, those previously marginalized within feminism and theatre.

As Sears suggests, the idea finds its most direct expression in the relationship between company and audience. This is particularly evident at Groundswell, an annual festival of work which is usually still in an early stage of development and often by women

writing for the stage for the first time. The atmosphere is informal, with audience feedback encouraged in a number of ways; in 1989, for example, the audience was invited to write comments on the paper-covered tables where they were seated, cabaret-style, at the Annex Theatre, while a form asking specific dramaturgical questions was enclosed with the 1994 program. Kate Lushington emphasized Nightwood’s desire to reach out to a different audience with their Groundswell Festival in an article in NOW; the 1988 Groundswell was the first to have a selection committee made up of women from outside Nightwood, mandated to take into consideration a wider representation of the theatre community. Participating playwrights were also invited to Groundtalk, an informal discussion group led by Susan Feldman (Executive Director of the Performing Arts Development Fund of Ontario) and including playwrights Carol Bolt, Sally Clark, Ann-Marie MacDonald and Judith Thompson. In the NOW article, Lushington commented on the cross-fertilization that occurs between participants and audience at Groundswell: "We hope people will come to see the whole Festival, not just one or two readings... We want audiences to see the whole fabric of a developmental process. Maybe some viewers will be inspired to go home and write something themselves. We're always looking for new material." 7

The importance of audience involvement has continued to be crucial to Nightwood, as evidenced by the Spring 1996 Nighttalk newsletter. In reference to the most recent Five Minute Feminist Cabaret, associate director Soraya Peerbaye wrote: "...an idea I've had of Nightwood for a long time suddenly crystallized, an image of Nightwood being not the handful of women who are the staff, nor the cluster that forms the Board and Advisory, nor

7 "Groundswell's grassroots grow in new direction," 1-17 Dec.: 59.
even the multitude of artists who illuminate Nightwood's productions; it was an idea of Nightwood defined not by its artists, but by its audience."

There is no clear linear progression in the three types of feminism Case outlines, nor can we equate them with particular time periods in Nightwood's history. They might all be identifiable within a single Nightwood production and, because there are many people active within Nightwood at any given time, the women who make up Nightwood could easily encompass all of the attitudes and beliefs discussed above and never realize they are, in certain respects, "in conflict." We shall return to these categories again, as the opposition of the cultural and materialist forms of feminism provides a recurring theme in much theoretical writing. It will also be useful, however, to look at some other ways in which feminism can be categorized.

Gayle Austin, in *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*, identifies three models for looking at stages in feminist criticism (15-16). In stage one, the emphasis is on compensatory or contribution history, devoted to the work of "notable women" and women's contributions to movements in male-written history. A Nightwood example would be the 1981 adaptation of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a short story written by early feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. Directed by Cynthia Grant and performed by Mary Vingoe, this was one of Nightwood's earliest productions and was later adapted for radio. In stage two of Austin's model, there is an inquiry into women's actual experiences in the past, exploring such primary sources as diaries, autobiographies, and oral history; here we might consider the collective creation *Love and Work Enough*, which used original sources to depict the experiences of Ontario pioneer women and toured throughout the summer and fall of 1984.
The third stage challenges the basic assumptions of historians regarding the division of historical periods; for example, the 1983 productions *This is for You, Anna* and *Smoke Damage*, both make transhistorical comparisons, as the action moves back and forth between time periods in order to suggest the parallels in women's experiences of oppression.

Another three-stage model identified by Austin follows a similar progression. The first stage focuses on the negative aspects of men's work about women; the 1987 collective creation *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita* would be a good example here, as it attempted to re-assess the character of Lolita from Vladimir Nabokov's novel. The second stage focuses on the tradition of women writers, such as Nightwood's 1986 production of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc* by Jovette Marchessault. The publicity and program materials for this production featured extensive information about Violette Leduc, her writings and relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, and also about Jovette Marchessault, an important cultural feminist writer from Quebec. The intent was clearly to situate these women within a lesbian and a feminist literary tradition. The third stage begins to look at the differences between women writers, rather than just their differences from men, and here we might consider ahdri zhina mandiela's play *dark diaspora...in dub*, sponsored by Nightwood in the 1991 Fringe Festival. Mandiela creates a new form of theatrical expression which she calls dub theatre, a mixture of poetry forms and movement arising from the playwright's distinctive cultural background and geographical displacement.

Finally, Janelle Reinelt has produced a three-stage model that focuses specifically on

---

8 This was not the first time that Nightwood had dealt with lesbian themes (*The True Story of Ida Johnson*, its very first production, included a lesbian relationship), but it could be viewed as the first occasion where its work was placed explicitly within this particular tradition and marketed to the gay and lesbian community.
performance theory: in the 1960s and early 1970s the emphasis was on getting more female characters and experience onstage; by the late 1970s, the deconstruction of gender onstage led to a new feminist theatre which would point out the ideological character of theatrical representation; in the 1980s, there was an awareness that the production of meaning must occur in spite of, or perhaps in the face of, gender; the concern is now with the "subject-as-agent" (Austin 16, Reinelt 49). This model will be addressed in Chapter Four, but the idea that notions of gender are increasingly complicated and problematized runs as an important theme throughout feminism and feminist theatre.

Further differences between theories of feminism can be traced to the different theoretical directions roughly corresponding to an Anglo-North American and a French feminist school. The Anglo-American school is historical in orientation and tries to define women's writings in terms of language, genre, literary influences, and within the specifics of culture, race, class and nationality. These pursuits are sometimes referred to as gynocriticism. The French school, on the other hand, explores textual consequences and representations of sexual difference. Often associated with psychoanalytic theory, the focus is on how women have been defined as all that is "other" than male and how the feminine may be located in the gaps, silences and absences of traditional representation. This pursuit is called gynesis (Austin 23).

In her Introduction to *Lesbian Triptych*, a collection of plays by Jovette Marchessault, Barbara Godard identifies two feminist poetics in Quebec writing which correspond to gynocriticism and gynesis. Both poetics are concerned with the dialectic between self and other, sameness and difference. Godard calls the first poetics "feminist deconstruction," a
school which focuses on the fact of oppression and the construction of reality through language. Self-reflexive modes, such as satire and parody, are often employed to expose the rhetoric and intellectual paradigms used by patriarchal discourse in order to establish itself as the central truth (18). Feminist deconstruction would be most clearly aligned with materialist feminism, and with gynocriticism.

Godard describes the second feminist poetics as a "resurrection of the feminine," a concern with all that is different and other, all that is excluded from patriarchal discourse. Writers in this school seek all that is irrational and traditionally feminine, introducing new symbolic dimensions and subjects, often relating to women's sexuality, child-bearing experiences, and matrilineal heritage. This school of thought is aligned with cultural feminism and gynesis.

Again, it is not the intention of feminist theorists to create monolithic categories into which all feminist work must be divided. In a field of inquiry which is interconnected with a social movement for change, however, it is useful to incorporate positionality into one's analysis. A company like Nightwood, which has occupied shifting positions in the definition and implementation of feminism, illustrates the importance of constantly re-defining one's terms and goals. A critic considering the significance of a particular Nightwood production, for example, would need to take into account the "kind" of feminism it most clearly espouses in order to determine how effectively it fulfills both political and aesthetic agendas. Unfortunately, as we shall see in discussing feminist theatre theory in Section Three of this chapter, some critics have a very narrow understanding of feminism and apply their prejudices to any and all productions by women, with little regard for positioning it as
feminist theatre within a wide spectrum of possibility.

2. Feminist Theatre

What can we learn about feminist theatre by extrapolating from the example of Nightwood? Can we draw some conclusions about what a feminist theatre company is or might be? Do the productions consistently reflect and grow out of a stated philosophy, or do they contradict and therefore change the philosophy? What "kind" of feminists do the Nightwood Artistic Directors and Board Members see themselves as, and where do they see Nightwood in terms of feminism(s)? Does this shape the projects they choose, their working methods, the audiences they seek (or get)? It is my contention that Nightwood has been a feminist theatre, or rather, a series of constantly shifting feminist theatres, throughout its history, despite its changing mandates and relative levels of commitment to the label.

Lizbeth Goodman has written that "... 'feminist theatre' is itself a form of cultural representation, influenced by changes in the geographies of feminism, women's studies, economics, politics, and cultural studies" (3). Just as we now speak of feminisms, we also need to be careful about assuming that feminist theatre is any one thing or looks a particular way. The fact that Nightwood Theatre has continued to re-define its mandate and its policies and practices over the years reflects the practical nature of feminism: it must be provisional and changeable, adapting to social forces and the evolution of thought within the movement, in order to remain relevant. A feminist theatre which did not change and evolve and constantly work on re-defining itself would not be very feminist. In addition, the collaborative nature of theatre and the large number of people and projects that have been associated with
Nightwood all contribute to its direction. Finally, external forces like granting agencies and the media can have a significant influence on the way a company evolves.

To suggest that Nightwood has not always developed according to a long-term plan is not to suggest that the motivations of those involved or the work produced are any less valid, or any less feminist, but that, in many instances, external circumstances have shaped Nightwood's development as much as agendas from within. This dialectic of accident and intention will play a recurring role throughout my discussion of Nightwood. Any attempt to define feminist theatre must try to take into account the realities of theory versus practice. For example, it may not be immediately apparent that a women's theatre company and a feminist theatre company are not synonymous. While we readily agree that a play by a woman is not necessarily a feminist play (after all, not all women are feminists), it seems somewhat more problematic to consider a women's theatre collective devoid of political implication. Why would women choose to work only with other women if not because they were making a statement? In the case of Nightwood Theatre, the choice may be seen as one made and perpetuated by expediency, a preference or convenience that became a mandate.

While the founders were not consciously creating a women's theatre company, the need for such a company ensured that it would thrive.

In the January 1995 issue of Nightwood's Nighttalk newsletter, Kim Renders, one of the founding members, writes about her original and recent involvements with the company: "Now...in those days we really didn't see ourselves as a women's theatre group. We were four artists with ideas and we got together to make theatre. But as Nightwood grew, we realized the terrific need for feminist expression in our culture. We realized that Nightwood could and should be a vehicle for
many women's voices and passions, not only that of we four.

... Now, after almost seven years, I am very happy to be back on the Nightwood "squeaky floor" boards. I am thrilled to see that the ship...she still sails!

Renders has also commented that, as an actor newly arrived in Toronto in 1978, she did not want to wait passively for someone to cast her in a show; instead, she and the other founders of Nightwood chose to create their own opportunities. At the time, they did not regard their actions as feminist, but in a sense they were: they were women who did not want to be at the mercy of those (men) with power in the theatre hierarchy and who found like-minded (women) artists to collaborate with. Cynthia Grant and Krista Van Daele (an early collaborator) had been a part of the Women's Press editing group working on the publication of *The True Story of Ida Johnson* by Sharon Riis, and a stage adaptation of this novel became the first Nightwood production in 1979. So, while some subsequent Nightwood productions dealt with non-feminist themes (the painter Alex Colville in 1980's *Glazed Tempera*, for example), the very first show dealt with issues of gender and race, was created collectively, and used experimental staging techniques -- all attributes that placed it within the tradition of feminist theatre.

By the time Nightwood was founded in 1979, women's theatre was already a powerful force in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Canada. Winnipeg's Nellie McClung Theatre was founded in 1968 and Toronto's Redlight Theatre had been active from 1974 to about 1977. There was also a lesbian theatre group called Atthis, founded in 1979, which sponsored actor Pol Pelletier's English language premiere in *Night Cows* by Jovette

---

9 Kim Renders, personal interview, 11 May 1996.
Marchessault. ¹⁰ An article published in Chrysalis Magazine in April 1980 by Phyllis Mael notes that over two hundred plays by women were published between 1960 and 1980, and that many more, unpublished works were produced by dozens of active feminist theatres throughout the United States (51). Mael discusses the wide variety of plays found within this movement: "...the voices of the resisting writers reflect -- in both content and form -- the broad spectrum of opinion and expression of women's culture" (52). She specifically notes the difference between feminist theatres that wish to portray women in positions of strength and those which refuse to show only positive images because they want to spur their audience toward social change. She also categorizes the difference between women writers who embrace the feminist label and those who reject it; those who espouse the unique perceptions of women and those who deny the existence of a female sensibility; those who state their goals as primarily aesthetic and those who insist that all aesthetic choices are also political; those who wish to depict the female condition and those who want to change it; those who want to speak only to women and those who seek an audience of both men and women (52).

Already, in 1980, those studying the phenomenon of feminist theatre were well aware of the diversity within the genre, although perhaps reluctant to start labelling those divisions as such for fear of undermining what was still a new movement. The emphasis was instead on celebrating quantity and the emergence of common themes, such as relationships between women, that had been ignored onstage for so long (53). In Part Two of the same Chrysalis article, Rosemary Curb focuses on some of the characteristics of the feminist theatre companies she surveyed, claiming that: "All across this continent, there are probably forty

¹⁰ The founder of this company, Keltie Creed, also worked on Nightwood's 1986 production of The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc, also by Marchessault.
or fifty theaters that call themselves 'feminist' rehearsing and performing right now" (63). Like Mael, she points out that not all these companies necessarily use the feminist label, some preferring "anti-sexist" or "humanist" or "lesbian," and so on. She also observes that some companies spring up to do one show and dissolve afterwards, while others become well-established. An interesting distinction is made between theatres that grow out of consciousness-raising, which tend to see their aims as more political than theatrically ambitious, and those ". . . formed in response to the artistic frustrations of women, and which serve as showcases for female talent in the performing arts . . ." (64). Nightwood clearly belongs in this second category, but also illustrates Curb's belief that there is considerable overlap between the two kinds of theatres, especially once a company has been around for a while: ". . . feminist theaters which have been thriving for more than two or three years see artistic and political commitments as interconnected and interdependent" (64). Certainly, Nightwood's awareness of itself as a voice for women developed alongside its establishment as an artistic presence in the Toronto community.

Curb goes on to describe other traits common to the theatre companies she surveyed, all of which are also applicable to Nightwood at this early stage. She points out that at least half of the feminist theatres in operation were run as collectives, with members taking turns fulfilling various roles and functions: "About two-thirds of the theaters create some plays through collective improvisation and list the theatre or all members of the collective as playwright. Most often a resident playwright provides an idea and a partial script which the group expands" (64). This is an accurate description for many of Nightwood's earlier productions and working models, from the Glazed Tempera, Mass/Age and Peace Banquet
collectives to the collective with a single author that produced *Smoke Damage*. Curb also mentions that the companies she surveyed showed a marked similarity in their shows, even in collective creations; for example, re-tellings of Greek myths were common, as were shows that dramatized the lives of women pioneers. Again, Nightwood fits this pattern, with productions of *Antigone* and *Peace Banquet* (subtitled "ancient Greece meets the atomic age") in 1983, and *Love and Work Enough*, celebrating Ontario pioneer women, in 1984.

Curb declares: "Feminist theaters which present plays on social or political issues do primary research into the problem" (65). Nightwood again follows this pattern, particularly in the case of *This is for You, Anna* and *Smoke Damage*, but also with many other shows, such as *Re-Production*, for example, which was written by Amanda Hale, dealt with reproductive issues, and was performed in 1984 at an Ottawa conference for the National Association of Women and the Law. In cases where there is a single author for a play, she has usually done considerable background research, which is passed on to the actors as improvisation material before taking a final written form. It is a method of dramaturgy, in a way, as the collective members educate themselves on the issues and context of their material, and a technique which is especially appropriate for feminist consciousness-raising. Curb also points out that about a quarter of the companies had men participating in the creation of works, often because they had valuable theatre skills and were personally committed to feminism. Again, some early Nightwood collectives, such as *Mass/Age* and *Peace Banquet*, included men, and there have almost always been men involved in various capacities through the years.

"Few [women's] theaters can pay operating expenses and salaries of all their theater

---

11 This is a trait held in common with other collective creators of the time; see, for example, Denis Johnston's description of the making of *The Farm Show* (26).
workers from ticket sales. Only about one-fourth pay any salaries at all. Major sources of income are grants, donations from members and friends, tours, fees, ticket sales, workshops, and classes," Curb states. In its applications for funding, Nightwood has frequently addressed the need to pay artists a decent wage for their work, struggling to find a balance between artists' fees and administrative costs; the current Nightwood administration has declared "a commitment to paying all artists to affirm that women's work is of value." Curb also mentions that most women's theatres do not have their own space but rely on rented or donated spaces. This again is consistent with Nightwood's experience. Nightwood has operated through grants and fundraising efforts and, in recent years, revenue generated from their rental facility and workshop offerings. They have moved three times, twice sharing space with other small companies and, since 1990, occupying their own, very modest space in a downtown office/warehouse building.

In arriving at a description of feminist theatre, one can adopt a fairly strict view,

---

12 For example, in an application to Canada Council for an operating grant of $60,000, 28 Feb. 1992, Kate Lushington included a breakdown of administrative costs: artists' fees for 1990/91 were $50,695, while administrative salaries were $48,340; in 1991/92, the figures were $69,765 and $42,200 (plus a grant from the Ministry of Culture and Communications for an administrative intern position). For 1992/93, Nightwood was projecting artists' fees of $92,079 and salaries of only $30,000, since there would be only two staff members, both on ten-month contracts.

13 Board of Directors, Values We Consider Important, 1995.

14 Nightwood was one of five member companies of the Theatre Centre. Legally incorporated on Feb. 10, 1981, the registered name was B.A.A.N.N. Theatre Centre, reflecting the names of the five member companies. The addresses for the Theatre Centre were: 1979-1981, 95 Danforth Avenue; 1981-1984, 666 King Street West; 1984-1986, 296 Brunswick Avenue (the Poor Alex Theatre). Nightwood no longer identified itself as a part of the Theatre Centre after 1986 and remained at the Poor Alex space after the Centre had departed. Nightwood moved to its current location at 317 Adelaide Street West in the fall of 1990.
preferring to define it narrowly as Lizbeth Goodman does, for example. Goodman notes that some people believe that feminists should always write from a "situated perspective," foregrounding their differences, and that this may also be applied to feminist performance. Goodman believes that, while "identity politics" may be somewhat unfashionable, they are helpful for defining certain types of theatre work which may be based on politics of personal identity. She is careful to distance this stance from charges of essentialism, arguing that everyone has multiple identities, and that the expression of one's situated identity need not be essentialist, but rather based on one's experience of living in society. She further advocates this approach by pointing out that it helps to position spectators in relation to feminist performance (21). Like Sue-Ellen Case's discussion of positionality amongst feminist theorists, the intention seems to be towards clarification, an acknowledgment of differences between women and between feminists.

Heather Jones has made the opposite argument, calling for a much more inclusive appreciation for theatre which can be called feminist in its most general sense. Jones argues that much early theatre can be claimed as feminist if it is evaluated in terms of its own age and context, and she cites plays by Sarah Anne Curzon and Elizabeth Lanesford Cushing as examples. For her, the implicit or explicit privileging of feminist drama and theatre over other writing and performing by women is based on the assumption of a feminist drama/theatre archetype: it must be recognizable as such and it must be distinctive structurally and thematically. While this serves a sense of avant-gardism in feminist practice (83), opportunities for women's playwriting generally are still so scarce that insisting on only works that fit a politically correct feminist agenda undermines women's playwriting. Jones
believes that a more desirable project would be to enable voices of any and all women playwrights to be heard and that this would have a feminist effect, if not an explicitly feminist agenda. In short, Jones argues that any attempt by women playwrights to articulate a position, to make sense of or resolve contradictions within their lives, will have a feminist effect and that we should be open to a widely varying set of discourses of resistance (86).

Goodman would agree that the distinction should be made between feminist theatre and women's theatre, but with the purpose of encouraging and developing more of what is clearly feminist. Returning to the definition of feminist theatre, Goodman offers that staging and interpretation, political content and intent must all be considered in the process of determining whether any given theatre is feminist (30). She believes that the term should be reserved for work that is "politically aligned," with particular aims and objectives. 15 To this end, she advocates using women's theatre as a general term, and feminist theatre as a political one, a practice which I think Nightwood has generally adopted, although perhaps not consistently. Furthermore, unlike Jones, Goodman believes that an exploration of women's common experiences is not sufficient grounds to assume political unification or action (31); this is an interesting perspective, clearly at odds with cultural feminism, and one which is relevant to the work of many women of colour, like Monique Mojica for example, who argue that their female identity is not enough to make them feel welcome in the "white

15 Situating her discussion within the British context, Goodman quotes Rosalind Coward's definition of feminist theatre as that which adheres to "The Seven Demands": equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; day care; free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence; end to discrimination against lesbians and freedom of women's own sexuality; the end of violence and sexual coercion (30). While this concrete list of issues might appear to limit the possibilities for feminist theatre, Goodman insists that its criteria is a new set of social structures within which male-female roles are redefined.
Kate Lushington has addressed both the definition of feminist theatre and Nightwood's anti-racism mandate in a number of articles. The topic is introduced in the Winter 1990 issue of Night Talk (vol. 1 no.2), Nightwood's newsletter, when Lushington discusses her experiences while on tour with the play Goodnight Desdemona. Because the Edmonton host, Gyllian Raby, emphasized Nightwood's position as a feminist theatre more than the other host companies had, Lushington spent three days in Edmonton at talks, interviews and meetings trying to define Nightwood's position. She lists some of her conclusions: feminist theatre challenges fixed ideas; it is woman-centred; it offers access to the means of production to women theatre artists; it is collaborative and non-hierarchical in process "yet unafraid to seize and wield power"; and it combats isolation, reaching out to other under-represented groups to promote alternative visions of the world. She agrees that there are many other women and companies across Canada with different kinds and styles of feminist theatre, but with similar ideals and desires: "Nightwood does not represent all feminist theatre, and looks forward to trying on many different shoes in the future." Later that same year, in an article in the Toronto Star, Lushington elaborated further:

We don't do issue-oriented theatre. . . It almost seems that if you're talking about real issues then you can't be theatrical and if you're being theatrical then you're talking in a kind of abstract way about art and can't deal with real issues. We like to put the two together. . . Some people are saying Nightwood is going soft: 'They used to do plays about violence against women


17 Wagner H2.
(This is for You, Anna) and now they're doing a play about a university lecturer who finds herself visiting the worlds of Shakespeare. 'Those people want to plug us into their stereotype of what a feminist theatre company should do. But Nightwood is about exploding stereotypes. And that involves knocking conventional ways of thinking sideways a bit — our own as well as other peoples'.

That same month, in an article in Performing Arts Magazine (Hunt 28), Lushington talked about Nightwood's anti-racist mandate and how it was intended to manifest itself in four ways: there would be an increased representation on the Board by women of colour; priority would be given to women of colour when development money was available; various artists connected to Nightwood would be involved in a project called The Colour Collective, based on individual experiences with and attitudes towards racism, co-written by Lushington and Sears; and Nightwood would hold a forum targeted at progressive arts organizations.  

Lizbeth Goodman argues that the label "feminist theatre" should suit the work, rather then vice versa, although this is not always practical: in Nightwood's case, its work will always be assumed, by the media and the public, to be feminist because of the history and public profile of the company, regardless of the qualities of the play. Goodman further suggests that a playwright should allow issues to come up as a consequence of her feminism, rather than self-consciously writing a play about an issue. This would seem to be the norm with Nightwood, where plays are frequently described as arising out of the experiences or interests of its playwrights. Exposure to a feminist working environment can have wide-ranging

---

18 These last two became Untitled, created and performed by Lushington, Djanet Sears and Monique Mojica in 1993, and Do the Thing Right, an anti-racist forum which was planned but never materialized. According to Lushington, the forum was abandoned partly because of limited resources and partly because the Board felt it had work to do within the company on issues of racism, without attempting to advise outside organizations.
consequences, influencing the way one approaches future theatre projects. For example, in the Fall 1994 issue of Nighttalk, Sarah Stanley discusses directing a production of Oedipus, and how her experience serving on Nightwood's Artistic Advisory Board influenced her approach to the play. Nightwood's conception of feminism as being a matter of perception, rather than specific political demands, is addressed in an article in NOW, in which Lushington states:

It's easy to mistake us for a social action theatre company because we have such a strong political bent, but we're not just interested in social action... Everyone at Nightwood agrees that they want to affect change in society, but the nature of that change is an opening of the mind, a shifting of perception, a looking at things from different angles... Nightwood is given to exploding stereotypes, but one of those stereotypes is what a feminist theatre company is.\(^\text{19}\)

In its most general sense, Goodman argues, feminist theatre aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to affect social change, and is informed by broadly feminist ideas, a definition which allows for a diversity of theories and practices (37). Again, this more inclusive definition seems to fit well with the reality of Nightwood as a company made up of diverse individuals.

In attempting to characterize feminist theatre, particular attention must be paid to the way women are represented onstage, especially the representation of self and the woman as subject. As we have seen, the development of feminist theatre has been read as a progression from criticizing male representations of women, to creating new female roles, to a critique of

the very possibility of representing "woman" onstage. Many theorists have debated the relative position of women in theatre, in terms of both the text and the act of performance. As Toril Moi points out, even terms such as "feminism" and "sexism" can be said to be trying to rationalize, compartmentalize and unify what is chaotic and fragmentary (160). Barbara Godard writes that, in order to discuss woman as producer of textual meaning, we must inevitably analyze woman-as-sign in male-constructed discourse, where she is absence, as we observed in Godard's description of gynesis earlier. We may describe the way that woman has been excluded from that discourse, examine the process of exclusion, or describe the hidden female culture (Lesbian Triptych iii).

We might trace these preoccupations in any of the work done by Nightwood over the years. I would argue that, in any work undertaken by feminist artists, there is a simultaneous addressing of what has gone on before -- the absence of women from the stage or what is perceived as women's misrepresentation -- along with an attempt to sort out one's own position on the question, one's collusion or resistance, perhaps, to perpetuating stereotypes, and the constant attempt to imagine and create a new self without the old obstacles and inhibitions. In the "Afterword" to her 1990 play Afrika Solo, Djanet Sears uses the term "autobio-mythography" in an attempt to describe this process, whereby she finds her place in the world through a combination of fact and fiction.20 The play is not strictly autobiographical, yet it is very much about the struggle to define herself and then to represent this struggle and self onstage.

For Case, the problem lies in the fact that terms such as "woman" and "lesbian," as

---

20 The term is attributed to African-American feminist poet Audre Lorde.
used by cultural feminists, are too totalizing, too biologically based, while the terms as used by materialists have been evacuated, emptied of all practical use (12-13). Case is concerned that the abandonment of terms like "woman" by feminist theorists leaves them open to be appropriated and defined in the public imagination by forces on the political Right. She concludes that feminist critics must negotiate out of a bipolarity of definitions:

> If she could retain the transgression of the seduction of [the] same within the heterosexist social prescription, while remaining cognizant of the heterogeneity being constructed in the feminist critical community, she might move past the present stall to a motile feminist subject both within critical theory and political praxis (Performing Feminisms 13).

Theatre practitioners themselves are involved with the feminist debate as a social movement on a daily basis, just as we all are as social beings who must take political positions on various issues, negotiate representations in the media, and deal with the shifting structure of our society. The relative levels of familiarity with feminist thought will affect how a playwright chooses to assign gender to her characters, a director's casting decisions, an actor's willingness to play certain roles, and so on. Whether or not the theatre practitioner chooses to call herself and her work feminist will depend on her own level of commitment to the ideals of the social movement, but it will also reflect how she understands her feminism to affect the nature of her work. For example, in discussing Nightwood's current efforts to involve more women of colour, Diane Roberts insists: "...I want to be sure that [people] understand that this is not just racial integration for political or social reasons alone -- this is primarily for theatrical innovation!" (Glen 36).

On the other hand, even theatre practitioners with very strong feminist beliefs may hesitate to label their work as "feminist," and may resent others' attempts to do so. This is
a largely liberal response, I think, one which asks why work by women cannot be considered with the same seriousness and at least the pretense of objectivity which is afforded men's work. Women who have constantly had their work ignored or marginalized, who are asked about their political opinions rather than their artistic goals by reviewers, and who have been subjected to sexist comments by other theatre practitioners and critics, may well conclude they have no choice but to insist on being taken seriously as an artist first. Cynthia Grant has said, in regard to the creation of Nightwood, "When we established the company in 1978 we were very anxious that people not consider Nightwood a 'women's theatre.' Personally, I wished to have a career as a director, not as a woman director. Although I was already clearly defined as a feminist, I knew the derogatory, second-class implications of such terms."21

Cynthia Grant described Nightwood's first several collaboratively created pieces as "a theatre of images." Grant has said: "As a group we brought together aesthetic concerns which immediately took us into the realm of a theatre of images...we formed, through our shared concern, an innovative theatre company which would devote itself to explorations in style and content. Everyone should understand this today because our role, over time, has evolved into something quite different" (45). The accident/intention dialectic was at work from the beginning. Women who considered themselves feminists, but saw their work as part of an international avant-garde, were defined by others as a women's company. Through the persistence of the label, and the women's own growing commitment to feminist politics, the label became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Meredith Levine has argued that Nightwood's very

---

21 "Notes from the Front Lines" 44.
formation was a radical act because it "affirmed that women writers and directors did exist and that women's creative work had a right to be valued on par with men's" (6).

3. Nightwood Theatre

In the beginning, the development and image of Nightwood Theatre were very much connected with that of the Theatre Centre; much of the media attention they received related to the Centre and their connection with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, as co-producers of the Rhubarb! Festival. Rhubarb! had its inception in 1979 and was originally called New Faces of '79. Plays rehearsed for two weeks and had a one week run with small technical resources, with emphasis on combining the dramaturgical and performance process. In 1981 Buddies linked up with Nightwood Theatre to produce Rhubarb! for the next three years. Sky Gilbert, the Artistic Director of Buddies, credits Nightwood with introducing performance art and non-text-based performance to Rhubarb! (43). For example, one popular act that was featured for several years involved Kim Renders and Maureen White, better known at that time as serious actors, doing a clown routine that relied on improvisation and physical humour. Other successes included Jan Kudelka's American Demon, directed by Kate Lushington in 1980; the play went on to Brave New Works at the Factory Theatre and then a full production at Theatre Passe Muraille, while Kudelka continued to be involved with Nightwood's Groundswell Festival in later years and Lushington eventually became Artistic Director.

Nightwood, Buddies, and the other resident Theatre Centre companies were characterized in the media as a fringe of the fringe, an even more alternative form of theatre
than the alternates like Theatre Passe Muraille. Within the context of the Theatre Centre, the fact that Nightwood is run by women was not highlighted, and the focus was squarely on their work as alternative and experimental. For example, in a 1983 article in *Canadian Theatre Review*, Patricia Keeney Smith talks about "the many expressions of Nightwood": their adaptations of novels, such as *The True Story of Ida Johnson* or *The Yellow Wallpaper*, their use of visual art in *Glazed Tempera*, their collaborations with the Latin American and Greek communities on *Flashbacks of Tomorrow*. Keeney Smith writes: "One of their latest shows, *Mass/Age* has been called McLuhan-esque but, as Grant readily acknowledges, it owes more to Mabou Mines, a New York company with which she apprenticed... The biggest problem with Nightwood Theatre is honing a piece; there are always too many ideas and never enough time for the experiments to gestate properly" (40). We can gather an impression of Nightwood's imagistic style through Keeney Smith's detailed description of the 1980 production *Glazed Tempera*, a collective creation which the company considered an unqualified success. Keeney Smith writes:

The piece used both taped commentary and original material worked up by the company. Slides of Colville's paintings were juxtaposed with still figures behind scrims to produce a flat light effect uncannily similar to the artist's. They had some fun too; in one scene, actress Maureen White shoots her silhouette across a slide of Colville's 'Stop for Cows!' while Kim Renders looks fixedly out at the audience through binoculars; and in the famous 'Horse and Train' painting, a little toy train comes chuffing along; the Canadian coin series evoked animal noises. There was magic in these colour-washed atmospheres that dabbled in fantasy, tinkered detachedly with perception and constantly surprised (41).
Keeney Smith's article was published in 1983, the same year that Nightwood produced *Smoke Damage*, a project with an explicitly feminist message. Yet, the focus in this article continues to be on artists rather than women artists. For example, Cynthia Grant is quoted as saying that artists are not sufficiently recognized in Toronto: "She points out that we still lack both foresight and hindsight, a strong enough reason for doing, for seeing the potential of what we're lucky enough to have happening here" (43). There is discussion of the lack of a practical division between commercial and experimental theatre in terms of government funding, but again, no mention of the specific problems or potential of a company run by women.

In contrast, the magazine *Broadside* (vol. 4 no.5) ran an article in November of 1983 entitled "No Mean Feet" by Amanda Hale (who would later have a play produced by Nightwood and would go on to work at the Company of Sirens with Cynthia Grant). It begins by mentioning an abbreviated version of Rina Fraticelli's report on the status of women in Canadian theatre, published in the September 1982 issue of *FUSE Magazine*. The report was also sent to all Canadian artistic directors (89% of whom were male) and the federal government. Hale announces that a Women in Theatre group had recently formed in Toronto in response to the report, a group of about 45 women who were meeting on a monthly basis. Two of these women, Susan Padveen and Kate Lushington, had gone on to form a company called Mean Feet, the aim of which was to give visibility to the problems women encounter as a result of gender stereotyping, to create opportunities for female directors and playwrights, and to develop the skills required to capitalize on those
opportunities. Lushington is quoted as saying that she felt isolated as a female director.  

Because *Broadside* is a feminist publication, Hale is careful to specify the kind of feminism that Mean Feet represents: "Both Lushington and Padveen are feminists of the liberal, broad spectrum variety rather than the separatist perspective, and they intend to reflect this in their work by giving visibility to the feminist perspective..." Both feel that male artistic directors are unwilling to take a chance on women directors, and that an individual woman's success or failure reflects on all other women directors, but at the same time, they are concerned that they will contribute to their own "ghettoization" if they deal only with women's issues or are seen to be producing agit prop: "... Lushington and Padveen feel they must compete on the open market rather than retreating into 'women only' theatre justified by the all-too-true excuse of discrimination." This is interesting considering that Lushington took over as Nightwood's Artistic Director in 1988 and, if anything, moved the company in a more explicitly feminist direction. Although theatre practitioners like Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders and Kate Lushington defined themselves personally as feminists, they went through an initial period of resistance to having their work labelled as such. Artists seldom like having their work defined for them and one can understand the reluctance to being pigeon-holed by the media. With Fraticelli's report, however, and the growing strength of feminism, women began to understand their marginalized position in the theatre as part of a much larger problem, and came to embrace

---

22 The first and only production by Mean Feet was staged in early December of 1982. Built around the theme of fathers and daughters, it included *Dark Pony* by David Mamet directed by Padveen, and *Canadian Gothic* by Joanna McClelland Glass directed by Lushington and was funded by a project grant from the Ontario Arts Council. According to Hale, "It was a first class production and received very favourable reviews."
the movement that was identifying and critiquing that problem. Women like Grant, Renders and Lushington accepted the label and attempted to make feminism fit their own individual work, as opposed to making the work fit feminism. As feminism has evolved it has expanded to include more women who have, in turn, shaped feminism.

Around 1983 the perception of Nightwood as a feminist theatre company became more explicit. That year, the Women's Cultural Building sponsored a festival of women's art which included a Women's Perspectives series at Partisan Gallery. Nightwood's contribution was a trio of short pieces: Four Part Dischord by Kim Renders and Psycho-Nuclear Breakdown by Cynthia Grant had been previously performed at Rhubarb!, but This is for You, Anna was a "spectacle of revenge" created collectively by the Anna Project: Baquta Rubess, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Suzanne Khuri and Maureen White. The piece was so successful that the group was encouraged to expand it into a full-length play which eventually went on tour throughout Ontario in 1984 and to England in 1985. It was published in Canadian Theatre Review in 1985, credited to the four original Anna Project members, as well as the stage manager and administrator. The show was re-mounted in Toronto at Theatre Passe Muraille in January 1986 and at the DuMaurier International Theatre Festival that spring. Although Rubess describes Nightwood's involvement as "arm's length," they provided funds that made the tour possible and three of the Project members, including founder Maureen White, were actively involved with Nightwood. Following This is for You, Anna, Nightwood's next project was Smoke Damage in the fall of 1983, which I have already cited as an example of cultural feminist theatre. Susan Cole has described Baquta Rubess and Ann-Marie

23 Much and Rudakoff, Fair Play, 58.
MacDonald as part of a first wave of women who got involved with and widened the sphere of the original group through shows like *Pope Joan* and *Smoke Damage*: "These early '80s productions used Nightwood as a collective laboratory, and emphasized the need for a feminist company on the theatre scene, for no other troupes were confronting such issues as church violence and hypocrisy from women's perspectives" (13). These projects helped to formulate Nightwood's growing identification as a feminist company.

This identification is evidenced by a new focus in subsequent funding applications. By March of 1984, in an application to the Laidlaw Foundation requesting funding for an upcoming production called *Penelope*, Nightwood's status as a women-led company was given prominence. The application was written by Mary Vingoe, who notes that, over the past five years, Nightwood had produced "original and innovative work for the stage," including plays that dealt with contemporary issues such as "the concerns of the women's community," the role of technology in our lives, and the "peace problem." She mentions *Glazed Tempera* and *Flashbacks of Tomorrow*, but also *Smoke Damage*, and adds:

Nightwood Theatre is unique. We are the only professional theatre company in Toronto founded and operated by women. Recent studies commissioned by the Status of Women have revealed the real limits to the participation of women in Canadian theatre. The hard statistics tell us that: only 10% of plays produced in Canada are written by women; only 13% of directors working in Canada are women; only 11% of artistic directors employed in Canada are women; contrast this to the fact that 60% of all audiences are female and in 1980/81, 68% of the student body in the performing arts were women. [The application was accompanied by the *FUSE Magazine* article summarizing Fraticelli's report].

In the application Vingoe stresses the urgent need for developmental contexts for women
playwrights, directors, and performers: "Our theatre increasingly finds itself viewed as a central resource and potential producer for women artists in this city." Vingoe boasts that Nightwood has offered employment to women as technicians, designers, directors, playwrights, stage managers and administrators. She also states that, for 1984/85, Nightwood has designed a season which is intended to specifically address the imbalance in the statistics recently released: "We wish to fully educate the public on the status of the 'invisible majority' in the theatre while providing opportunity for many women artists." Vingoe explains that the season will include *The Euguelionne* by Louky Bersianik, "which electrified Quebec women when it was first published," as well as a play developed through The Women's Immigrant Centre in Toronto.24

The focus of Vingoe's application, however, is the proposed production of *Penelope*. Nightwood planned to commission ten women writers to interpret female characters from the *Odyssey*; some of their prospective participants included Sharon Riis, Ann Cameron, Jan Kudelka, Jane Rule, Susan Musgrave, and Rita MacNeil. They then planned to challenge any of Toronto's male-run companies to do the same, creating the male version, and to run the two works on alternate nights as *Penelope/Ulysse* (sic). Nightwood would sponsor the production costs, but salaries were to be paid by the "male company" within strict limits. An external judge would interpret the "rules," and neither company would be allowed to see the other's rehearsals. Vingoe concluded that the project would provide "a unique forum and a

---

24 The immigrant women's play did not receive funding. Grant directed *The Euguelionne* at the November 1987 Groundswell. *Penelope* was eventually staged October 3 to 6, 1985, as a workshop production at the Theatre Centre, with poetry by Margaret Atwood adapted by Cynthia Grant, Peggy Sample and Susan Seagrove. It was later developed further and performed in 1992/93 by the Company of Sirens, and published in *Canadian Theatre Review* 78.
good humoured context by which to explode some of the dark myths which exist about men and women in the theatre.” Also significant are Vingoe’s statements: “Our wider purpose is to stimulate a better awareness of the female aesthetic in the theatre, a field which even today is dominated (90%) by men” and “The theatre has always had the power to shock public consciousness into an awareness of our true social values.” The nature of the project and the use of the term "female aesthetic" clearly point to a theatre company coming to terms with its status as woman-centred, and the implications of feminism run like an unspoken subtext throughout the application. As Meredith Levine has commented: "The artistic community's diminishing resistance to feminism has enabled Nightwood to 'come out' as a feminist theatre" (6).

There is a similar willingness to push their role as a resource for women in their promotional brochure for the 1984/85 season. The brochure states that Nightwood chooses "... programming that reflects the voices of women in Canadian culture. Over the past five years we have produced 20 new or adapted plays. We focus on a broad spectrum of modern concerns. Using comedy, we provide our audiences with entertaining and thought-provoking evenings." The brochure highlights the 1984 summer tour of Love and Work Enough and the fall 1984 production of Pope Joan by Baputa Rubess, which played an extended run at the Poor Alex Theatre (the home of the Theatre Centre at that point). The brochure lists upcoming productions in Nightwood’s season including The Woman Who Slept With Men to Take the War Out of Them by Deena Metzger, a piece about the artist Kathe Köllwitz, Penelope, and Before and Beyond Testubes by Amanda Hale, which dealt with reproductive issues. Obviously, the work is now consistently dealing with women-oriented themes and
characters. The brochure sums up what appears to have become Nightwood's official strategy at this stage in their development: they never use the word feminist, but they do market themselves as being unique and they do start talking about things like a "female perspective," a "female aesthetic," and their role as an employer of women theatre artists.

Interestingly, this can be contrasted with publicity materials produced ten years later, which state: "Nightwood is a feminist theatre company committed to the creation of original, innovative plays and the long term development of women theatre artists. We are dedicated to exploding stereotypes and creating an alternative, woman-positive vision of the world" [my emphasis]. But then, a few years later, the mandate statement changes once again; as of 1995 it reads: "Nightwood Theatre's mandate is to develop, promote and produce original, innovative works by Canadian women theatre artists creating alternative visions of the world from diverse cultural perspectives." The statement goes on to list "Values we consider important," which are: "a commitment to anti-racism as a visible and significant priority in the interpretation of our mandate; a determination to increase the opportunities for women from all cultural communities to work in all aspects of the creative process; a commitment to paying all artists to affirm that women's work is of value; a commitment to new voices; a commitment to the long range development of women artists as well as to specific plays; a commitment to artistic self-determination (eg. hands-off dramaturgy); a desire to mount more shows in production in addition to our workshop activities; an interest in the international feminist repertoire, and also new feminist interpretations of the classics, in addition to the mandate to develop and promote original Canadian work; a firm commitment to finding a theatre space for Nightwood Theatre which we will operate as a
women-run, woman-centred focus point for our own work and the work of like-minded artists." The statement concludes with the slogan: "Unique feminist theatre from diverse cultural perspectives."

Obviously there has been something of a shift in focus with this most recent statement of policy. The emphasis is now on involving women of colour, women from diverse cultural communities, and this is done within the on-going context of new play development and the creation of job opportunities. The word feminist is used, but not prominently, and not at all in the actual mandate statement. There is also a clear policy regarding the payment of salaries and also a commitment to developing the artist as well as the work. This was confirmed by current Producer Leslie Lester, who acknowledged that the desire to function as something of a resource centre, even a training centre, for women artists runs as a kind of subtext to the mandate. She also confirmed that the decision not to highlight the word "feminism" was a conscious choice, motivated in part by their desire to be inclusive and partly because of the ambivalent and somewhat contradictory feelings about feminism amongst the three women running the company. 24

This is revealed in an article by Erica Sessle, in which she interviews Alisa Palmer and Diane Roberts, then Nightwood's Artistic Co-Directors. 25 In discussing their definition of feminist theatre, Palmer says: "Women have disagreement as to what feminism is, what power for women is, and what equality for women is. But for these disagreements to be stifled in an attempt to present a unified feminist front, is dangerous. Discourse must happen and should

---


be encouraged. And that encouragement is the most radical thing that a woman's theatre company can do." She goes on to say that the word feminist is "no longer satisfying, because feminist is not a clear enough word."

Sessle remarks that it is interesting that Nightwood has been able to preserve aspects of their original mandate and still evolve within the theatre community. In response, Palmer comments: "There was a very clear need for Nightwood to have a clear political mandate 15 years ago. But things are different now and it is necessary to have a clear set of artist demands. . ." She believes that the three women of the current team fit into the model of the four founders in being:

. . .a collaborative group of women who are each interested in different areas of innovation. We have, of course, issues in common, such as the direction of the future of Nightwood as a theatrical resource centre for women artists. But 15 years after the start of Nightwood, the context of the theatre scene in Toronto is different. Now there are a lot more women artists as recognized artistic directors and playwrights. But it is largely white women who have garnered this recognition. It's a different story for women of colour.

She emphasizes that Nightwood provides a space for women of different cultural, age and artistic backgrounds to come together and find the support to do their work the way they want to, even if it is not explicitly feminist work. Yet elsewhere, in their newsletter for example, the word feminist is used with pride. Rather than undermining its feminist stance, the kind of debate, ambivalence and careful defining that are reflected in these statements indicate the importance of situating one's self and work in the feminist theatre spectrum.

The Toronto feminist community has also attempted to situate Nightwood within a political context, and this is explored in two articles in particular. The first, appearing in
Theatrum: A Theatre Journal in the Spring of 1987, is entitled "Feminist Theatre--Toronto 87" and was written by Meredith Levine. In an attempt to explain the more conservative programming choices at Nightwood for the 1986/87 season, Levine argues that Nightwood has always been relatively conservative and that these choices are consistent with the company's latent tendencies. Levine argues that a feminist sensibility was always evident in Nightwood's choice of politically controversial plays and a non-linear, imagistic form, but that: "The cautious rhetoric of the early years, and the long-standing desire for mainstream recognition reveal recent changes at Nightwood to be more consistent than it may first appear" (6). By 1987 Nightwood had an eleven-woman Management Board and operational funding and Cynthia Grant had been replaced by Mary Vingoe as Artistic Director. Levine writes: "...Nightwood is pursuing the middle-class, main-stream audience which involves using larger, more expensive venues. These are not fundamental changes, but a reflection of recent structural and financial abilities to realize their original goals." Levine quotes Mary Vingoe as saying that they feel pressure from the government to achieve greater box office revenue: "But the pressure towards the mainstream is from the inside too, the artists want to reach a broader audience." Vingoe is unapologetic about this: "We don't say mainstream is bad. We want to have an influence on the mainstream. We don't want to be ghettoized. ...Still it remains very important in the work that I do that I challenge the status quo" (7). She contends that to survive in the centre with political content is an act of subversion: "I guess what we are trying to do this year is create sophisticated pieces of work that are attractive to mainstream audiences. And imbuing them with a feminism the audience didn't expect. We are still looking for different ways of redefining the images we see around us. We
are just using a different means of snaring people." Levine concludes by wondering what type of feminism Nightwood will reflect; she notes that the Board "represents a range of feminist perspectives" and wonders how much commitment to the political arm of feminism will remain intact.

Levine then goes on to contrast Nightwood with the Company of Sirens, saying that, while most feminists would applaud the presentation of positive female images in highly visible places, not all share Nightwood's view on how this is to be done: "Perhaps one of the more notable dissenting voices is its former Artistic Director Cynthia Grant, who left Nightwood last June [1986] to form the Company of Sirens with Lina Chartrand, Shawna Dempsey, Peggy Sample and Lib Spry." Part of the impetus for forming a new theatre group was a difference of opinion about the definition of theatre and its audience; Grant says the mainstream is not such a bad place to be but that she and the Sirens are unwilling to have it become a major focus of energy, preferring to concentrate on non-traditional audiences and performance venues (7).

Levine structures her comparison of the companies around the kind of audiences they attract: "One must ask: which post-isolation audience is the group trying to reach and what venues are being used to reach them? The choice both of public and of public space indicates a particular concept of feminism and therefore feminist theatre" (6). She concludes that: "Ultimately, it is not the particular public space and audience that tests the validity of each group's work, but rather their ability to be heard beyond their own parlours" (7). While setting up an opposition between the mainstream Nightwood and the grassroots Company
of Sirens which is perhaps not as clearly drawn as she makes out.\textsuperscript{27} Levine does point to the differing routes that companies calling themselves feminist may take and suggests how wide the spectrum has become even in the limited context of Toronto theatre in the late 1980s.

The second article was written in the spring of 1990 for \textit{FUSE} Magazine. Entitled "10 Years and 5 Minutes: Nightwood Celebrates a Decade of Feminist Theatre," it was written by Susan G. Cole, a member of the Nightwood Board. In direct contrast to Levine, Cole starts off by saying that Nightwood has been substantially transformed from its original concept and is grappling with fundamental questions. How does a theatre company remain true to its alternative roots while fulfilling a political mandate of reaching out to a large audience? How does it function within a theatre community unfamiliar and sometimes hostile to feminist principles? How does any theatre exist in the 1990s?

Like Levine, Cole believes that Cynthia Grant's resignation represented a shift in Nightwood's direction, but rather than seeing Nightwood's move towards the mainstream as a natural emergence of latent tendencies, Cole problematizes the move and characterizes it as part of an on-going struggle for definition. New audiences and the involvement of an increasing number of artists demanded a re-evaluation of their ability to fulfill all the requirements of a feminist mandate and remain accountable to the community: "The structure, which worked well for a small group, couldn't be expected to function for Nightwood's slowly changing political priorities. In 1985, Nightwood established a board of directors, employed a general manager as its first paid staff and hired Mary Vingoe as its first artistic coordinator." While Cole is correct in depicting a growing move toward structure

\textsuperscript{27} The Company of Sirens has mounted shows in more traditional venues as well, such as the Alumnae Theatre and Theatre Passe Muraille.
within Nightwood, her facts are not quite accurate - by 1982 Nightwood had a first Board in place and Cynthia Grant was consistently referred to as the Artistic Director; Levine, in fact, refers to Grant as "Nightwood's founding Artistic Director." Cole writes that the founders agonized over every move, making sure that there were artists on the board and naming an Artistic Coordinator instead of Director in order to "institutionalize the collective values they thought might be leached out of the company under the aegis of a board." In fact, the concern for artist representation on the Board and the Coordinator title came about during the terms of Mary Vingoe and Maureen White, between 1986 and 1988. Cole believes that if these women had been labelled Artistic Directors they might have been considered more legitimate by their counterparts at other theatres and by government funding bodies. This is difficult to judge, but it is perhaps noteworthy that Kate Lushington, after being hired on as the Artistic Coordinator in 1988, had her title changed to Director two years later and that it has remained so with the new management team.

The most interesting aspect of Cole's article is her discussion of the Five Minute Feminist Cabaret (known as FemCab), an annual fundraising event which began in 1983 and has remained one of Nightwood's strongest links to a wider feminist community. Cole writes: "In many ways, FemCab has become emblematic of Nightwood's internal philosophical tensions. Originated by Women's Cultural Building in 1983, it started out as a quintessentially grassroots event, with an open call to anyone female with a feminist bent to submit ideas." For the first two years there were no auditions and the venues were bars, but when Nightwood took over as the producer, the event was mounted in legitimate theatre settings: "FemCab supporters, proud of the roots of the event, challenged this turn of events.
They believed that it would work against Nightwood's philosophy of encouraging new theatre artists." While Cole leaves her discussion at that, she is correct in identifying FemCab as a source of potential philosophical conflict; in fact, when the current leadership team took over in 1994, they suspended the annual event for two years before resurrecting it in 1996, at least in part to create a period of distance between themselves and the past.

Cole concludes her article with the telling statement: "Many theatre artists call it a support group, but they couldn't really tell you all the women that are in it. But in spite of the elasticity of its definition and the fact that the company has never had a permanent theatre space, many women playwrights, directors and actors call Nightwood home." I agree entirely that Nightwood is loosely defined in this regard, very much a theatre of people and yet an influence and force for many who may barely be acquainted, despite the mutual benefit of their community bond.

4. Feminist Theatre Theory

So far we have discussed feminism, and we have tried to define some of the characteristics of feminist theatre; we have also used Nightwood as a source for practical examples of both. When we begin to speak of feminist theory as it applies to theatre, the rather ungainly term feminist theatre theory comes into play. It is a term that can be applied to a growing field of knowledge, with its own texts and theorists and academic courses within universities and yet, like feminism itself, it may take on many different qualities. To write and talk about feminist theatre theory, one is often performing a double "translation," taking concepts and terminology from other disciplines and applying them to the subject at hand;
terms could be coming from literary theory or feminist theory, anthropology, psychology or film theory, but in each case they must be discussed within a new, performance context. As a result, much feminist theatre theory operates at the level of introduction, defining terms and laying out the field, remaining multidisciplinary and marginal by necessity. Sue-Ellen Case points out that the advantages of this marginality include a certain motility and ease in negotiating the postmodern terrain of fragmentation and undecidability. Case celebrates the intertextuality which is characteristic of much feminist theatre theory and the transgressive pleasures of bringing previously neglected and marginalized subject matter into academic study (Performing Feminisms 4).

During the 1980s, feminist theory rose to prominence both within the feminist movement and within the context of dominant theoretical practices. But while feminist theory has changed the nature of many academic disciplines and altered other theories, its role within the feminist movement is less clear. Theory is often seen as separate from practice, inaccessible to women who have not had the privilege of higher education, and it is accused of luring feminists away from working on social and political issues. Feminist theorists are always reminded that feminism began as and continues to be a movement for social change and, as a result, much feminist theory makes a great effort to be practical, to relate itself to concrete issues and to remain politically relevant.

Nonetheless, the role of feminism and feminist theory within theatre practice remains controversial. In a 1989 article entitled "The Changing Body of Women's Work," Kate Lushington argues that "... all women theatre practitioners are by their very nature marginalized, disenfranchised, from prestigious 1988 Toronto Arts Award Winner Judith
Thompson, to the community theatre workers from coast to coast who labour to give voice to the silenced.28 Lushington cites statistics released by the Playwright's Union of Canada in 1988 showing that, of all new plays produced in the 1987/88 season, only 17 percent were by women; even fewer were directed by women, and there were also few roles for women actors; (these statistics were collected as a follow-up, six years later, to Rina Fraticelli's original survey). Yet in the same article, Lushington quotes Janet Amos who, during her 1985 term as Artistic Director of Theatre New Brunswick, said: "The danger (in labelling women's work feminist) is that the work will either be rejected as propaganda, or worse, it will become more important that the work be done by women, than whether or not it is any good." Lushington criticizes Amos for her timidity, using the Playwright's Union numbers to note sarcastically, "Don't worry, Ms Amos, we are in no imminent danger of affirmative action."

Many of the problematic issues around feminist theatre are illustrated by Lushington's article and her examples. As we saw earlier in quotes from Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders and Kate Lushington, some women theatre practitioners overcome their initial resistance to the feminist label and learn to embrace it. Others, however, remain ambivalent or even hostile. While activists like Lushington are incensed by the statistical under-representation of women in theatre employment, which is at least partly a sociological and economic issue of

28 To suggest that Judith Thompson is marginalized in Canadian theatre seems at first a dubious statement, but Lushington is no doubt alluding to Thompson both as an anomaly and as someone who has encountered sexism in her rise to the position of respect she now enjoys. Thompson herself (Peerbaye, Canadian Theatre Review 84, 23) talks about the paternalistic control she had to overcome in order to get her earliest plays done to her satisfaction. Furthermore, in a larger context, even the most successful woman in our society is still the victim of sexist stereotyping, expected to behave in certain ways, at risk from male violence, and so on, a common condition which forms the basis for feminist solidarity amongst women of very different circumstances.
employment equity, an Artistic Director like Amos is concerned with more ambiguous issues like audience reception and "artistic quality." While Lushington might advocate the tactical use of the word "feminist" to highlight the marginalized status of women's work in a male-dominated field, Amos fears the word will evoke connotations and assumptions that will overshadow the work itself. The two women share certain concerns, both economic and aesthetic, but the word "feminist" inhabits diametrically opposed degrees of importance and has very different implications for their respective understanding of theatre.

This is more than a question of semantics; the fear that one's work will be misinterpreted is a very real one for theatre practitioners in general, and particularly for feminists, when the future of their small theatre company relies on the box office returns and favourable reviews that translate into grant money. Reviewers bring biases to a production which have less to do with the production at hand than pre-conceptions of what a feminist show must be: for example, in a review of Nightwood's 1987 production of Margaret Hollingsworth's play War Babies, the writer comments: "After seeing a play of the quality of War Babies produced well by Nightwood, I am reluctant to see them do more of their traditional collective creation. It's encouraging to see that Nightwood's vision of feminism isn't as dogmatically rigid as much of their previous output suggests." 28 Here, the reviewer implies that he was able to enjoy this particular production in spite of the expectations he had developed from seeing previous Nightwood shows (how many and which ones he does not specify); the reader assumes, therefore, that this play is an exception to the usual "dogmatically rigid" work which Nightwood produces, and may approach the next

Nightwood creation with these prejudices in mind.

Another example is the review "Cathy Jones steals World Stage Festival show" by Ray Conlogue, comparing two productions by women at the DuMaurier World Stage Festival in 1986. Conlogue starts out by praising Jones' show, then says it is a "ready contrast" to the "victim fetishism" of This is for You, Anna: "Much has been written about this show, an incontrovertibly powerful piece of theatre created by a feminist collective in Toronto and revived for the festival." In re-counting the plotline of the show, Conlogue makes a number of factual errors and spends most of the review talking, not about the play itself or its performance values, but about his personal opinions on gender relations:

It is true that some men are physically violent to women, and that most women cannot respond in kind. But this does not mean women are helpless to fight back. They do so by other means, responding . . . with psychological sexual humiliation. Often they do so not toward the men who have abused them, but toward other men they meet at some subsequent time. Our society is engulfed in gender tension right now, and women are responsible for a good deal of it. . . Sexual violence in our society is a syndrome in which men and women alike are caught, and to which both contribute. Plays in which women

---


31 For example, Conlogue is incorrect in saying that Marianne Bachmeier killed her "ex-lover" who was on trial for murdering her daughter; nowhere in the play is it suggested that he was her lover. Conlogue writes: "It explores Anna's life history in detail [again, this is an error, he means Marianne's life history], including her various humiliations in a male-dominated society, and if it doesn't actually say her action was justifiable, it is sympathetic." He objects to the murder as being portrayed as "normative" and also points out that women belittle men by calling them "wimps," which suggests that they like aggressive men. It is difficult to see how the play suggests these opinions or in what way they are relevant.

are seen as incapable of any wrong action (or any action at all, a convenient byproduct of "victimization") misrepresent women as well as men. Conlogue concludes by stating that Anna "is a negative image of shattered, crippled women and its implied message to any male viewer is one of blame." Conlogue is of course entitled to his opinion, but one is struck by the anger he directs, not at the play or its performers so much but at women, and feminism, in general.

Given this potentially hostile reaction from influential reviewers, it becomes understandable that the women involved with Nightwood sound at times as if they are trying to avert criticism before it arises. A few months after Conlogue's review Mary Vingoe is quoted as saying that, although Nightwood is a feminist collective: ". . . we do not ask writers to toe any particular political line. . . . We want theatre that has integrity and its roots in real experience, rather than just being doctrinaire."32 A few months later, Baputa Rubess elaborates:

Nightwood. . . never consciously set out to make a grand, feminist statement, let alone an angry diatribe. . . . The point here is not to proselytize. Since we happen to be feminists, we ask certain questions, but this show isn't meant as agit-prop. What we want to avoid is being ghettoized to the point where people say, 'If it's Nightwood, it must be feminist, so I probably wouldn't like it.'33

The author of the article assures the reader that Nightwood's emphasis on "solid theatrical values rather than dogmatic statements" has resulted in Dora Mavor Moore award nominations for best new play (War Babies 1987) and featured male performance (Sky Gilbert

in *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near*, Violette Leduc 1987). The message is clear that Nightwood produces high quality shows that have been given a seal of approval by arts organizations, and that the potential audience member need not fear an experience like Conlogue's.

The relationship between theatre practice and the social movement of feminism necessarily shapes feminist theatre theory through a complex interconnectedness, a circulation and cross-fertilization of information and ideas. It is important to note, however, that the parallel is not necessarily acknowledged or understood by the participants themselves; theatre practitioners may create postmodern feminist performance, for example, without necessarily using those, or any, theoretical terms to define their activity. Likewise, those activists and theorists within the social movement who struggle with and continue to re-define and revise the feminism(s) they live by, may do so without considering how their work might be reflected in an artistic context.

Women producing feminist theatre have differing views on what that means for them, in terms of everything from political content to aesthetic questions of form to the relationship with their audience. Feminists have applied the social critique of the feminist movement to both the analytical perception of art and the organization of theatre practice, mixing critical discoveries about the sexualization of women onstage, the omission of women’s narratives, the lack of strong roles for women and the invisibility of lesbians and women of colour, with the economic issues of wage inequities, patriarchal hiring practices and union representation (Case 113). In attempting to theorize these multi-faceted projects, feminist theatre theory pursues a "new poetics," to use Sue-Ellen Case's term, abandoning the traditional patriarchal
values embedded in notions of form, practice and audience response for new models that accommodate the presence of women in art, liberate women from the cultural fictions of the female gender, and deconstruct the valorization of the male gender (114). Feminist theatre theorists attempt to develop a model by which women, as theatre workers and audience, can take possession of their cultural (re)production, especially the construction of gender.

In her Introduction to Performing Feminisms, Case identifies three characteristics of feminist theatre theory which she argues define both the content and the nature of the field. First, Case points out that the "double" of feminist theatre is the historical moment in which it takes place, the real material conditions that are addressed by feminist political action and which move within the gestures of the stage. Case comments on the ease with which feminist theorists move between material circumstances and theoretical strategies, extending their critique not only to contemporary works but historical texts as well. A good example of this characteristic would be the 1989 Nightwood production of Susan G. Cole's play A Fertile Imagination, which deals with a lesbian couple's attempt to have a baby by artificial insemination. The performance of the play within the fictional world onstage is constantly echoed by the status of the social issues in the external world which are its "double." Any consideration of the play by a feminist critic, therefore, would have to address how the play and its performance evoke "real-life" circumstances and issues for the spectator, and we shall return to a closer examination of this particular example in Chapter Two.

Case next points out that material conditions have historically shaped the situation of the woman performer:

The location of the woman performer as situated on the boundaries of notions of the sacred, public performance, and state politics provides a nexus of
theory, state practice and patriarchal assumptions...raising the theoretical issue of the codes and meanings of the female body onstage - as a performance site and as a social determinant (Performing Feminisms 5).

Here, feminist theory moves straight past drama as literature to arrive at the body of the woman onstage in performance, the fact of her physical presence before an audience and the system of meanings within which they will operate. An ideal example here would be A Particular Class of Women by Janet Feindel. Excerpts of the play were performed at various locations including the Theatre Centre (where Nightwood was one of the managing companies) in January of 1986 and as part of Nightwood’s Groundswell Festival in January of 1987, where it was directed and dramaturged by Mary Durkan. A Particular Class of Women consists of a series of monologues by women who work as strippers, and attempts to portray the diversity of the individual women and their attitudes towards their work while complicating stereotypes about strippers; Feindel portrayed all the characters, which she had based on women she knew, employing slight costume changes and music for each. The intent is to convey a politicized message about the derogatory stereotypes that strippers face, and the audience finds itself implicated in the perpetuation of these stereotypes, both as voyeurs/strip club customers and as theatre-goers. This dynamic would undergo substantial shifts depending on the venue in which it was performed and the configuration of the

---

33 Libra Productions presented A Particular Class of Women, directed by Kim Lavis, at the Alumnae Theatre, October 27 to November 6, 1994. In this production, each character was portrayed by a different actor. Instead of admiring the virtuosity of a single performer, the audience focus was on a parade of attractive young bodies in competition with one another, undermining the intention of the playwright to emphasize female solidarity. Signs at the theatre entrance encouraged the audience to clap and cheer for the dance pieces, heightening our role as voyeurs and consumers. It should be acknowledged that the program note indicated that Janet Feindel was consulted on and supported the production.
audience: Feindel presented the play at Fringe Festivals, feminist conferences, and at a Toronto stripclub. In a performance context, it is Feindel's body which is displayed onstage, but for the purpose of celebrating other women. A feminist theorist discussing the play in performance would need to consider Feindel as both skillful actor and sexualized female presence and the implications for her varying spectators. Were they expecting to be titillated or to disapprove? Was the play's message what they thought it was going to be? And how did their reaction reflect their own assumptions about strippers or about feminist theatre?

Finally, Case describes three tendencies in feminist theory which result from interaction within the community of feminist theorists and their proximity to the social movement: a tendency to engage in dialectical thinking; to perform a kind of self-criticism; and to become positional (Performing Feminisms 6). Positionality is the identification of the site from which the feminist theorist writes, her approach, the ways in which her own analysis is shaped by her circumstances: it is at once ideological, social, and a matter of personal attitude. Case states that, while in earlier feminist writings this was addressed through some kind of testimonial statement, the generality and stability of these identifications are now called into question. For example, a particular sexual preference is affected by many other factors -- ethnicity, class, historical period and so on -- and does not inhabit a "changeless, self-enclosed essential positional model." Even to delimit the sign "woman" as a stable referent requires the performance of gender as a "repeated corporeal project." As we shall see in Chapter Four, the idea that while one might be a sex one only performs a gender, is an important one for postmodern theory; Judith Butler has written that "... because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strategy'
better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs" (Gender Trouble 7). It is no longer sufficient to simply label oneself in an effort to deflect criticism or garner authority; instead, the feminist theorist must adopt a constant interrogative strategy by which all assumptions, including her own, are up for investigation.

Lynda Hart, editor of Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre, explains that feminist theory of dramatic representation simultaneously addresses the absence of women from conventional theatre while it struggles to construct alternative ways of seeing. She describes this as a three-stage process, whereby the theorist investigates male-inscribed literary theory/tradition; documents women's realities as constructed by women writers; and then rigorously explores the language of representation itself (3). Hart commends women who do what she calls "dangerous history" -- not only to discover the forgotten achievements of women, but also to examine conditions under which gender conflicts have repeatedly arisen and been resolved with women remaining subordinate (16).

We shall conclude this chapter with a few examples of how Nightwood practitioners have addressed the relationship between feminism, theatre, and theory, thus bringing together the several threads of the preceding discussion. In an article entitled "Feminist Theatre" in Bark Magazine, by Marlene Arpe, Cynthia Grant is quoted regarding her work with the Sirens: "We see ourselves as part of a larger feminist movement, which I think is very important in terms of feminist artists -- that they work within the larger feminist movement. I think sometimes artists end up sort of 'out there on their own'." Next, writer and performer Diane Flacks, who has appeared in a number of FemCabs, discusses the

---

criticism sometimes levelled at feminist theatre that it only "preaches to the converted," that is, attracts an audience which already agrees with the feminist philosophy. Flacks contends that such "preaching" is in fact valuable because it reinforces those ideals and gives the audience more things to think and talk about. Flacks says: "I think the media has done a really good job of turning feminism into a dirty word. But the theatre community is wonderful, because the theatre community is conscious and not interested in buying into that." Finally, the article contains a quotation from Kate Lushington:

There are a lot of lines drawn. Maybe it's Canada, maybe it's art, maybe it's theatre. It's either political or it's purely aesthetic. It's either popular or it's non-professional. It's either academic or it's practical. And it seems to me that there is a lot that feminism can offer in joining together all these either/or-s.

With them we fall into too many traps of exclusivity.

All three of these examples illustrate how feminist theatre practitioners understand themselves to be part of the larger feminist movement, and how this is important not only as a source of strength but also as a source for ideas and inquiry.
Chapter Two: The Representation of Women and Nightwood Theatre

The object of this chapter is to illustrate the ways in which two of the feminist theatre categories outlined in Chapter One may be used as analytical tools when looking at feminist theatre. Specifically, we shall look at how feminist plays may be seen to take a cultural or materialist feminist approach to questions of identity and subjecthood and how this will influence the way they represent women for the audience. Feminist semiotics, as a field which inquires into the ways gender is signified, can be a useful tool in understanding the difference in approach; questions are raised about the authenticity of presence and the role of the audience in creating meaning. Subjecthood is also tied up with questions of form -- can realism effectively communicate female identity, for example -- and the complex relationship between theatre and representation. Finally, we shall apply the cultural and materialist categories to several examples from Nightwood's production history, as a means to explore how these particular plays represent women.

1. Cultural and Materialist Feminism

The intention is not to set up an opposition between the two types of feminism, nor to prove that one is in some way better than the other, but rather to demonstrate how the principles I have identified as cultural or materialist affect the creative process and end product of feminist theatre work. It is also important to note that these are not absolute
categories, but rather clusters of tendencies which serve as a useful means of distinguishing between, and understanding the intentions behind, various pieces of feminist theatre.

While a particular theatre company might be more closely identified with cultural feminism, for example, and could therefore be said to produce cultural feminist theatre, it is seldom possible or desirable to draw absolute distinctions. For one thing, while in the United States or other countries there may be a wide enough variety of feminist theatre companies to assign types of feminism to each exclusively, in Canada and particularly in Toronto, there is simply not the basis for such comparisons. In fact, some Canadian feminist theatre practitioners have objected to what they see as an American agenda behind analysis of their work; in their view, categories like cultural and materialist have been invented by American theorists and do not necessarily have the same relevance for Canadian theatre. Deanne Taylor, Artistic Director of the Toronto company Videocabaret International, has said, for example, that by identifying oneself as feminist, one ends up taking on the battles of American mainstream feminist ideology; Taylor believes that the direction of Canadian feminist theatre should not be set by American feminism.¹

Furthermore, Nightwood has never formally defined the "kind" of feminism it espouses, although the individual women who have been involved over the years have certainly defined themselves within or against particular feminisms and this is evidenced by the work they contributed to the company. Nightwood as an entity has been the home to a variety of feminists and has produced work which, at times, can be identified as belonging to one or the other schools of feminist thought, but, as will be demonstrated, can more often

be read as an amalgam or synthesis of types. And, of course, different readings can be brought to different plays, so that spectators and critics have formed their own opinions about what kind of philosophy Nightwood advances — notions which may bear little resemblance to the intentions of the practitioners or the administrators of Nightwood.²

I think these cautionary factors qualify the use of categories, but do not render them useless; understanding the ideological differences between feminist theatre practitioners can help us to understand the dynamic that went on between them, the decision for certain women to work together, and the kind of work they produced. Even within a single company like Nightwood, affiliations spring up and different kinds of work result. The broad terms “feminist” and “feminist theatre” may not communicate enough information if they are used without further explanation, which is why employing descriptive categories like materialist and cultural helps us to understand how radically different work can still be feminist.

At the base of the materialist and cultural feminist divide is the idea of identity and subjecthood. Both schools of thought would agree that, in traditional theatre created by men, women are absent from the stage. This is historically the case, of course, in periods and countries where male actors played the female roles, but it is also the case that the female characters represented onstage are merely textual symbols of women, created by and for men. The female character is an amalgam of cultural codes and attitudes, expectations and desires, which the female actor legitimates by giving them physical presence as a corporeal medium.

² For example, Lynda Hill, Associate Director of Nightwood Theatre, was interviewed by Malcolm Kelly for the October issue of the Annex Town Crier regarding the upcoming Groundswell Festival. In a subsequent letter to the editor, ("Festival is proud of the feminist label," (Dec. 1991): 3), Hill complained that the resulting article had downplayed the feminist mandate of Nightwood and Groundswell; the article had even contained the line: "You can't say this is a feminist festival."
between playwright and spectator. Much early feminist theatre criticism was devoted to deconstructing and critiquing these male-defined representations of Woman and asking how real women could make use of them, either by re-writing and subverting them or perhaps rejecting them altogether. From there, attention turned to representations of women by female playwrights, and an examination of how these representations would be different. Would a female character, written by a woman, necessarily be more truthful, more legitimate, or would there need to be a consciously feminist agenda behind her creation? Or, as theorists came to ask in increasing complexity, would it be possible to represent women onstage at all -- does such a thing as a woman actually exist? As Case has written: "... for feminists, gender is the crucial encoding of the subject that has made it historically a position unavailable for women to inhabit" (*Feminism and Theatre* 121).

For the cultural feminist theatre-maker, with her concern for individual expression rooted in personal experience, the very act of a woman writing or performing her subjectivity onstage is enough to constitute a feminist theatre. The deeply personal, autobiographical nature of much cultural feminist work affirms the experience of women as legitimate material for artistic creation; no longer are women on the margins of male history or narratives, but centre stage, speaking and physically being the subjects of their own stories. All the subject matter traditionally considered inappropriate for theatre is reclaimed as central to women's experiences of themselves in the world and celebrated onstage. Much of women's experience

---

38 Women writers may even be seen to contribute to the "othering" process as a result of their socialization in a sexist, racist culture. Increasingly, the concept of speaking from an authentic voice has become a contentious issue. Many of the contributors to *Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender: Views by Canadian Women Writing in English*, express concern about a new "feminist orthodoxy" which dictates that they must write only "positive" female characters and must not create characters of races other than their own.
is seen to be centred in their bodies, and the experience of living in a female body is discovered as a fabulously rich source of theatrical creativity, both at a performative and a metaphorical level. As Hélène Cixous has written: "by writing herself, the woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display -- the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions" (284).

The materialist feminist, however, responds uneasily to this cultural celebration of female experience. The suggestion that women are their bodies transcends history, race, socio-economic class and the other intersecting aspects of identity which concern materialist feminists. While the cultural feminist might point to women's common experience of menstruation as a source of unity and female solidarity, for example, the materialist feminist might be more inclined to point out that a woman's experience of menstruation could be drastically different, depending on her historical placement, the culture in which she is raised, the attitudes of her family, and so on. For the materialist, to stress only women's common bonds erases the many other factors that condition their lives and constitute identity.

39 At the Groundswell Festival in November of 1990, Exhibiting Disgusting Material was presented by Woomers (Toby Zeldin, Michele Fillion and Barbara Pavlic), directed by Sally Han with assistance by Alisa Palmer. The piece was based on the experiences of the authors, who had created a window display for Pages Bookstore in 1985 as part of an event called Fem Fest. The display was intended to depict stages in a woman's life cycle and included blood-stained sanitary napkins. Charges were laid against Pages for "exhibiting a disgusting object," but eventually dropped.

40 Further, because cultural feminists tend to stress the female body functions, such as sexuality, childbirth and so on, their message is easily appropriated by a much more conservative agenda. If women really are different than men and their sense of identity is tied up with their ability to give birth, then no matter how celebrated or validated these functions are, they may take on the weight of a biological imperative, leaving women who do not choose to bear children a distinctly marginal and perhaps devalued status.
terms of theatre, we might contrast the example of Jovette Marchessault’s *Night Cows* (1979), which celebrates biological femaleness, with Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982), in which women are seen to be divided by issues of class.

The question of identity is crucial here, and very much tied up with subjecthood. The materialist questions whether there is such a thing as a constant, unchanging subject position, or whether a stable identity is a fiction and we are, instead, a fragmented conglomerate of shifting positions that enable us to function within our environment. In this analysis, gender becomes a role we perform to greater or lesser degrees of success. The concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, so long considered to be inseparable, are pried apart and examined as separate phenomena which do not necessarily have to match up: "Women's experience is recognized as not 'natural,' not unmediated, not able to be represented at all apart from the sign systems of the prevailing hegemony" (Case 51). For the materialist, the cultural assumption that one's biology is the same as one's gender, that to occupy a female body equals one's experience of femininity and therefore identity, is a dangerous notion. Equating biology with destiny plays into the age-old binary of male/female that always and inevitably leads to one being valorized over the other; as Jacques Derrida has explained, bi-polar oppositions cannot escape hierarchy (Moi 104). Feminists are left defining women's experience in opposition to something else; as Julia Kristeva has written: "It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say ‘that’s not it’ and ‘that's still not it!'" (137).

On the other hand, theorists Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis have suggested that gender is a field of experience, socially constructed and constantly changing, not a bi-polar
opposition, and that the specific historical character of one's situation must be acknowledged. To quote de Lauretis:

The construction of gender goes on today through the various technologies of gender. . . and institutional discourses . . . with the power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote and 'implant' representations of gender. But the terms of a different construction of gender also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses. Posed from outside the heterosexual social contract, and inscribed in micropolitical practices, these terms can also have a part in the construction of gender, and their effects are rather at the 'local' level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation (Technologies 18).

Janelle Reinelt concludes from this that "...the representation of the subject-in-process practising resistance, exploding the strait jacket of gender through doing the 'work' of self-inscription onstage, before an audience, is both theoretically and practically a vital, imaginative, political act" (52). The difficulties for feminist theatre are multiple. The woman onstage is a physical presence, a signifier of great potential. For a piece of cultural feminist theatre to foreground and celebrate her physicality can be tremendously powerful and effective; on the other hand, to question the stability of her identity and to suggest the constructed nature of her subjecthood can be far more problematic. Both choices are open to misunderstanding and appropriation by anti-feminist forces. Both bring with them a host of concomitant aesthetic decisions which will have political ramifications, and each will serve a different need for the women who are making and watching theatre.

Sue-Ellen Case has suggested that it is not necessary for a feminist to adopt one theory to the exclusion of all others. In certain situations, for example in debating notions of universality, it might be to the theorist's advantage to highlight female difference. In other
cases, as when for example she is critiquing the representation of women onstage, the theorist might prefer to deconstruct the notion of an essential female nature:

By employing alternative theories at different times, the feminist critic would still remain firmly within the operation of the feminist movement, which has no leaders, no central organization and no 'party line.' Swinging from theory to opposing theory . . . would not be a kind of 'playful pluralism,' but a guerilla action designed to provoke and focus the feminist critique (132).

Likewise, the feminist theatre-maker may find she has occasion to employ one type of feminist perspective, while retaining her ability to argue the opposite in the next moment. If feminist theatre, like feminism, comes across as unfocused and multiple, as fragmented and even contradictory, then she may conclude she has been successful. Further, she may be assisted in her project by a resistant reader, one who is engaged in both a materialist deconstruction and a cultural reappropriation. Once we have excavated the site of Woman, we can begin again from multiple perspectives.

2. Semiotics

Keir Elam, in his book *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, defines semiotics as "a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with processes of signification and with those of communication, i.e. the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged" (1). Every aspect of a theatrical performance is a signifier, and the signified is the meaning or message which is derived by the 'collective unconsciousness' of the audience. Feminist semiotic theory focuses on the cultural encoding of the sign as the foundation of communication.

Cultural encoding is the imprint of ideology upon the sign, the prescribing of its
resonances with cultural norms. The notion of encoding shifts the political implications of theatre from the interpretation of the viewer to the signifying process of the performance. In theatre, there is a three-part process at work, as the words of the play refer to the created reality of the stage, which in turn refer to the world beyond. Any theatrical performance is made up of a variety of elements -- the actors, the set, costumes, blocking, and so on -- which act as "signifiers," complex units of meaning which communicate messages, "the signified," to the audience. Semiotic performance theory examines the relationship between the signifiers and the signified in an attempt to understand how a given phenomenon creates meaning for its viewer, and how that viewer participates in the creation of meaning. These issues are highly relevant to feminist theatre theory, which is concerned primarily with the sign Woman, deconstructing the elements which make up the sign and the process by which the audience participates in its creation and thereby has its own experience shaped accordingly. The sign Woman, like all signifiers, is imprinted with the ideology of the dominant culture; the values, beliefs and norms of the culture control the connotations of the sign and prescribe its resonances with cultural biases. It is important here to remember that we are speaking of an ideal, of the cultural construct called Woman, as opposed to the women who live in her shadow, hence the capital "W" to signal this distinction; as Sue-Ellen Case explains: "The sign Woman is constructed by the dominant patriarchal ideology as an object to be looked at by the male; he is assumed to be the subject of the dramatic action and the female the object of his gaze." 6

6 The concept of the male gaze asserts that representations of women are traditionally perceived as they would be seen by the male subject in capitalist patriarchy. Case uses the example of the ingenue making her entrance onstage: the audience sees her as the male protagonist sees her. The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting, are all designed
As an example, Case cites the cultural encoding that leads to casting blonde-haired, fair-skinned women in ingenue roles, a decision based not necessarily on the specifications of the text so much as on cultural attitudes about innocence, purity, and the desirability of certain racial features (117). Cross-casting immediately exposes this arbitrariness. Although the text may indicate physical attributes, these can be overlooked by a resistant reader in a way that corporeal presence makes far more difficult for a viewer. In writing we have no bodies, but in theatre the body is present and so biological and sexual phenomena are nearly inescapable. Casting against expectation clearly foregrounds these issues.

Paradoxically, so does disguising the body, since the audience is aware or will likely become aware of the disguise at some point and the deception will therefore become part of the pleasure of the performance. Disguise is integral to the art of theatre, of course, from the extremes of female impersonation in specific historical contexts to the skill of the actor in embodying someone he/she is not in the process of creating a character. An interesting example from Nightwood’s history involves the 1991 production of A Fertile Imagination by Susan G. Cole. The play is a largely autobiographical account by a well-known Toronto journalist, chronicling a lesbian couple’s attempts to have a baby through artificial insemination. While the reviews were generally favourable, one published in a specifically gay
to reveal her as the object of his desire; thus, the audience also sees her as an object of desire. Again, the male inhabits the subject position. The woman onstage never represents the subject position, nor does her desire operate within the theatrical experience. When the audience looks at the woman onstage, she is perceived as a possible site for the fulfillment of desire, transformed into a kind of cultural courtesan (Case 119).

7 See Katherine E. Kelly, “The Queen’s Two Bodies: Shakespeare’s Boy Actress in Breeches,” Theatre Journal vol. 42 (1990): 81-93, for a discussion of the audience’s reaction to Shakespeare’s boy actors (a convention of young males playing females who sometimes disguise themselves as males, which the audience was aware of in advance).
newspaper found fault with the production because the two actors playing the lesbian couple were known to be heterosexual; the reviewer commented that she did not find their portrayal of lesbians convincing and as a result, she, as a lesbian audience member, could not relate to them or enjoy the play. One might interpret this as an instance where the actors took on a disguise, knowing that some of their audience would see through it because of prior or "specialized" knowledge, and hoped that their attempt would be artful enough to convince the viewers-in-the-know to suspend their disbelief. Perhaps in the sexually politicized arena of gay theatre their hopes were unrealistic, since the authenticity of the actors' physical presence was read as being as important as the veracity of the playwright's script. This is interesting semiotically, as well: the actors as signs related to the stage world of meaning, which in turn was to be read in relation to the real world inhabited by the spectators, but for this reviewer, the process broke down from the beginning, disrupting the relay of

---

8 Sandra Haar, "Breeding Ground: Dyke sensibility weeded out of play's production," RITES (April 1991): 15. Haar writes: "Of course, reality is not what theatre is about, but authenticity is. The relational, emotional framework that Cole has claimed to want to contextualize lesbian sexuality cannot support the sex and sensuality in A Fertile Imagination and little heat is generated. . . This impediment is not contained in the script itself, but in the actors (and perhaps, in the direction)." Haar says that the actors were too stiff with each other and that humour "consistently threatened the intensity of the most sexual of scenes. From the very beginning I was unable to identify with the characters' sensibilities or connect with their presence. . .." At this point she reveals that neither of the actors is lesbian and that "the actors' inability to reflect the particularity of the situation they were representing was masked by the steady flow of jokes." Haar comments that "lesbians everywhere" were no doubt encouraged to see a "mainstream" company like Nightwood mounting this play. Cole was obviously trying to appeal to a broad audience, since some jokes and references were "extended to permit a small explanation. . . Because lesbians live a different reality that (sic) non-lesbians, the extending of [jokes] served to pander to the needs of a mainstream audience, of a theatre company to mount a 'hit,' to 'fill the house.' In so doing, the centrality of the lesbian couple was made unstable."
signification throughout. 9

The feminist approach to semiotics concentrates mainly on the notion of Woman as a sign. So pervasive is this sign that a live woman standing onstage is not only a biological reality, but also a "fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures" besides (Alice Doesn't 5). In some instances, the evocation of the sign is so all-encompassing that, to quote Sue-Ellen Case, "There is no real woman under the requirements of costume, make-up and body language;" she has ceased to be real either to the audience or to herself (121). Feminist semiotic theory attempts to deconstruct the sign Woman in order to distinguish biology from culture and experience from ideology, bringing into question the entire notion of how one knows what the sign Woman means. It is not so much that the woman onstage ceases to operate as a sign, but rather that she can attempt to control her own signification.

One of the results of this representation of woman as "other" is that she becomes other to herself; "... a wedge is created between the sign 'woman' and real women that insinuates alienation into the very participation of women in the system of theatrical representation or within the system of communication in the dominant culture" (120). This is why so much feminist theatre takes on the task of building an identity and defining a place for oneself in the world, and why feminist theatre often experiments with form; the challenge

---

9 While gender and race are generally self-evident to the audience, perhaps sexual orientation requires another kind of perception. Jill Dolan, in "Breaking the Code: Musings on Lesbian Sexuality and the Performer," argues that all production choices are inherently political because a person's gender and race have cultural meanings that bear ideological weight: "A lesbian required to pass as heterosexual on the street or stage is placed in a Brechtian position of commenting on her role, editorializing on the trappings of her impersonation for those who can see" (140).
is not only one of self-discovery, but also of finding a new way to communicate onstage, within a structure and history of representation which has traditionally been seen as objectifying.

Semiotic enquiry is also concerned with the audience's role in the production of meaning, which brings us to the idea of "the male gaze." Sue-Ellen Case explains that the sign Woman is constructed by and for the male gaze. From the realm of production, this gaze is owned by male playwrights, directors and producers; from the realm of reception, the gaze is owned by the spectator who is always assumed to be male even if she is female, and therefore encoded with the culturally determined components of male sexual desire. The male spectator is the subject, the woman on screen (or stage) is the object (118). Feminist theatrical performance immediately complicates this binary relationship, of course, in a number of possible ways: by assuming, or even insisting, that the audience be primarily female (in the sense of the people in attendance, but also in terms of who the work is "for," by whom it will be judged, what reception is expected); by choosing to confront the male gaze in an oppositional manner, challenging or frustrating desire; or by choosing to reclaim the position of desired object as one of power and agency. This last option is perhaps the trickiest to manoeuvre and would most often be employed within a context of lesbian desire, (the review of A Fertile Imagination cited above is partly a complaint that the actors did not generate enough erotic energy), although it can also be found at work in A Particular Class of Women or The Last Will and Testament of Lolita, for example, which deal with heterosexual desire.

An early and influential theorist of the male gaze is Laura Mulvey; her 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is still widely cited. Although working within the
context of film, many of her observations have been applied to theatre, especially her call for
the use of narration to distance an audience, creating a Brechtian ideal of "passionate
detachment" in the spectator. A more contemporary re-working of some of the same ideas,
again within the context of film theory, is found in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* by
bell hooks, who argues that, for the black spectator, looking at white people and their
representations of blackness can mean experiencing pleasure and viewing critically at the
same time. While feminist film theorists such as Mulvey have structured a totalizing narrative
of Woman as an object whose image functions solely to reaffirm and reinscribe patriarchy,
hooks argues that this analysis participates in the abstraction of Woman, and denies that
sex/sexuality may not be the primary or exclusive signifier of difference (124). The black
female spectator must either ignore cinema or watch it uncritically, not thinking about
sexism/racism; she must either negate herself by identifying with a white woman, or remain
critical and therefore hurt (120). As hooks explains: "Identification can only be made through
recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status
quo" (119). Black female spectators like hooks choose not to identify with the film's
imaginary subject because such identification is dis-enabling; she prefers to resist structures
of power that ask to be consumed uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways (123).\(^\text{10}\)

In order to do this, hooks employs Michel Foucault's description of domination as
"relations of power": because there is no domination that controls everything and leaves no

---

\(^\text{10}\) Hooks points out, for example, that many independent or foreign films do not have in their
deep structure a subtext reproducing the narrative of white supremacy; instead, they demystify
whiteness, and the lives of their subjects seem more real and less rooted in fantasies of escape
(127).
room for freedom, there is always necessarily the possibility of resistance. Every narration places the spectator in a position of agency, and "moments of rapture" can occur when the spectator resists complete identification with the film's discourse (117). The trick is to look for those margins, gaps, and locations where agency can be found. In other words, one learns to look in certain ways in order to resist (116). It is not just a question of critiquing the status quo, but of transforming the image, creating alternatives and moving away from dualistic thinking about good and bad; little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives and ways of looking (4). As hooks says: "We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions — contest, resist, revision, interrogate and invent on multiple levels" (128).

In an interesting conclusion to her discussion, hooks remarks that she does not have to resist work by black women filmmakers, but she still chooses to look critically. Furthermore, she does not expect black women filmmakers to only provide positive representations that respond to the totalizing nature of existing narratives, but rather to offer points of radical departure, new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity (130).

3. A Female Form

Another important question that Mulvey included in her critique is the possibility of a feminist dramatic form. Mulvey has charged that the form of narrative itself is complicit with the psychocultural repression of women: "Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength,
victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end" (124). In her book Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis takes this idea to a feminist conclusion: in a typical narrative, it is the male protagonist who will make something happen and play the sadist. In love stories, the female plays masochist to his sadist and the audience member joins in the reification of male and female sexuality as a battle in which the female is defeated; the desire that propels the story forward is sadistic and encoded in terms of male and female genders (44). The structure of narrative, as well as its broad appeal, enacts this process in the culture. For Mulvey and de Lauretis, it is important that feminists explore the possibility of an alternative form of narrative (131).

The debate around form often focuses on the usefulness of realism for feminist theatre. For example, in her article "Mimesis, Mimicry and the True-Real," Elin Diamond argues that mimesis at its most naive results in a simple equation of realism with Truth, an identification which mystifies the means of historical construction and is therefore an inappropriate form for a feminist theatre that aims to interrogate the construction of reality: "Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces 'reality' by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths . . . ." (60). In direct contrast to Mulvey, Diamond wants to recover realism for feminist uses because of its narrativity, which she calls the discourse of authority. As we have seen, narrativity lies in the way the spectators create a chain of events and Diamond argues that the feminist theatre practitioner should be able to influence that activity; it is an opportunity for feminists to re-write the female narrative and to create subjectivity. Diamond argues that it is not narrativity itself, but its uses which have been phallocentric; as de Lauretis says, narrative and visual pleasure are not the exclusive
property of the dominant codes (*Alice Doesn't* 60).

The search for a feminine form is related to the cultural feminist desire to express women's experiences in a way which also arises from experience and process. Theorists closer to the materialist feminist perspective would argue that the notion of feminine form merely reifies the traditional gender construction of masculine and feminine, and that liberation for women in art would come with the freedom to create in any formal context. More importantly, materialists would argue that the idea of a feminine form presupposes that the feminine gender is real, rather than an invention of the patriarchy. On the other hand, I would argue that, even if gender is not biologically determined but culturally learned, women still learn their gender differently and therefore inhabit the world differently than men do, and therefore a female dramatic form or a female aesthetic is a potential result of her artistic efforts from a gendered subject position.

Josette Féral believes that there are identifiable qualities which mark the form and content of feminist theatre: a focus on the uncentred nature of women and a valorization of fragmentation over wholeness, the point rather than the line, dispersion rather than concentration, heterogeneity rather than homogeneity (559). In "Towards a New Poetics," Sue-Ellen Case identifies a characteristic of feminist writing which she calls "contiguity," a concern not with clarity, but with what is touched upon tangentially: "... elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, interrupted rather than complete" (129). Interestingly, these are also qualities which are often attributed to postmodern theatre, a connection I will pursue at length in Chapter Four.

For feminist theorists and theatre practitioners, finding an appropriate form is about
enabling the woman onstage to emerge as a subject: at once a point of view, a cultural construction and an artistic device. The possibility of a woman as subject onstage opens up what women can do in theatre and how they will do it, bringing into question the very nature of theatrical process and presentation. To speak as a subject is to deconstruct the culturally encoded sign Woman and the words that she might speak and the form that the theatrical event might take will be similarly crucial. One of the strategies frequently employed by feminist (and other types of) theatre is to allow the actor to emerge as the speaking subject, hence the prevalence of auto- or semi-autobiographical works dealing with the creation of personal identity, performed by the author; consider Afrika Solo, for example, in which Djanet Sears discusses, amongst other things, the significance of how she spells her name. The submersion of self within a role (the "disguise" mentioned earlier) could be seen as a loss of subjecthood. On the other hand, when the actor is performing a statement about her own creative process and belief system, the performance becomes less a submersion than a powerful act of personal communication and an affirmation of self.

Jill Dolan concludes that: "Giving up the notion of theater as a place to image those who are elsewhere erased is difficult, even as feminists debate the efficacy of theater as mimesis" ("Breaking the Code" 141). Whether those who have been erased are lesbians, women of colour, or some other marginalized group, Dolan's point is important -- those who have yet to be adequately represented onstage and who have seldom had the opportunity to see themselves as subjects in the theatre will be less than willing to give this up as a goal, no matter how theoretically problematic the construction of subjecthood may be: there is both pleasure and power in seeing oneself represented. This is not to say, however, that the theatre
created from these perspectives will employ a naive realism or even an essentialist insistence on identity; on the contrary, the experience of women of colour, for example, as doubly or triply erased, may well provide an analysis based in personal experience that at the same time takes into account the constructed nature of identity. A good example here might be Nightwood’s 1992 production of Do Not Adjust Your Set by Diana Braithwaite, in which the theatre audience watches a day of role-reversal "television" where all the people who are usually white are black and vice versa. Behind the parodic comedy is the acknowledgment that how we see ourselves represented affects how our identity is constructed.

One of the factors affecting the form and content of feminist theatrical performance will necessarily be the kind of feminism that the practitioners espouse. Theatre-makers who tend towards cultural feminist beliefs will make different choices than those with a more materialist understanding, and for both ideologies to co-exist, a hybrid will need to be formed. However, the qualities which Féral identified and which Case calls "contiguity" could be used to describe writing that is cultural or materialist feminist, suggesting that there are ways in which the two schools overlap in both form and content.

4. Representation

There are a number of approaches to representation within feminist theatre. As we have seen, Sue-Ellen Case would argue that, historically, there was never any representation of women onstage at all: instead, female characters operated as symbols of an ideal that had little to do with real women (120). In contemporary theatre, a feminist play that operates within the conventions of realism, such as A Fertile Imagination for example, accepts the
possibility of representing women and aims to establish a relatively traditional relationship between actor and character. Feminist performance art, on the other hand, foregrounds the body of the performer as such; a good example would be *Glazed Tempera*, where the actors functioned as sculptural elements within a visual design, rather than as characters. In all Nightwood's productions, regardless of form, the significance of the women onstage as performers, feminists, and members of a women's theatre company, informs the audience's experience, and the particular nuances, of the representation. The presence of a female body onstage has always been erotically charged and therefore significant -- for its novelty value, the suggestion of impropriety, the implications of voyeurism, or perhaps because of the weight of collective sexual signification -- but it is only within the context of feminist theatre that female presence becomes synonymous with identity and subjecthood.

Barbara Freedman, in her article "Frame-Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre," covers a wide range of topics concerning representation. She begins by explaining the interrelatedness of language and sexual difference, reminding us that the signifier (the word "woman," for example) does not stand for the thing but only makes sense in relationship to another signifier. Male and female, regardless of biological differences, are differentiated through a linguistic signifying system, so that the male is understood as necessarily "not female" and the female "not male" (55). At issue is the representation of sexuality: the conventions of signification have traditionally demanded that we be one thing and not another, thereby directing libidinal energy and mediating desire. Freedman's interest is in how theatre might revision this frame-up:

Given feminist rethinking of narrative. ... we come at last to the question of how theatre figures difference. At issue is the problem of the frame and
framing behaviour as intrinsic to theatre, the extent to which theatre is always already determined by the frames it puts onstage, and the extent to which theatre provides a means for reframing (56).

Is it possible to insert a difference into the construction of the subject, or is a feminist, anti-oedipal theatre a contradiction in terms? Is there something fundamental in the relationship of theatre to the system of sexual opposites, or can theatre be open to their deconstruction?

Freedman says that traditional drama has been rejected in favour of the avant-garde performance, Aristotle for Artaud, because both traditional comedy and tragedy promote the interpretation of identity as destiny. As we saw with realism, the sense of a transcendent law or necessity limits the potential for envisioning change. Feminists such as de Lauretis suggest we redirect attention away from a focus on transcendental laws to an examination of the dialectical relationship between the means by which signs are produced and the codes themselves, so that we see meaning as a cultural production, "not only susceptible of ideological transformation, but materially based in historical change" (Freedman 65). The opposition of transcendental laws to the materials of production brings us back once again to the essentialist versus materialist debate, or as Freedman summarizes it: "...should [feminism] celebrate the scorned values with which it has been identified, abandon those values for those of the ruling class, or challenge the entire structure by which it has been defined, replacing it with a more inclusive sense of difference?" Hélène Cixous would have us reverse the negative value assigned to woman, locating her specificity in a feminine unconscious shaped by female bodily drives which make their way into the style of feminist writings. On the other hand, Monique Wittig argues that this keeps us locked in an oppositional gender structure, fetishizing difference: "We must dissociate 'women' (the class
in which we fight) and 'woman' the myth. For 'woman' . . . is only an imaginary formation, while 'women' is the product of a social relationship" (Freedman 65).

Furthermore, returning to the concept of the male gaze, in the narrative of classic theatre the male is represented as a mobile agent and the bearer of the look, and the female as the object to be actively transformed by him. As Freedman puts it: "Not only pleasure but plot is derived from male fantasies which depend on the scopic and narrative exploitation of woman; she is the linchpin in the system whose losses propel the relay of looks and whose sins move the plot forward. In question, then, is the reliance of theatrical desire on the fetishized spectacle of woman and the narrative of her domination and punishment" (59).

While bell hooks advocated a resistant readership, Freedman proposes an escape from these limitations by reminding us that: "theatre works through polarities -- but only as long as we replace the term 'theatre' with the term 'western narrative drama,'" suggesting that it is in performance that feminist deconstruction might take place: "Could it be that there is a radical aspect of theatre, what we might refer to as 'theatricality' or 'performance,' as opposed to narrative drama, that is characterized by a disruptive gaze that never rests secure" (66)? Freedman describes the disruptive potential of the theatrical gaze, which is always ambivalent, always displacing one view and threatened by another in turn. She likens this gaze to that of the mother, who introduces the infant into the social order by offering the infant an image that is not stable and cohesive, but which changes, that reacts to the infant's gaze and reflects it differently. There is a deferred disruption always already present with the mother-infant relationship, just as there is a subversive force always already within theatre
and to which theatre must be returned (66).\footnote{If filmic practice... is an inscription of the look on the body of the mother, we must now begin to consider the possibilities and consequences of the mother returning the look.} 11

The point is to reconstruct the woman's gaze, which is to break up the performance space, subvert the classical organization of showing and seeing, revision spectatorship, and restructure traditional canons, genres and personal-political identities (69). To quote Freedman: ". . . when women are not asked by men to take place in a representation created by and for men, but occupy and share the sites of production and consumption, a different economy obtains. Women take place, and refigure that taking place, in ways that challenge traditional forms of representation and gratify, as they displace, the spectatorial gaze" (69).

At this point, Freedman looks at feminist deconstructive theatre through the work of Josette Féral. Féral uses the terms theatre and performance to distinguish the written text from the physical event, and pronounces the two mutually exclusive: theatre cannot keep from setting up, stating and constructing points of view, depending on a unified subject, narrativity and models of representation, while performance deconstructs all of this into drives and energies, discontinuity and spillage. Yet this is not so much an opposition as a dialectic essential to theatre, as performance is that force within theatre which deconstructs it, explores its underside (71). According to Féral, the difference between traditional theatre and performance art is the way in which the look is returned. In the former, this is achieved

\footnote{If filmic practice... is an inscription of the look on the body of the mother, we must now begin to consider the possibilities and consequences of the mother returning the look. Freedman outlines how other (male) film theorists have denied this as a possibility, claiming it a simple inversion: "the difference inverted is also the difference maintained" (66). Freedman accuses them of denying the role of the mother in the socialization of the infant (the importance of the mother's shifting gaze) and also of ignoring the fact that there can be no simple inversion --the woman returning the look cannot do so on exactly the same terms, unless she is in fact the imaginary construct 'Woman,' in which case she is not doing the looking from the point of view of women (69).}
by setting into motion a series of displacing gazes which succeeds in disrupting our own gaze without showing us how, while performance art puts theatrical construction itself onstage (71). In Freedman's words, in seeking to stage a moment outside representation, one cannot evade the play of gazes that constitutes representation (72). The performative side of theatre emerges as a process of staging the disturbance and reversal of the gaze. Freedman concludes that the strategies of feminism and deconstruction are always already within, so that to theatricalize something is at once to deconstruct it (75).

While Freedman and Féral argue that the structure of western narrative drama enframes and reifies the dominant order by its very nature, they agree that theatre in performance can disrupt and subvert that nature. In turning to look at some examples from Nightwood, we will keep in mind how the personalized structure of these pieces and their construction of subjecthood through representation in performance, serves the project of creating new female identities. Furthermore, we shall consider how cultural and materialist feminism influence how these identities are understood.

5. Nightwood

In reference to black women writing for the stage, Djanet Sears has explained that to write is to "define ourselves, by ourselves, and create stories to keep that definition within the limits of our own controls" (Much 97). Sears suggests that this activity is a form of healing, a longing to tell one's story, a process which is also a symbolic gesture to recover the past, to gain a sense of reunion and release: "We have created our own theatre from a language that was forced upon us, and we season it with our own sense of rhythm, ritual and
music. Not a song and dance, but a heightened language and ritual" (Much 102).

These points are all very much applicable to Monique Mojica's play Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots, which was produced by Nightwood in 1990 and published by the Women's Press in 1991. Monique Mojica came to Toronto from New York to be a founding member of Native Earth Performing Arts. She played Adele Starblanket in The Rez Sisters and the title character in Jessica in the February 1986 production directed by Linda Griffiths and Clarke Rogers. Mojica has been involved with a number of Groundswells and FemCabs and was playwright-in-residence at Nightwood for the 1991/92 season. In 1993 she created and performed a Nightwood piece called Untitled with Kate Lushington and Djanet Sears which explored the issues of race and female friendship.

Princess Pocahontas . . . was workshopped by Mojica and Alejandra Nunez, with direction and dramaturgy by Djanet Sears, in the spring of 1988. It was workshopped by Nightwood and Native Earth Performing Arts in May 1989, directed by Muriel Miguel (a founder of Spiderwoman Theatre company and Mojica's aunt), and dramaturged by Sears and Kate Lushington. The play was then read at Weesageechak Festival of New Work by Native Playwrights at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace in June 1989 and presented at Groundswell in November 1989, directed by Djanet Sears. It was fully produced at the

---

12 A shorter version was first published in Canadian Theatre Review 64 (Fall 1990), but my references will be to the Women's Press edition.

13 The family relationship is significant in that it relates to the cultural feminist idea of matrilineal tradition and Mojica's concern with heritage in the play. Mojica's friendship and close working relationship with Sears and Lushington was the subject of their 1993 collective piece Untitled: it explored their common bonds as women (a cultural feminist trait) but also the material condition of their racial differences.

It is also significant that Spiderwoman "...is known as a radical feminist theatre group": Jon Kaplan, "Spiderwoman's Struggle," NOW (1-7 July 1982): 12.
Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace in co-production with Nightwood, February 9 to March 4, 1990, directed by Muriel Miguel.

The play has a complex structure and the two actors onstage play a large number of characters.¹⁴ The published version explains the play's structure, which consists of thirteen "transformations." These can be sudden or lingering, but are divided into four sections: "they are the transfigurations of three women who are one" (14). The playtext stresses that these transfigurations came out of the characters and were not imposed; already, we can see the cultural feminist tendency towards respecting experience and the organic process, and seeing women as "one," a unified field of subjecthood. In performance, the distinctions between each character or entity were not as evident as they are when reading the text; as Mojica moved from one transformation to the next, it was as if she were illustrating different aspects of a single subject, the Native Woman. We have previously noted that this tendency to collectivize women is part of what feminist theory objects to in traditional, patriarchal theatre, yet here the technique is clearly intended to establish solidarity rather than to erase individuality. It may help to remember that the main difference lies in who the play is "for" -- the traditional male spectator, for whose gaze the Woman is presented, versus the author herself and an audience to whom she wishes to communicate her respect for what she sees as her lineage, her female and native cultural inheritance, through presenting powerful, almost archetypal, images.

¹⁴ Mojica played: Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides; Contemporary Woman #1; Malinche; Storybook Pocahontas; Pocahontas/Lady Rebecca/Matoaka; Deity/Woman of the Puna/Virgin; Marie/ Margaret/Madeline; Cigar Store Squaw; and Spirit Animal. Alejandra Nunez played: the Host; the Blue Spots; Contemporary Woman #2; Troubadour; Ceremony; the Man; Spirit-Sister; and the Musician.
The cultural feminist concern with nature is reflected in the richly detailed mise en scène for *Princess Pocahontas*. . . . The set, as described in the text and as it appeared in the 1990 Theatre Passe Muraille production, was a pyramid with steps. There was a tree with a platform: a basin, cup, water, red paint, sand, and popcorn; a pole pegged for climbing; faces and clothing of Métis women; a picture frame, cloth, a circle on the floor, and the foliage of trees. Each prop was transformed into many things over the course of the performance.

The play begins with a scene called "500 years of the Miss North American Indian Beauty Pageant." Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides enters, distributing corn, as the Host introduces her. The Princess performs a parodic "Hollywood Injun Dance." This use of stereotype and satire is employed repeatedly throughout the play and might suggest a more materialist approach to the subject, given the association of parody and satire with materialist textual strategies (see the discussion in Chapter One). This suspicion is reinforced by the next scene, in which the two actors, as Contemporary Women #1 and #2, talk about being a "real" Indian and about how one's authenticity was traditionally established by the appearance of a blue spot at the base of the spine. There appears to be an awareness of how "realness" is complicated by other factors besides biology and that the presence of a physical characteristic (in this case of race, but one could extrapolate to sex) does not guarantee identity.

There is also an investment in Truth, however, which the play comes to emphasize through a series of scenes which attempt to tell familiar stories from the perspective of the voiceless female. Pocahontas' story, for example, is told in both its "storybook" and its "real" versions, suggesting that there is an essential truth to her experience which can be recaptured by looking at her life from a new perspective. This is very much in keeping with the cultural
feminist aim to re-create women's culture and to reclaim forgotten or neglected women of the past.

The cultural feminist perspective is also evident in an important scene in which Mojica is transformed into the child Matoaka. The musician becomes an entity called Ceremony, beating a rhythm as Matoaka chants a song, entitled "Nubile Child," about the traditional initiation ceremony for becoming a woman. Mojica paints the outside of her arms and the tops of her feet with red paint, and declares that she is invoking "woman's time" (35).

The cultural feminist agenda is complicated here by the inclusion of a scene about male/female relationships called "Grandfathers/Stand up." Contemporary Woman #1 talks about what she finds attractive and familiar about her male partner and discovers that it is his resemblance to her grandfather and his connection with their male traditions. Woman #2 becomes a Man and the couple perform a semi-comic routine, with the Woman trying to get the Man to stand tall on his own feet, not to be drunk, dependent or pursuing white women, but rebuilding their nation. When she succeeds in making him strong, he leaves her. The scene is not entirely materialist either, however, focusing as it does on an archetypal, non-individualized situation related from the woman's perspective.

The play continues to explore increasingly grim material, focusing on the abuse of Métis women by their white husbands, on the torture of a young woman in Chile, and the murder of Native activist Anna Mae Aquash. In the final scene, entitled "Una Nación," Contemporary Woman #1 talks about the difficulty of fitting into "feminist shoes" which do not represent all Native women. The two actors wash and purify each other. They offer a
range of quotations from various writers, culminating in the image of a Rainforest woman confronting a riot squad in Brazil. There is a final dance and a last quote: "A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground" (60).

*Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* attempts to link the experiences of the natives of North and South America through a few scenes of parallel storytelling, especially near the end, but mostly through mixing different kinds of music. The play is similar to Djanet Sears' *Afrika Solo* in that it is one woman's story, but other people on stage also play parts (in both cases, the others are also musicians). In both plays the woman is responding to her image or absence in popular culture in an attempt to establish an identity, and eventually finds a sense of herself by reclaiming her ethnic heritage. In both cases, this is by no means a straightforward task: Sears was born of West Indian parents and raised in England and Canada, while Mojica's parents are Jewish and Native American and she was raised in New York. Their experiences are representative of the multicultural, mobile society we live in and the sense of confusion and increased opportunity that can result. Another example of this phenomenon is the 1993 play *Dryland* by Pauline Peters, a "story cycle" which was performed at Groundswell and then at the Nightwood Studio and which celebrated a black cultural aesthetic in both language and visual design. In an interview in *Night Talk*, Peters expressed her interest in finding a hybrid identity, one rooted in her parents' heritage as well as her place within Canadian society.  

---

15 "*Dryland* inaugurates new studio theatre," *Night Talk* vol.4 no.2 (Winter 1993): 1. The first twenty minutes of *Dryland* were performed at Groundswell '92 and the 1993 production was an extended version. Pauline Peters explained that, as a second generation West Indian, she feels adrift because her parents have not passed on their stories, preferring to forget the past as part of the process of improving their present lot: "Some of us are desperately seeking black culture and others completely subsumed into white culture. So it's important to create our own, because
The task of these plays seems to be multiple: part of their value is therapeutic, enabling the author to give voice to her own experiences and concerns through the process of writing and performing. Furthermore, they attempt to communicate that process to an audience, by way of explanation and education, perhaps, for those of a different background, and as a means of empowering others with similar circumstances (Sears' play, for example, toured to high schools in Ontario and was clearly seen as having a valuable message to convey). These goals are consistent with the cultural feminist desire for community, and as a result, the plays exhibit a cultural feminist aesthetic that is affirmative and inspiring for performer and audience alike: they impart a sense of group identification which is tied to geography, artistic expression, common experience, and cultural pride.

While *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* mainly reflects a cultural feminist aesthetic, one rooted in the valorization of nature and matrilineal tradition, the process and philosophy found in the play *This is for You, Anna* provide some materialist feminist answers to questions of feminist form. As explained in Chapter One, the original Anna Project members were Ann-Marie MacDonald, Baguta Rubess, Maureen White, and Suzanne Odette Khuri. The first production was about twenty minutes in length and was presented in 1983 as part of a Women's Perspectives Festival at the Partisan Gallery, one of three pieces sponsored by Nightwood Theatre. Further workshops were held at the Factory Theatre Lab in Toronto and Playwright's Workshop in Montreal and included actor Aida Jordão, who was later replaced by Patricia Nichols. In 1984, funded by a variety of government grants, the collective added Tori Smith and Barb Taylor as stage manager and administrator and began

stories are what anchor you, give you a sense of belonging in history. It's a discovery really."
touring to community centres, women's shelters, law schools and a prison. This is for You, Anna also had runs at Theatre Passe Muraille and the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa, toured in England, and was invited to the 1986 DuMaurier Theatre Festival in Toronto. In 1985, Patricia Nichols left the collective and the play was re-written for four performers.

The process behind This is for You, Anna illustrates some important features of feminist theatre in general; for example, the piece was created collectively, initially performed at a women's event, and based on a real-life incident which provided the basis for further invented material and research into related issues. Beginning with a newspaper item about a woman taking revenge against the man who killed her child, the collective members expanded their material through research on battered women and consultations with police officers and rape crisis workers (Canadian Theatre Review 43, 171). This process is in keeping with the tradition of collective creation, but in a feminist context it also serves as a kind of consciousness-raising around feminist issues; furthermore, it reflects a materialist concern with analyzing the specifics of oppression.

Another important element in the collective method of working is the sharing of credit, demonstrated here by the inclusion of Tori Smith and Barb Taylor (stage manager and administrator) as collective members on the published version of the script. As Smith explained, the script was written by the performers, but "the theatrical experience was the work of the whole collective" (172). This demonstrates an awareness of the many elements that make up a theatrical performance and situates the script as just one factor amongst many. This awareness is further demonstrated by the collective's decision to perform outside
of traditional venues and to take their piece to an audience most directly affected by its subject matter.

In her essay "The Politics of the Script," Ann Wilson agrees that the text should be only one element of production and not its centre; she argues that feminist theatre should reflect a sense of flux and multiplicity, that it should reject the constraints of linearity and finality in order to convey the open-endedness of women's discourse (175). Wilson also applauds the Anna Project's emphasis on collective process: in order to be truly feminist, a production must not only deal with women's concerns and subvert the conventions of linearity and closure, it must also be born out of a politically-conscious theatre practice. As Maureen White says: "I think it is not coincidence that a lot of feminists are choosing to work collectively: in exploring new material and breaking down old structures, a new process also should be explored" (Canadian Theatre Review 173). Not only was This is for You, Anna created collectively, it also included its audience in the play development process by holding a question and answer session after each performance and remaining open enough to re-write the script when one collective member departed. The collective did not regard their play as a finished product but as an on-going process, even when a version of the script was published in Canadian Theatre Review, and it is this quality that Wilson identifies as particularly feminist.

Many of the decisions regarding process and content in This is for You, Anna reflect a basis in materialist feminism. As we have seen, the materialist position concentrates on the specific nature of women's oppression within their historical circumstances. While cultural feminism might focus on the universality of female experience, materialism is more interested
in its contributing factors and This is for You, Anna is specifically concerned with issues of class and women's history. As Ann Wilson observes, the story of Marianne and Anna Bachmeier is used as a framework in which to explore women's anger at the violence committed against them (178): the women onstage tell the stories of other women because the experience is held in common, yet the anger is always placed in a social context. The anger of the women in the different stories -- Marianne, Agate, Lucretia and the battered Canadian women Eena, Maria and Jenny -- is situated in relation to the economic and political organization of the societies in which they live, placing their experiences in context. In addition to socio-economic factors, materialist feminists also emphasize the necessity for change in male/female relationships. This is for You, Anna places Marianne within her particular social class, family history, occupation, nationality and so on, and explores her troubled relationships with men. Because we hear Marianne's story in her "own" voice (and in some cases, her own words, taken from newspaper accounts of the trial), she acts as the subject of her own experience in the play.

The combined talents of the collective members resulted in a play which is layered and nonlinear. The play's subtitle, "a spectacle of revenge," signals the heightened sense of theatricality and a certain detachment in tone. A number of stories are told, often in the third person, the actors do not assume the same roles throughout, and one character may be played by many different actors, either serially or simultaneously. The effect in performance is one of fragmentation, as the audience is prevented from identifying with one particular actor and instead focuses on the gradual build-up of detail and imagery. The audience is reminded of the separation between performer and role and is required to actively
participate in bringing meaning and connection to the stories.

The use of language in *This is for You, Anna* provides a further connection with the poetics of feminist deconstruction identified by Barbara Godard and discussed in Chapter One. The play is made up of short episodes which tell separate stories in a fragmentary manner; the deconstructionist tools, parody and satire, draw attention to the distance between expectation and reality. This is particularly evident in the use of fairy tales to frame individual stories and to define Marianne's relationship with her daughter. Throughout the play, Marianne communicates with Anna through stories, sometimes playful and reassuring, at other times more ambivalent:

M.3: Alright, Anna. You want a story? I'll tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a little girl and she was born and her mother was miserable (158).

As collective member Suzanne Odette Khuri points out, fairy tales have traditionally been used to tell violent or extraordinary stories about women (168). Here, the stories are used by the women as a way to tell their own experiences; in one way, the fairy tale format suggests a commonality between them, a shared cultural vocabulary, but on the other hand, they are only too aware of the irony of their usage, the gap between their own experiences and the happily-ever-after promise of the fairy tale.

The deconstructive project is most clearly demonstrated in the treatment of motherhood. The set is a multi-levelled white playing area including a refrigerator, a laundry line, a hamper, and four red chairs, minimally representing the home-bound environment of a traditional mother. Trapped within this space, Marianne Bachmeier serves as a challenge to the one-dimensional model of motherhood: she is not only the devoted mother, but also a complex woman who can be selfish and neglectful. Her act of revenge against her child's
killer is the grotesque conclusion to an ideal of protective motherhood pushed to an extreme. The play suggests that society (and perhaps the audience) is of two minds about the act: the court punished it as a crime but the general public applauded it as the right action of a good mother. In the process of creating the play, the Anna Project collective became increasingly aware of the power of the motherhood myth and the seductiveness of revenge. Baputa Rubess remarked: "Whereas in 1983, we were angry and volatile, by 1984 we were very concerned not to endorse violence, to make clear that we do not idolize Marianne" (171).

In the published text, a provision in the copyright information forbids any "graphic depiction of violence, weapons, or blood in any production of this script." The collective was very conscious of the signifiers they employed and rather than concrete items (like a gun, for example), they selected objects that can have a multitude of resonances for the spectator. In the first scene, entitled "The Story of Marianne Bachmeier," the circumstances of Marianne's life are related in a series of short sentences delivered by the Narrator. With each sentence, she places a nail on a piece of black cloth on the floor, forming a circle. Marianne's story culminates in Anna's death:

Issuer: A man called Grabowski strangles Anna when she visits him in his room. Marianne is away, driving around town. He tells the court that Anna flirted with him. Anna was seven years old. Marianne walks into the courtroom and shoots him seven times. (Narrator drops seven nails). . . A thousand tragedies, a thousand sins. (with empty hands) (133).

16 Regardless of whether or not this provision is legally enforceable, it does strongly convey the collective's concern that the material not be sensationalized; they felt that Marianne's story had been sensationalized in the German press and wanted to avoid a similar approach (171). I think the presence of guns and blood, etc., also serves to make the circumstances too specific, when the intention of the collective seems to be a more symbolic exploration of revenge and anger as an idea.
The Narrator picks up the black cloth full of nails and carries it offstage, cradling it like an infant and counting under her breath. The nails are unrelated to any other aspect of the play and are not used again; they have a variety of connotations -- crucifixion, construction, "hitting the nail on the head," "a nail in her coffin," "hard as nails" -- but their specific meaning in the context of the scene and the play is left up to the spectator. There is a grim irony in the image of the "infant" represented, not by a doll or even a soft bundle of cloth, but by nails, each of which signified an event in the troubled life of the mother. It is as if the child, or the idea of the child, is yet another cruelty in this woman's cruel life.

Another powerful image in the play is the pouring of milk. At the beginning of the play, Marianne pours a glass of milk from the refrigerator and offers it, saying: "This is for you, Anna." At the end of the play, Marianne stands at the refrigerator pouring milk into a glass until it overflows and runs onto the floor; she says: "I did it for you, Anna." As Odette Khuri explains, the image is one of absence: Anna does not take the proffered glass of milk because she is not there anymore (167). Like the bundle of nails, a conventionally positive image is juxtaposed with a darker undertone. Milk is an image or metaphor easily found in cultural feminist work, where it might represent the nurturing female body of the mother (as in Night Cows, for example), but in this instance it resonates with grief, violence, and loss. The fragmented nature of the storytelling and the use of all the actors to portray Marianne suggests that the audience is unable to identify with a particular character throughout the play; instead, the emotional power of the performance comes from the repetition of visual imagery.

Nightwood's 1993 production of Charming and Rose: True Love serves as a final
example of how cultural and materialist elements co-exist and can be problematized in feminist theatre. After premiering at the 1992 Winnipeg Fringe Festival, Kelley Jo Burke's play was given a staged reading at Groundswell that fall, and then a full production at the Theatre Centre West, directed by Kate Lushington. It is a particularly interesting work in that it appeals to a discourse of natural identity which fits in with the cultural feminist model, and yet maintains a parallel critique of the constructed nature of identity which is more materialist. I shall first examine how the play sets up an opposition between nature and culture, and then propose an alternative reading of, and a possible route away from, what could be considered a problematic essentialism.17

*Charming and Rose* also returns us to the fairy-tale as a potent device for feminist revisioning. In the 1993 production, the character of Melisande the fairy godmother was played by Djanet Sears. In an interview with *NOW* Magazine, Sears commented:

> Myths hold a special place in any society -- they are maps of ways to live. . .
> Like everyone else who has grown up in western culture, I've internalized myths . . . the whole romantic fairy-tale myth is within me.18

In her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Donna J. Haraway calls myths "meaning-laden public knowledge," and illustrates the on-going battle for mythological currency by arguing that:

> Feminism is, in part, a project for the reconstruction of public life and public

---

17 Kelley Jo Burke has jokingly referred to herself, in the Nightwood newsletter, as "the only radical feminist in Saskatchewan." One might interpret this to be a statement of affiliation with cultural feminism, or perhaps radical is here being used in the sense of extreme or fervent. In any case, a materialist, or at least a problematized, reading of her play is still possible.

meanings... a search for new stories, and so for a language which names a new vision of possibilities and limits. That is, feminism, like science, is a myth, a contest for public knowledge (82).

These quotations outline the senses of "mythology" I will be working with: first, the fairytale as popular lore passed on for entertainment and instruction; and second, the notion of mythology as ideological explanation, the "stories" about sexuality, gender and race, for example, through which we construct an understanding of our culture. My interest here will be in exploring how and why myth, in the sense of fairytale, is used in the feminist project of reconstructing mythology, in the sense of a feminist understanding of female identity.¹⁹

The translation of traditional mythology into the language of contemporary feminism has been considered a powerful tool, both politically and artistically. In her article "Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking," Jane Caputi argues that part of the agenda of the feminist movement is to "reclaim the symbolizing/naming power, to refigure the female self from a gynocentric perspective, to discover, to revitalize and create a female oral and mythic tradition and use it, ultimately, to change the world" (425). Caputi defines this as a twofold process, involving both the repudiation of what she calls patriarchal mythology, and the active reinterpretation "of ancient myth, focusing attention on female divinities, supernaturals and powers that have been repressed and silenced" (426), clearly part of a cultural feminist project.

¹⁹ In her introduction to A Feminist Companion to Mythology, Carolynne Larrington argues that myths are "at the centre of a web of meanings, drawn out of the body of the myth by different interpreters for different purposes" (xi). Myths, here being used in the sense of legends or fairytales, may have a plurality of meanings at successive stages in their existence and this is particularly the case when mythology becomes the source for artistic creation.
Is it possible to rework a patriarchal myth, (or even one believed to reflect pre-patriarchal beliefs), to feminist purposes without being undermined by its accumulated baggage? Part of the answer lies, of course, in the appeal of the stories themselves. Lena B. Ross, editor of To Speak or Be Silent: The Paradox of Disobedience in the Lives of Women, believes that women in mythology are always associated with disobedience in some way, and speculates that disobedience has "a special and specific value in connection with the feminine archetypes, possibly playing some vital and necessary role in the drama of human life and relations" (xii). Ross suggests that hearing tales of female disobedience may serve a psychological or spiritual need for recipients of the myth; the deciding factor is whether that disobedience is punished or rewarded by the storyteller, echoing Odette Khuri's comments about This is for You, Anna.

The storyteller under investigation here attempts to reclaim female figures from mythology and fairytale, and to reward them within the context of feminist reinterpretation. The choice of mythological characters raises particular problems and resonances within a feminist agenda, which are further complicated by theatrical considerations. How does the actor portray a fairy godmother, for example? The presence of the actor's body serves to naturalize her portrayal, but the purpose of introducing the fairytale figure onstage remains complex. We, as the audience, are to identify with the creature as something tangible, corporeal, de-mystified (especially in the case of the gin-swilling fairy godmother in Charming and Rose) but at the same time, we sense a desire on the part of the playwright to retain some of the potency and promise of the traditional figure -- the fairytale magic, as it were. We are given a role model, but one with a magic wand up her sleeve, a materialist critique and a
cultural transcendence at the same time. Interestingly, casting a woman of colour in this role served to foreground the issues of convention and expectation, heightened further by Sears' choice to play the character with a West Indian accent.

In *Charming and Rose: True Love*, the potential for an essentialist interpretation is most closely associated with Rose, a character defined by her sexuality and fertility, who becomes truly herself only when she returns to her natural state as a "wolf-woman," an uncomplicated state of pre-patriarchal grace. Rose's identity as half-wolf and half-human provides a stark contrast to her role in the confines of the castle and court society. The play presents Rose as deeply marked by her experiences being raised by the wolf White Paws. It is her unfettered "naturalness" which attracts Prince Charming to Rose: she is so different from all the other women he knows, so unselfconscious and sexually free. Later, it is her natural instincts or "wolf morals" which compel Rose to kill Charming when he poses a threat to her fetus. At the end of the play, Rose returns to live with the wolves, clearly indicating that it is within a natural, animal realm that she will find her true self, away from the false constructions and alien requirements of patriarchal culture. The natural realm was represented onstage by a film shown at the beginning of the play, a montage of images of wolves in the wild that provided a highly resonant, imaginative reference for the off-stage world Rose felt drawn towards.

Yvonne Hodkinson has explained the cultural feminist identification with nature as a reclamation of female power: "The female loss of identity becomes the struggle to regain the ancient correlation with nature in pre-patriarchal society, 'when Goddess-worship prevailed, and when myths depicted strong and revered female figures'" (134). In direct opposition to this positive view, Diane Purkiss has argued against "Romantic" feminism, defining it as an
over-determination of woman's instinctual relationship with nature and "an essentialist notion of a bodily femininity assumed to be reflected in -- rather than produced by -- the myths they elaborate" (444).²⁰

Yet while Rose is assumed to have a natural identity, the image of the princess is deconstructed. The role of any "princess" (read: ideal model of femininity) is explicitly revealed as a construction, a constant deception revolving around appearances. The Princess Rose complains that: "Princesses don't swear. Princesses don't burp. Princesses don't pass wind, sweat, shit, zit or drool," to which her fairy godmother, Melisande, replies: "Princesses don't appear to swear, burp, etc. etc. I never could get you to grasp the finer points of that principle" (35). The dress that Rose wears serves as a visual theatrical symbol for this deception. The stage directions tell us that "the Dress stands by itself...a construct of wire and fabric" (33). Of course the role of the princess is similarly free-standing and artificially constructed, quite separate from the "reality" of Rose as a girl raised by wolves, and something which, in performance, she was both literally and metaphorically "strapped into.

This is an example where the signifier, the dress, relates to the onstage reality of the play but also bypasses this intermediary step to signify its meaning to the audience directly by announcing itself as a symbol; placed upstage centre for most of the performance, it loomed

²⁰ Purkiss objects to the blurring of differences between goddess figures from different cultures and expresses apprehension about an ideal of femininity that becomes a kind of transhistoric essence, located in maternity and reproductive capacity. Purkiss argues instead that femininity is itself a product of the culture and language which represses it: "Femininity is, precisely, that which is excluded from patriarchal representations and can only be glimpsed in their gaps and silences" (448). In this view, myths arising from patriarchal culture can only point to the absence, rather than the essence, of the female.
over the action as a constant reminder of the social roles constricting Rose and Charming and deforming their relationship. The dress, as a metaphor for the social influences on individual circumstances, can also be seen as evidence of the play's materialist feminism.

Working towards a reconciliation between the cultural and materialist readings of this play, I would like to conclude by suggesting another possible model for understanding the attraction that mythological figures hold for feminist playwrights and audiences, one which, rather than appealing to the "naturalness" of these creatures, re-names them instead as "monsters." If, as we suggested earlier, part of the appeal of the female characters lies in their disobedience, perhaps we need to examine the ways in which they are transgressive.

If we want to think about strange and monstrous creatures, the movies are an obvious source to consider. In her essay, "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams maintains that the monster in the classic horror movie should not be interpreted as the eruption of repressed male sexuality, but rather as the feared power and potency of the woman -- as her double. As Williams explains:

The female look . . . shares the male fear at the monster's freakishness, but also recognizes the sense in which this freakishness is similar to her own difference. For she too has been constituted as an exhibition-object by the desiring look of the male (87-88).

The woman's look at, and identification with, the monster is a recognition of their similar status as threats to male power. The monster and the woman are both "biological freaks with impossible and threatening appetites that suggest a frightening potency . . ." (87); think of Princess Rose's insatiable sexual appetite, for example. Williams argues that this is the reason for the strange affinity that often exists between the woman and the monster in the classic
horror film; the surplus of danger and excitement when the two are together; and the woman's sympathy at the monster's death. For the woman, the monster has been a horror version of her own body, one of the many mirrors held up to her by patriarchy in which she may view her difference. With Williams' model, we are still locating femininity in "difference," but switching the focus from a femininity assumed to be natural and biological to one constructed in opposition to and repressed by the male norm, and therefore threatening to patriarchal order. In this sense, rather than locating power in their reproductive capacities alone, we can see Rose's relationship with White Paws on the level of woman and monster, the woman recognizing their common status as dangerous "others"; throughout the play, Rose is acutely aware that she poses a threat to Channing and his world.

Donna Haraway argues that the search for political identity can lead to "...endless splitting and searches for a new essential unity. But there has also been a growing recognition of another response through coalition -- affinity, not identity" (155). Thus, an affinity with the natural world need not lead to a totalizing essentialism, but rather, as with the woman and the monster, to an affinity based on recognition and responsibility, and a rejection of the false dichotomy between nature and culture. In this sense, we can also look at the female character as embodying the monster as part of herself. For Haraway, women are monsters because they are boundary creatures, holding a destabilizing place in the great western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives. The word monsters, Haraway writes, "...shares more than its root with the word, to demonstrate. Monsters signify" (2). Viewed in this light, Charming and Rose is about boundary creatures who, in their status as neither
one nor the other, represent a potent threat to the dominant order: Rose is a wolf and a woman, a princess and a murderer, while White Paws is both wolf and mother-figure, Melisande is both fairytale and earthy reality, and even Prince Charming is both loving and abusive husband. As Haraway argues: "A concept of a coherent inner self, achieved (cultural) or innate (biological), is a regulatory fiction that is unnecessary -- indeed, inhibitory -- for feminist projects of producing and affirming complex agency and responsibility" (135). The play is about the search for identity, but concludes that a single identity does not suffice -- and this is certainly part of the appeal of mythology, in both senses, for the feminist playwright.

Written ten years after This is for You, Anna, it would be tempting to see Charming and Rose: True Love as benefitting from the intervening years of feminist thought and an increasingly complex relationship to all feminist issues, even violence against women. This is for You, Anna explores the impulse towards revenge, touching upon Marianne's victimhood and culpability in a way which is both challenging and emotionally direct; Charming and Rose problematizes the abusive relationship in a more ambivalent way, looking at the couple in their (metaphorical) context and suggesting what must be sacrificed to maintain a "fairytale" romance.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, early feminist criticism focused on the female characters male writers have created, roles which are seen as having less to do with real women than with an ideal Woman that the actor (whether male or female) is asked to embody. Feminist semiotics examines precisely how this ideal functions as a culturally encoded sign, relaying information to an audience that reinforces their already culturally
learned understanding of male and female, an understanding which, in turn, allows them to "read" the sign onstage. Sue-Ellen Case has written about the value of casting against convention, so that the audience is made aware of the process of signification and their own expectations, suddenly forced to consider how much of what goes on in theatre is determined, not by requirements of the specific text, but by cultural requirements for the representation of gender.

Representation is examined, by Barbara Freedman, as an opportunity to undermine these requirements. She argues that, while classic drama is dependant on maintaining the binary opposition of male and female and on casting the male spectator as the controlling gaze for which the narrative unfolds, feminist performance can deconstruct this "frame." Feminist theatre addresses women as its primary audience, the gaze for which its narrative unfolds (in realist theatre), or the gaze which it returns (in non-realist theatre). For the spectator of feminist performance, the actor onstage is engaged in creating theatre, but also in creating culture, in actively defining the possibilities of female subjecthood, and she, the spectator, is a participant in this dual process as well.

How does the feminist theatre-maker understand her identity, her place as the subject of her own life and her own art, and how will this influence the way she represents herself and other women onstage? Does she see herself as belonging to a women's culture, as linked to all other women through common bonds of biology, experience, and understanding, or perhaps to all other women who share her country of origin or her ethnic heritage or her language? Or does she see women as separated by these specifics of geography, race, class, and sexual orientation, and seek to illuminate how these factors serve to oppress some women
and privilege others? Does she question whether there is anything innately female about her identity at all, or whether she has had to learn to behave in certain ways to survive in a world divided by gender? How an individual theatre-maker understands feminism and how she believes it affects her own process of self-discovery will determine whom she chooses to work with and what she hopes to say to her spectators; it is crucial that she examines her own position because, as we have seen, the feminist spectator demands "authenticity" in her representation.

As we have seen with the Nightwood examples, the project of representing one's identity as a woman is not straightforward. At times, an appeal to women's commonality provides a necessary sense of strength and unity against forces which it is too much for one individual to bear; at other times, that commonality seems less appropriate than embracing difference. It can be confusing, as a spectator, to understand the implications of feminist theatre, its breadth and variety, without analyzing the elements, the signs, being employed, and in acknowledging their diversity, even contradictions. The aim is to find a model in which women can take control of cultural production. Employing one model does not mean the exclusion of all others.

The difference between cultural and materialist feminism is mainly in the conception of a gendered self—a innate femaleness tied to biology versus a constructed social function. This division is not necessarily what a particular piece of feminist theatre is about, but it informs the creator's worldview and her understanding of the creative process: an expression of women's creativity versus creativity by persons gendered female. Both practitioners would understand women's creativity as being historically repressed, but would have different
conceptions about what they are expressing. This is an important philosophical distinction, and one which needs to be acknowledged in the process of reception as well.
Chapter Three: Collective Creation and Nightwood Theatre

If we were to compare Nightwood to other Canadian feminist companies past and present, such as Redlight, Nellie McClung, Maenad Theatre, Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, Le Théâtre Parminou, and the Company of Sirens, for example, we would find similar struggles around obtaining funding, defining a mandate, developing an organizational structure and communicating with a desired audience.¹ The different kinds of feminist philosophy that individual theatre practitioners advocate will be reflected in the work they produce within these companies -- the aesthetics of cultural feminism found in Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots, for example, the materialist analysis of This is for You, Anna, or some combination of approaches. A commitment to feminism also influences how a piece of theatre is created, and each of the companies mentioned above has attempted to develop an appropriate, collaborative working model. Part of the feminist agenda is to build confidence and to create bonds between women, so the process by which a project is organized can be as important as the finished product; a collaborative model in which credit and responsibility are shared, as opposed to a strictly hierarchical structure, is a choice philosophically consistent with such goals. Collective creation at least offers the possibility for equality and a balance of power and, since these are feminist goals for society at large, it seems only right

¹ See, for example, Susan Bennett and Alexandria Patience, "Bad Girls Looking for Money -- Maenad Making Feminist Theatre in Alberta," Canadian Theatre Review 82 (Spring 1995): 10-13. "What Maenad is exploring is an administrative and artistic structure that makes possible a wide range of work by a diversity of women who do not or cannot, for a number of reasons, produce their theatre in the more traditional structures" (12).
that they should be put into practice in a feminist organization.

Collective creation has come to connote a particular kind of theatre piece: episodic in structure, presentational, and made up of a number of stories that all contribute to some overarching theme or purpose. But collective creation is perhaps more accurately described as a process, a method of working in which authority is shared and each participant contributes in a significant way to the content of the work at hand. A collective might include one person who is designated as director or even playwright, but the other participants -- actors, designers and so on -- are understood to have more direct input than within a traditional, hierarchical situation, where everyone works towards realizing the playwright's vision. The end result of the collective creation process might be a play about a specific community or historical event (something like Love and Work Enough, for example), and it might include an overt political motivation (such as Peace Banquet, or the work of companies inspired by Augusto Boal, for example). The collective process might also result in a play like Glazed Tempera, which was intended to explore an interdisciplinary aesthetic rather than social commentary. Finally, it should be noted that the term "collaborative" is often used to convey much the same meaning as "collective." Of course, all theatre is collaborative, in that it requires the skills and talents of many individuals, but the use of terms like "collaborative" and "collective" signals a special emphasis on the group effort, and a de-emphasizing of the script as the central element of theatre.²

² Canadian Theatre Review 88 (Fall 1996) is devoted to the proceedings of a conference entitled "Surviving the Ice Age" which was sponsored by Winnipeg's PRIMUS Theatre. The invited companies produce a wide variety of work, but each pursues a non-traditional, collaborative working method. Their work is described as "popular theatre," a term which signals their refusal to view theatre as an industry and art as a commodity for the elite.
Nightwood's mandate has always been to encourage diverse perspectives and to provide opportunities for women who might not find them elsewhere, and collective creation is in many ways an ideal model for this kind of empowerment. Furthermore, the work that is created through collective creation can be especially rich and powerful, benefitting from the combined efforts and gifts of a number of people, rather than the vision of a single individual. As Maureen White commented regarding This is for You, Anna:

For me the greatest reward of working collectively is seeing a vision emerge that could never have come from just one person. A constant criticism of this method of working seems to be that it is a compromised vision. Yet I do not begin working collectively on a show with my vision in mind -- that would certainly lead to compromise. Instead, ideas feed off one another to develop into a vision (The Anna Project 173).

On the other hand, working collectively can be difficult and time consuming, particularly if all the participants are not equally committed or comfortable with the process. Ann-Marie MacDonald acknowledged some of the hazards in her description of the Anna Project:

... the collective process has been fraught with more challenges and obstacles than any other I have known; struggles such as fund-raising and administration of one's own work, not to mention the constant striving for consensus in a process which is also a commitment to respect each artist's creative input (170).

MacDonald concludes, however, that it was worth "hanging in for," and a collaborative, if not necessarily collective, method of working has continued to be associated with Nightwood and all other Canadian feminist theatre companies.

When discussing Nightwood's experience with the collective model, both administratively and as a method of creation, it is useful to situate it within the tradition of
Canadian political theatre and also the context of feminist theatre; the point of intersection is the collective process and how it defines the work. Alan Filewood has written persuasively about the place of the collective creation in Canadian theatre history, particularly linking it to political theatre. As we saw in Chapter Two, Ann Wilson has argued that the collective process is inherently more feminist than other methods of creating theatre; as a working method, it can lend itself to either a materialist or a cultural perspective, aiming to incorporate anything from an analysis of class to a sharing of personal stories, depending on the aims of the participants. We shall look at the place of the collective in both the Canadian and feminist theatre contexts in order to understand how Nightwood's particular experience evolved.

Because Nightwood came into existence at the end of the seventies, it missed the period ten years earlier in which the collective was most revolutionary in Canada, when the collective creation, the alternative theatre, the influence of an international avant-garde, and a passionate nationalism were all coming together in Canadian theatre. Nightwood also followed the initial period when many early women's theatre collectives were created as splinters from other groups, either experimental theatre companies or political associations, formed so that female members could work with each other on their own issues. In many ways, Nightwood reflected all that had gone on a short while before and yet developed in its

---

1 The origins of collective creation and documentary theatre go back much further than the alternative movement of the 1960s: as Filewood points out, Piscator's theatre in the 1920s also spoke to a particular community defined by common experience. Piscator's principles included the belief that the documentary is a genre of performance that presents actuality onstage and in the process authenticates that actuality, through internal conventions of the performance, and that it speaks to a specifically defined audience for whom it has a special significance (16).

4 See for example the discussion of Burning City Women later in this Chapter.
own unique direction, learning from the theatre explosion of the late sixties and early seventies, and moving into the eighties. I would suggest that Nightwood's historical placement partly explains its longevity, in that its founders had a variety of successful models to emulate. For example, Cynthia Grant apprenticed in New York with Mabou Mines, an influential experimental company, just before The True Story of Ida Johnson was produced at the Annex Theatre in the fall of 1979; Kim Renders was a cast member in the Theatre Passe Muraille collective creation Staller’s Farm in 1980. Their experiences with the international avant-garde and Canadian collective creation were reflected in their early productions and in how the fledgling company positioned itself within the Toronto theatre community. Furthermore, the growing feminist movement meant that more and more women were feeling confident about finding their own voices in the theatre and creating new roles for themselves both on and off stage, and Nightwood became a focal point around which a number of projects could revolve; Nightwood’s commitment to an inclusive, collective structure meant that many women could be accommodated. As we shall see, the collective structure and the focus on producing collective work altered considerably over the years, but because the need for a place where women's work is produced and women theatre artists can find jobs has (unfortunately) not disappeared, Nightwood has remained relevant.

1. Nightwood as a Collective

Nightwood produced many collective creations in its early years and was also run, administratively, as a collective. Although each of the four founders might take on different tasks and titles with each project, the responsibility and credit for creating an artistic vision
was shared. This changed gradually over time. As the company continued to expand and include more artists, a structure was required to provide the necessary administrative and organizational support. By 1982, Cynthia Grant was being referred to as the Artistic Director in media coverage and on funding applications, and there was a Board of Directors in place. As we have seen, Nightwood was very much associated with the artist-run Theatre Centre, its home for many years, and this status as a collective within a collective helped to define its place within the theatre community. The definition of collectivity became a contentious issue over the years, as subsequent leaders struggled to balance their sense of individual responsibility with a desire to retain the company's collective spirit. There were adjustments to the title of Artistic Director, for example; during Mary Vingoe and Maureen White's terms of leadership, the position was re-named Artistic Coordinator. In a letter to the Canada Council dated March 17, 1986, Mary Vingoe described the reasons for the new title:

For this season at least, we have created the position of artistic coordinator, as an alternative to artistic director, in order that the day to day artistic concerns of the company can be efficiently handled, while allowing more 'collective' input on major decisions such as company programming.

Vingoe also described Nightwood's decision to hire a staff person through the creation of a permanent, part-time administrative position as an important step for the company:

For the first time there is a sense of stability and consistency in the office. Organizational systems are beginning to be put into place to allow others easier access to information. The day to day concerns of the company are being handled more efficiently and the workload is being shared, thus relieving the burden on just one person. The long term plan is to secure
enough financial support to make this a full-time position.\(^5\)

When Kate Lushington was hired in 1988, she was initially called Artistic Coordinator, but in 1990 the title changed to Artistic Director and it has remained so under the current management team. As we shall see, the title and its adjustments reflect an on-going struggle to balance different agendas: the desire to be taken seriously within the theatre community, which demands artistic leadership; the desire to retain the support of the feminist community, which prefers alternative approaches to organization; and the desire for a clear working relationship between the Board and the staff.

Nightwood's Board of Directors has also changed its structure and purpose over the years. At first it was an artist-run Board, emulating the Theatre Centre model, but under Kate Lushington there was more of an emphasis on attracting women with certain skills, such as legal expertise and fundraising experience, and the Board was referred to as '"community-based."\(^6\) The more artistic decisions were taken over by the Play Group, a collective of artists working in conjunction with the Board and staff. At a meeting of an Ad Hoc Structure Committee in November of 1988, it was decided that the Board should be balanced between community and artist members. The Artistic Coordinator and General Manager were to be informed of all meetings and could attend with "a voice but no vote." The Play Group was to include the Artistic Coordinator and one or two Board members,

---

\(^5\) Mary Vingoe, letter to Jeremy Long, Theatre Officer, Canada Council, 17 March 1986.

\(^6\) Joseph Green and Douglas Buck, "Responsibility and Leadership in Canadian Theatre," *Canadian Theatre Review* 40 (Fall 1984): 4-8. A community-based board of directors is defined as one made up of non-artists, people in the patron and business communities. They have final legal responsibility and the authority to approve or disapprove anything. Funding agencies require that publicly funded institutions have a board.
plus four to six artists appointed by the Board. There is an amalgam of these approaches at present, with the Board of Directors taking on administrative tasks and a separate Artistic Advisory group in place, but with considerable overlap between the two.\(^7\)

Throughout these changes in leadership and Board structure, Nightwood continued to identify itself as a collective, although it might be more accurate to say that it was a producing company that supported the creation of collective projects. The last collective creation which Nightwood produced as a mainstage show was *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita* in 1987, although some of the presentations at subsequent Groundswells have been by collectives.\(^8\)

Nightwood produced all their plays collectively in the early years, beginning with *The True Story of Ida Johnson* in 1979. The project began in 1976 with the Editing Group of the Women's Press, which included Cynthia Grant; she organized a dramatized reading in March of 1977 with members of the Editing Group, and then a workshop production in 1978 which involved Maureen White, Kim Renders and Mary Vingoe. It played September 6 to 15 at the

---

\(^7\) For example, for the 1996/97 season the Board of Directors is Clare Barclay, Shirley Barrie, Dawn Carter, Dawn Obakata, and Sierra Bacque and Ann-Marie MacDonald (co-chairs). Dawn Obakata is also on the Artistic Advisory, and of its seven members (Alex Bulmer, Marium Carvell, Jani Lauzon, ahdri zhina mandiela, Shesali Saulam, and Sarah Stanley), three others have also been Board members in previous years.

It is illegal for a person to sit on a Board if she is employed by or receives remuneration from that organization. The Artistic Advisory Committee was created to accommodate this stipulation; advisors may be paid as artists and still offer their assistance to the Board without actually being on it.

\(^8\) For example, the 8th annual Groundswell, "Making Waves," held at the Tarragon Theatre Extraspace, in October and November of 1992, featured three collective creations: *A Savage Equilibrium* by Monique Mojica, Fernando Hernandez Perez, Jani Lauzon and Floyd Favel; *Coming from the Womb* by the Red Sister/Black Sister Collective; and *Girls in the 'Hood* by Catherine Glen with young women from Metro Housing.
NDWT Side-Door Theatre (now the Annex Theatre) and later at the Adelaide Court Theatre. The 1979 production listed Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe and Maureen White as actors and Cynthia Grant as the director; Renders also did the design. These four women, who came to be considered the founders of Nightwood, and six others, were listed on the program as the "Theatre Collective and Associate Members."

In terms of its formal qualities, the production was described as "...a highly innovative and fascinating social document" by McKenzie Porter in the Toronto Star, and Kate Lushington wrote: "...using slides and non-linear text to illuminate the relationship between two women and their worlds, a new style of feminist theatre was born." According to Cynthia Grant, "the work didn't abandon but rethought plot and character. The style wove a fabric of sense impressions through music, dance, mime, mask and visual images."

These two features -- a collective structure with the four founders and others taking on different functions in each project, and a commitment to a multimedia, imagistic experimental aesthetic -- continued to define Nightwood for several years, throughout their early productions. When Nightwood became involved with the Rhubarb! Festival in 1980, the theatre had already developed a mandate statement; the program note for Rhubarb! read: "Nightwood Theatre operates as a collective to produce original or adapted material in a style which emphasizes the visual, musical and literary elements of the presentation."

Nightwood's next big production was Flashbacks of Tomorrow/Memorias del Mañana.

---


a collective presentation by Nightwood and the Open Experience Hispanic-Canadian Theatre, and a musical group called Los Compañeros. *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* was presented as part of the Toronto Theatre Festival's Open Stage in May of 1981, at the Toronto Free Theatre downstairs space (26 Berkeley Street), and was supported by the Ontario Arts Council and Theatre Passe Muraille. The program described it as "an original theatre production, presented in a mosaic of dance, ritual, personal experience and music, based on legends, documents and the art of Latin America. The musical adaptation has been written by and will be performed live by Compañeros . . . a political group formed in Toronto in 1978. They have participated in many political, cultural and creative gatherings in order to sing their message of their culture and their peoples' struggle."

Compañeros and the bilingual company composed original music and based the text on their research and personal experiences. The form of the piece reflected the collective approach: "Flashbacks. . . celebrates a festival on the Day of the Dead, when the past may be told by the people who lived it. ALL are here. . .and their collective memory spans more than one hundred years." Nightwood, meanwhile, was described as producing original or adapted material in a style interweaving literary, musical and movement elements onstage. The role of the company with this project was as facilitator, providing a creative centre around which a large group of people could build their story.

The next summer, another large-scale collective piece was mounted. *Mass/Age*, a multi-media spectacle of life in the nuclear age, was produced August 25 to 29, 1982, at Harbourfront Centre and was subtitled "A McLuhanesque Look at our Lives." In the
program Nightwood was described as a B.A.A.N.N. Theatre Centre satellite and the "collaborative production" was performed by Jay Bowen, Kim Renders, Daniel Brooks, Allan Risdill, Gordon Masten, and Maureen White. The director was Cynthia Grant, choreographers included Johanna Householder (of the Clichettes) and visual artist John Scott worked on the design. Also listed "for Nightwood Theatre" were administrator Anna Barron-Schon and publicity director Anne H. Kear. Nightwood is described as a professional company which operates within the jurisdiction of Equity, so we can see that, at this point, Nightwood was already employing short-term administrative personnel for their shows and operating as a professional company.

In the press release ("Nightwood Theatre presents Mass/Age, High-Tech Theatre in a tent"), Nightwood is described as "one of Toronto's most innovative experimental theatre companies." The press release also reads: "Nightwood's artistic director Cynthia Grant has established a reputation as the challenging director of such productions as Ida Johnson and Glazed Tempera," and mentions Kim Renders' Dora Mavor Moore award nomination for Staller's Farm at Theatre Passe Muraille. These statements indicate a claim to being taken seriously as part of the Toronto theatre community: identifying Grant as Artistic Director signals a cohesive structure and vision, while Renders' Dora nomination communicates a recognized standard of quality.

The reviews of Mass/Age discussed it, not only in terms of avant-garde theatre, but also in the context of an established Nightwood style. In his review, Ray Conlogue described

---

12 B.A.A.N.N. was an acronym for Buddies in Bad Times, AKA Performance Interface, Autumn Leaf Theatre, Nightwood and Necessary Angel, the five founding member companies of the Theatre Centre.
the set as a runway with high platforms at each end. Projections of da Vinci paintings, John Scott's ghost figures (faces painted on dangling styrofoam) and slogans and poetry were blown up giganticly over the actors' heads; a soundtrack of familiar popular music was used and action faded in and out as the audience's attention was focused towards different spaces in the huge playing area. Furthermore, Conlogue refers to Renders and White as "Nightwood's customary actors." Nightwood is already identifiable in terms of style and performers, building on the striking visual design and attention garnered by its first shows.

Further documentation from this time period reinforces Nightwood's status as an experimental collective, operating within the small theatre community of Toronto. Cynthia Grant, interviewed in NOW Magazine, is said to be creating a theatre of images, broadening the theatre-going experience by bringing in other art forms. Jon Kaplan writes:

The opening of Mass/Age has a filmic quality typical of Grant's work. A voiceover description of humanity's coming into the cosmos glides into a personal monologue about coping with today's world. Then the focus of the play zooms out again to look at experiments on the brain, including memory distortion.

Grant is quoted as saying she wants to present the implications and contradictions of the individual in today's society: "The work will try to evoke certain responses in the audience so that people can see themselves in perspective." Kaplan comments that the work sounds reminiscent of Mabou Mines.

After discussing Nightwood's aesthetic style, Kaplan and Grant turn to the


\[14\] "Cynthia Grant Builds Images."
company's placement within the Toronto theatre context. Grant sees disappointingly small change in Toronto theatre but believes "that the sort of collective, ongoing process of a group like Nightwood is important to the growth of theatre." She is cynical about change because of the absence of funding and support from the media: "Our area of theatre is research/development. Because those organizations that fund don't distinguish between our area and that of commercial theatre, the pressure is on us to become more commercial."

Again, the shape of Nightwood is coming into focus in the public eye, that of an experimental theatre company with a strong visual sense, a collective way of working, and an identifiable leader.

The next large-scale production after Mass/Age was Peace Banquet ("Ancient Greece Meets the Atomic Age"), collectively written and presented in November of 1983 as an adaptation of Aristophanes' play Peace. The collective was made up of Micah Barnes, Sky Gilbert, Dean Gilmour, Cynthia Grant, Charis Polatos, Kim Rinders, Judith Rudakoff, Philip Shepherd, and Maureen White; the piece was produced and directed by Grant. A review by Carole Corbeil describes the structure of the play: in the first half of the show, Dean Gilmour visits heaven in search of Miss Peace and meets Sky Gilbert as the God of War, attended by Rinders and White as Corruption and Chaos. Gilmour is told that Peace is actually Force in drag. The second half of the play takes the form of a banquet in which the audience participates. 15 Here again, we notice reviewers attempting to place the work within a continuum of Nightwood productions. In his review, Henry Mietkiewicz praises the coherence of the piece and the appropriateness of its broad tone, "unlike earlier Nightwood

efforts which have too often tended towards incoherence (Mass/Age) or verbosity (Hooligans)."16 Except for the four Nightwood founders, the collectives behind Peace Banquet and Mass/Age were completely different, and yet an identifiable Nightwood stamp is seen to be on both. The earliest Nightwood shows do demonstrate a consistent aesthetic vision: from The True Story of Ida Johnson, Glazed Tempera, Flashbacks of Tomorrow and Mass/Age, the reviews always speak of the innovative use of multi-media techniques and the fragmented, nonlinear structure. By 1984, with other women like Banya Rubess having a strong presence at Nightwood, there was a corresponding diffusion of the "Nightwood show." In fact, one reviewer of Rubess' Pope Joan (1984) commented that the plot is unusually linear for a Nightwood production, indicating that there had been a certain loosening of the established model for the company's work;17 the obvious difference, of course, is that Pope Joan is not a collective creation.

In their application to the Toronto Arts Council for 1983/84, Nightwood applied for $4000 for the period May 1983 to May 1984 (they had previously received $1,700) and the company is described as "operating as a collective." The application also provides some interesting statistics about the number of performances: over the previous year they had done 32 performances for an audience of 2900; in the upcoming season they projected 40 performances for an audience of 3500. The average audience per performance was 91 and the special audiences they addressed included women's groups, the literary and visual arts


17 Kate Lazier, "Pope Joan's Infallible Wit," The Varsity 10 Sept. 1984: 16. "Rubess' linear plot is a departure for Nightwood, whose work is usually more associative. But in typical Nightwood fashion, the transitions between scenes are smooth..."
community, and the Spanish-speaking community. In fact, community outreach was seen as an important part of Nightwood's mandate and it is interesting to note that the application form asks the company to list which "special" audiences it is addressing. I would suggest that this is one factor that encouraged Nightwood to identify itself as a women's theatre company, the advantage of having a unique and identifiable niche in the eyes of potential funders.

A 1984 article in NOW placed the Theatre Centre and its member companies in the tradition of Canadian alternative theatre; the article suggested that the atmosphere at the Theatre Centre and its status on the fringe contributed to the process by which Nightwood continued to define itself. The Theatre Centre had operated as an artist-run space for five years in 1984, although there were only three resident companies left: AKA Performance Interface, Nightwood, and Buddies in Bad Times. The accent at the Theatre Centre was on directing and the collective environment promoted a rapid interchange of ideas, free from the burden of commercial enterprise. The article positions the Theatre Centre as the product of a younger generation, set up in opposition to the "establishment alternative theatre" of the 1960s, represented by Theatre Passe Muraille.

18 Cynthia Grant, Application for a Cultural Grant from the City of Toronto, May 1983 to May 1984.


20 Two of the other founding companies, Necessary Angel and Autumn Leaf (which had combined at that time to form Autumn Angel), left after the success of their production of Tamara and were viewed as "parental figures" by the remaining companies.

21 Clarke Rogers (Artistic Director of Theatre Passe Muraille in 1984) viewed this as a natural evolution. In fact, Theatre Passe Muraille did provide assistance to Nightwood, as well as other small companies. Passe Muraille tried to foster the theatre community by providing SEED grants,
The NOW article goes on to describe the collective nature of Nightwood, again situating it within the context of its generation: "For Cynthia Grant and her Nightwood Theatre, the necessity of keeping the Centre a forum for new blood is critical to the kind of work she does." Grant is quoted as saying:

Yes, the 60s have passed, but that spirit of collective effort in which new work can develop still exists. ... Above all else, theatre should communicate. And there is a whole generation below us anxious to get space to work in, to develop even newer ways of communicating. I really feel we should do something to make sure that opportunity is there.

The model of collectivity being espoused here is mainly about access, making sure that the Theatre Centre is available to younger artists who are evidently uncomfortable with an "establishment" theatre like Passe Muraille. There is less focus on collectivity as an aesthetic type of theatre and more on a policy of inclusiveness, and the discussion is situated within a discourse of youth versus age, new versus established theatre artists.

Most significantly, this particular article differentiates between the Theatre Centre's member companies in terms of the kinds of audiences they attract. Richard Shoichet of AKA Performance Interface is quoted as saying that his audience is the most general, as opposed to "Grant's feminist audience, or Sky Gilbert's gay one." Nightwood is described as having been instrumental in putting together Rhubarb! and also "a diverse range of theatre from the feminist oriented Yellow Wallpaper to the pop collage of Mass/Age. ... Grant. ... sees herself moving in the direction of more feminist works." Nightwood is still identified as part of the rehearsal space and technical assistance, and receiving co-production credit in return. Nightwood has mounted a number of its shows at the Passe Muraille Backspace, some of them as co-productions.
alternative theatre scene in Toronto, and defined by a collective structure, but it is the feminist content of its work which is seen to determine its audience.

In their application to the Ontario Arts Council for 1985/86, Nightwood's administrative structure is laid out explicitly: Rosemary Sullivan is the President of the Board; Cynthia Grant is the Artistic Director; Christopher Bye is the Administrator; Maureen White, Mary Vingoe and Kim Renders are collective members; and Brenda Darling is the fundraiser. The purpose of Nightwood is "...to provide programming that speaks to the women's community and to provide job opportunities for women." This application represents the culmination of influences at work in Nightwood for some time, both the need to set up a more stable administrative structure and also to acknowledge their significance within the feminist theatre community.

In many ways, Nightwood was actually moving more towards the mainstream at this point, in what could be seen as the second phase of its development. In 1986 Cynthia Grant left Nightwood to form the Company of Sirens, a feminist collective which works at a much more grass roots level than Nightwood, most often outside the framework of traditional theatre. (In her 1990 article in FUSE Magazine, Susan G. Cole suggested that the creation of the collectively-based Sirens freed Nightwood to concentrate less on collective work and more on developing individual writing talents). In their February 13, 1986 funding application to the Municipality of Metro Toronto, Mary Vingoe introduced herself as the new Artistic Coordinator of Nightwood and Linda Brown as the first full-time office person. Their application emphasized events that traditionally define success: a fundraising production by the American company Plutonium Players made $8000 in one week;
Nightwood's collective creation *Love and Work Enough* won a Dora award; the tour of *This is for You, Anna* sold out in England, was voted one of the top fifteen shows in London, and was also invited to the DuMaurier World Theatre Festival in Toronto. Upcoming projects included the English-language premiere of *The Edge of the Earth is too Near*, Violette Leduc by Jovette Marchessault and a 1987 production of *War Babies* by Margaret Hollingsworth, two very literary scripts by individual authors with little previous contact with Nightwood.

In her application, Mary Vingoe mentioned that they began to reach out in 1985/86 to new audiences and artists through touring abroad and co-productions and planned to continue working with Theatre Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre and Toronto Free Theatre. In addition to a new artistic focus, the company had also expanded its Board of Directors to include nine working artists. Furthermore, the creation of two new positions, Artistic Coordinator and General Manager, both part-time, "Marks a significant change in the structure and organization of the company. . . Nightwood has gone through a major transition this year."22

The application also makes clear, however, that Nightwood is not ready to give up its more community-based objectives:

While we have begun seriously to work with writers and scripts, we have not abandoned our commitment to the more innovative, collaborative way of play-making which has been our strength in the past. Both *This is for You, Anna* and *Love and Work Enough* were created through painstaking collective work, refined over a number of workshops and productions.

This commitment is centred in plans for "a collective, comic collaboration on the theme of

---

female eroticism, inspired by photography by Marcia Resnick." The creative team working on this project included Baquta Rubess, Maureen White, Louise Garfield (a member of the Clichettes) and playwright Peggy Thompson; collectively they were called the Humbert Humbert Project and their collaborative effort became The Last Will and Testament of Lolita, Nightwood's last mainstage collective creation, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Besides emphasizing their continuing commitment to collective creation, Vingoe also highlighted the company's attention to "innovation in theatrical form," as evidenced by the workshop production of Penelope. Research and development was also mentioned as an important component of Nightwood's work, and led to "two landmarks in the 1985/86 season": the Transformations reading series in the fall of 1985 23 and the newly created Groundswell Festival to be presented in the spring of 1986.

While the reading series was very successful and resulted in a further production for one of the plays (War Babies), it was not repeated. Groundswell, however, marked a very important development in Nightwood's history as it became an annual event. A festival in which new works-in-progress by women are given staged readings or workshop productions, Groundswell has become the most consistent means by which Nightwood develops new material for its mainstage productions and reaches out into the wider community. The first Groundswell was supported financially by the Jackman and Laidlaw Foundations and

---

23 The Transformations reading series consisted of public readings of four plays: War Babies by Margaret Hollingsworth, Masterpieces by Sarah Daniels, Portrait of Dora by Hélène Cixous, and Signs of Life by Joan Schenkar. Transformations received letters of praise from Susan Feldman, Executive Director of the Performing Arts Development Fund of Ontario, Canadian Theatre Review editor Robert Wallace, and Margaret Hollingsworth.
involved outside companies: Montreal's Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, Mixed Company, and Dance Kulcha Muvmant, "a new black theatre company in Toronto." Nightwood's strategy was to reach a wider audience by combining known and unknown names and co-producing with other companies. In some ways, this model is paradigmatic of the Nightwood method: finding corporate sponsorship and mainstream audiences for works which would not be produced otherwise. By 1989, only three years later, more than 50 authors had already had work presented at Groundswell.

Nightwood quickly realized how important and popular the Groundswell Festival could be and applied for funding to make it an annual event. In a letter to the Laidlaw Foundation, dated October 10, 1986, Vingoe explained how an in-house series over the summer had given them a headstart on the festival for that year. They were already receiving submissions after putting out a call in several publications, and actively soliciting material from theatre artists they wanted to encourage. The letter also mentioned that they wanted to invite outside writers and directors into the company to work with the many experienced people on their Board and "extended circle":

Rina Fraticelli, Bañuta Rubess, Maureen White, Mary Durkan, Peggy Thompson, Johanna Householder and Kim Renders have all furthered their own development through Nightwood and through Groundswell they will provide support for other theatre artists in kind. This involvement insures that the collective sensibility which we have built into our structure, is carried through to the grass roots level. By sharing programming decisions among a group of artists Nightwood reaches a wider cross section of the community than could any one individual. By having within our number alternate approaches to new work we are able to offer not just one, but a number of
perspectives. This statement sums up how Nightwood hoped to continue their collective tradition through Groundswell, while still producing mainstage shows. In an October 22, 1986 application to the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, Internship Training Program, Vingoe explained that: "Major decisions such as programming, are made in conjunction with a programme committee from the Board. The new structure has allowed Nightwood to retain a functioning collective sensibility while evolving an efficient management structure."  

With a growing interest in reaching a wide audience, Nightwood became increasingly concerned with marketing itself to potential sources of funding. This is evidenced by the aggressive fundraising campaign Nightwood launched in the beginning of 1987. A package was developed to send out to potential sponsors with an introductory letter signed by Carlyn Moulton, one of the Directors of the Board. Nightwood was defined as: "A successful and growing Toronto theatre company; a critical success in many of its 30 productions in past seasons; a strong commitment to developing new work and new talent; a charitable organization; a theatre company without a deficit!...Maturing fiscal management, developing talent, critical acclaim and popular success-- the combination feels terrific." In describing Nightwood's mandate, the letter reads: "In addition to creating and adapting our own plays, we are committed to encouraging the development of contemporary material from a women's

24 Mary Vingoe, letter to Nathan Gilbert, Executive Director, Laidlaw Foundation, 10 Oct. 1986. As the quote suggests, Nightwood's collective structure allowed many women an opportunity to gain experience and exposure which later assisted them in finding work at other theatres. Rubess, for example, later became an associate artist with Theatre Passe Muraille.

point of view. New York Times Magazine critic, Mel Gussow, refers to the recent emergence of women playwrights as 'The most encouraging and auspicious aspect of the current theatre.' " The letter emphasizes the range of topics dealt with and says Nightwood is unique because it was founded by and usually produces plays by women and its artistic, technical and administrative staff is 75% female: "We are committed to the collaborative process" and "committed to working with women whose individual vision challenges the way we see society through their politics and their dramaturgy. Nightwood is a feminist collective with an active board of directors who advise on matters of policy and programming." In this instance, Nightwood's commitment to collectivity is centred in its administration, while the creative focus is on individual women playwrights. The quote from the New York Times and references to fiscal management indicate a company attempting to appear legitimate to potential funders; this continued to be the objective into 1988 when, in an application for a Grant in Aid of the Arts to the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto Cultural Affairs Division, Nightwood continued to define itself as "a feminist collectively-run professional theatre company, dedicated to the development of new Canadian work and to supporting the work of women writers and directors."

The founding members were well aware that the introduction of single-author texts was a new direction for the company. In an article published in 1987, Kim Renders acknowledged that the production of scripted works was a new development for Nightwood: "The promotion of female talent is still one of the company's strongest features. But in the past two and a half years, Nightwood has been putting on fewer collectives and become more script-oriented. This is a broadening of the group's method, since previously it had been
adamantly opposed to scripted material." 26 And in a later article, Maureen White and Mary Vingoe commented on their working relationship as director and playwright for the production of Vingoe's play The Herring Gull's Egg: "This is the first time we've worked together in this configuration," says White. "In our earlier days at Nightwood, collective creations were more common. It's exciting to see Nightwood now, at a time when more input is coming from outside people, those who weren't founders. It's good," she smiles, "that the company can exist without its mothers."27 We can see the accident and intention dialectic at work here: when company members and related groups were interested in creating collectively, this was defined as part of Nightwood's mandate, but as the founders became more interested in writing and directing conventionally scripted plays, the mandate changed to emphasize the production of Canadian work and the creation of opportunities for women, while shifting the collective ideal to the company's administration.

In 1988, however, Nightwood was moving into its third phase as a company with the hiring of Kate Lushington as Artistic Coordinator. In a July 1989 application to the Ministry of Culture and Communications for money to hold a Board Retreat, Lushington wrote:

Since I joined Nightwood last September as the first Artistic Coordinator from outside the group of founding members, the Board has been under-going a year of structural transition, from an open ended collective approach to a more traditional structure, with the establishment of standing committees to handle tasks, intensive Board recruitment, and the setting up of terms for Board Members.
The Mission Statement had also been re-written to read: "To provide opportunities for all

27 Jon Kaplan, "Bearing the fruit of a polluted world," NOW 4-10 May 1989: 47.
women to create and explore new visions of the world, stretching the concept of what is theatrical, and to hone their skills as artists, so that more of us may see our reality reflected on this country's stages, thus offering theatre goers the full diversity of the Canadian experience." 28

It is intriguing to note that, at the same time Nightwood was abandoning the collective administrative structure for a more traditional model, it was also concentrating on being more inclusive. One might find this paradoxical, since the whole concept of collectivity is about sharing responsibility and power, but it may also reflect a growing dissatisfaction with collectivity as a philosophy amongst feminist artists. When Kate Lushington left the position of Artistic Director in the fall of 1993, the search committee was made up of Batuta Rubess, Sally Han, Jennifer Ross, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Kate Tucker, Monique Mojica, ahdri zhina mandiela, Amanda Mills, Astrid Janson and Diane Roberts, as well as the rest of the Board. An interesting note from the minutes of their August 30 meeting mentions that Rubess had turned down the position of Artistic Coordinator back in 1988 because she felt a need for personal artistic expression was not encouraged or desirable in a collective structure. Apparently this had been echoed in similar terms by several potential candidates: they feared that their own need for personal growth would be incompatible with the administrative duty to serve others. 29

By the fall of 1989, in the first issue of the Nightwood newsletter Nightwords (vol. 1 no. 1), Lushington explicitly charted what she saw as the company's new identity in a column

28 Kate Lushington, letter to Ministry of Culture and Communications, July 1989.

29 Search Committee Meeting Minutes, 30 Aug. 1993.
entitled "A Word, or two, from the Artistic Coordinator." The 1989/90 season was celebrated as Nightwood's tenth anniversary, and in her column Lushington recounted Nightwood's origins with *The True Story of Ida Johnson* and expressed the opinion that Nightwood had grown beyond the wildest dreams of its founders: "No longer a collective, the collaborative spirit lives on in the artistic heart of the company, The Play Group, consisting of Martha Burns, Jennie Dean, Pat Idlette, Astrid Janson, Kate Lushington and Djanet Sears." With this statement, Lushington redefined the way Nightwood would present itself from now on. There would be a stronger focus on administration, on having adequate office staff and large enough budgets to mount higher profile shows. The Board was increasingly made up of professional women, lawyers, accountants and executives, and there were more fundraising events. The "collaborative spirit" shifted to the Play Group, a collective of women who formed the selection committee for Groundswell and planned each season. Instead of sponsoring co-productions with collectives, Nightwood supported its own playwrights-in-residence; for the 1989/90 season, Sally Clark worked on *Life Without Instruction.*

Another very important development for Nightwood was reported in this same issue of the newsletter; in a note about a recent Board Retreat we find the statement: "...in a key historical moment, the board committed to form an anti-racist policy." This commitment was

---

Sally Clark is another good example of someone who furthered her development through Nightwood. *Life Without Instruction* had a long but ultimately unfruitful history with the company; Nightwood had originally sponsored Sally Clark's application for funding to work on *The Medea Project,* a piece about women and revenge which she was proposing for eventual production by Nightwood. This became *Life Without Instruction,* but Clark chose not to have Nightwood produce the show. Clark also developed another of her plays, *St. Frances of Hollywood,* at Groundswell, but had it produced by the Canadian Stage Company in 1996.
described further in the program for *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, produced in 1991. The program note again recounts Nightwood's origins as a four-woman collective and its growth into a collaborative, non-profit, artist-run company with a mandate unique in English Canada— to promote and produce the work of Canadian women playwrights and directors exploring alternative visions of the world. *Princess Pocahontas* highlights a commitment to anti-racism which will be reflected throughout the next decade. The terms "collaborative" and "artist-run" are significant, in that Nightwood clearly wishes to retain its image as an alternative company. The implication is that the collective structure has been outgrown, but that the original spirit -- of being alternative and unique in promoting women -- has remained. Even the commitment to anti-racism could be seen as newly highlighted, as opposed to a radical change.

A further development in Nightwood's structure was announced in the Winter 1991 *Night Talk* newsletter (vol. 2 no. 2). In a report on board news by Phyllis Berck, she explained that there had been another Board retreat in October of 1990: "During a special meeting about the artistic vision of Nightwood, it was agreed that the title Artistic Coordinator should be changed to Artistic Director, to better reflect the duties of the position." Accordingly, Lushington's regular column is re-titled in this issue to read "A Word, or two, from the Artistic Director." In her FUSE article about Nightwood the previous year, Susan Cole had suggested that the absence of a traditional Artistic Director may have lost Nightwood some support in the theatre community and may also have confused potential funders. While these issues may have been part of the reason for the change, the predominant consideration seems to have been a desire to reflect Nightwood's new identity
as a traditionally structured theatre company, no longer a collective.

However, another very telling document from this period is an article in eye Magazine, reporting on *Charming and Rose: True Love*, Lushington's final directing project at Nightwood before she left the position of Artistic Director. The reviewer described Lushington as directing a farewell show for "the feminist theatre collective she helped start five years ago." Of course, on one level this is merely bad reporting, mistaking the date when Lushington began working for the company with the date when the company was founded. But it also points to the fact that, even though Lushington had been consistently dissociating Nightwood from the collective label in those five years, it was still being considered as such by this theatre reviewer.

Nightwood continues to be thought of as a collectively-run organization, perhaps because of the existence of the Artistic Advisory and the presence of artists on its Board, and perhaps because it is perceived by some as a "community theatre." This was reinforced when a leadership team of three women took over from Lushington in 1994, even though each had a title and separate responsibilities. Since Diane Roberts left her position with Nightwood in the spring of 1996, Alisa Palmer is the sole Artistic Director, with Leslie Lester as the Producer and two other women, Soraya Peerbaye and Jay Pitter, working as their associates. Palmer may succeed in shaking the collective label because of her strong profile within the theatre community as an award-winning playwright, director and actor; she has been associated with a number of other companies, and this may actually help her to

---


establish Nightwood as a "legitimate" company. Nightwood remains collective, however, in the sense that it strives to be inclusive and accessible, and continues to be part of a long tradition of political theatre in Canada.

2. Collectives and Canadian Theatre

In the Introduction to *Eight Men Speak*, a collection of plays from the Canadian Workers' Theatre Movement, Robin Endres argues that:

Theatre, more than any other artistic medium, is conducive to the aims of politically conscious artists because its structure is social and public. . . If the theatre is the most political of art forms, and if all theatre is in some sense political, a distinction must be made between theatre in general and theatre which is consciously political. The key to the distinction lies in the fact that consciously political theatre, in addition to its inherent role of altering reality, attempts to convince its audience that it is desirable for them to alter reality through conscious activity. . . it sets itself the task of literally changing the minds of its audience in order that this audience will in turn change the world. Given that the aims of this theatre are radically different from other types of theatre, the aesthetic choices it makes will also differ — indeed, attempts will be made to change the nature of the dramatic illusion itself (xiv, my emphasis).

Both aims and aesthetic choices link political theatre, such as the Workers' Theatre Movement, to the collective creations of the sixties and seventies, and to feminist theatre. In his article "The Interactive Documentary in Canada: Catalyst Theatre's It's About Time," Alan Filewod identifies the qualities which characterize political theatre in English Canada: an emphasis on the ideological values of the text; historical revisionism; group collaboration;
regional identity and grass-roots populism (134). Filewod traces a connection between the Workers' Theatre Movement of the 1920s and the alternative theatre of the sixties. While the Workers' Theatre Movement was more concerned with conveying a political message than with aesthetics, its membership included ingenious and inventive theatre artists. The movement's performances were characterized by mobility, as they needed to set up and clear out very quickly; by props and costumes that were extremely basic but could be transformed for different uses; by a sense of theatre as social ritual, a heightening and formalizing of the needs of the community; by the elimination of individual characters in favour of abstract representatives of class; and by the use of mass recitation, the chanting of slogans to make the working class aware of its collective strength (Endres xvii). The style of presentation is called "agitprop," for agitation propaganda, a term coined in the Soviet Union (xx).

The similarity to some feminist theatre can be attributed to common economic situations as well as to political and aesthetic goals: the minimal use of basic sets and costumes, for example, may be both an economic imperative and also part of an aesthetic that values unambiguous communication and identification with the working class. The two theatres share a similar goal of reaching non-traditional audiences and take their performances to the people most affected, hence the need for mobility, simplicity, and broad characterizations. A good example here is Nightwood's 1984 production Love and Work Enough. While hardly agitprop, it did share some of the characteristics: the set consisted of a quilt and a chair or two, which were transformed into a bed, a carriage, and other set pieces as needed. The cast quickly took on many different, easily-identifiable characters which could be described as types: the eager young bride, the hard-working immigrant and so on. Instead
of mass chanting, there were songs, which served to unite the characters through their common experiences. The play was toured to senior citizen's homes, schools, parks, and other community locations where it was felt there would be an interest in the subject matter. *Love and Work Enough* makes the point that women pioneers contributed greatly to the history of Ontario and their stories should not be neglected; while not a "message" in an agitprop sense, the play does convey its intentions to the audience in a straightforward manner.

Another similarity might be the combined importance within the Workers' Theatre and feminist movements of both collectively created pieces and also single author works that address similar issues. In the case of the Canadian Workers' Theatre movement we have the collectively written *Eight Men Speak* for example, but also the single author play *And the Answer Is...* by Mary Reynolds, while at Nightwood we have a collective creation like *Love and Work Enough* co-existing with the Transformations reading series, introducing influential feminist works by international authors to Toronto audiences. The "importance" of the work within the context of the movement, as opposed to a strict adherence to one particular form or method, is the common factor.

In his book *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*, Filewood distinguishes between collective creations, created by actors through research and improvisation, and documentary plays, which are compiled from research into community and historical issues. The two forms overlap but are not synonymous; documentary plays are a common result of the collective creation process (viii). The pieces tend to make reference to the way in which they were created and use techniques to verify their authenticity (x). In
Nightwood's *Love and Work Enough*, quotations from historical documents, letters and diaries are identified as such within the structure of the play and can be considered an example of this kind of internal authentication.33

Collective creations and documentary plays are more a genre of performance than of literary drama, more easily defined by their process than by the qualities of a final product. Nightwood notes that, as with agitprop, it is difficult to use traditional dramatic criticism to evaluate these works, which reorder the fundamental relation of artist and society (14). Authorship as a group process makes traditional dramatic criticism, with its textual orientation, difficult (x). Many of the reviews of Nightwood's collective creations, for example, focus on the contribution or absence of a director, perhaps searching for an individual who can be identified as the "authority" in the absence of an author. This was the case with Nightwood's final collective creation, *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita*, which we shall return to later in this chapter; the reviews lamented the absence of a director or single author to give the piece "focus," thereby denying or devaluing the specific nature of collective creation.34

Unlike a traditional play in which the actors play roles defined by the text to which they bear no personal relation, (and are further subjected to the interpretation of a director),

33 Stasia Evasuk "Play shows how women helped settle Ontario," *Toronto Star* 27 Oct. 1984: L3. "It is based on letters, diaries and books written by and about Canadian women ... The play opens with a reading of a pamphlet published in London in 1832 and addressed to those who wished to better themselves by emigrating to Canada."

34 Savannah Walling claims that there is a taboo against collective creation, a fear that artistic standards will be diluted, which is based on an assumption of the primacy of the playwright and script: "Collective creation circumvents the 'truth' that art comes only from the minds of bold individuals who rupture tradition and single-handedly change history" (12).
a collective creation allows actors to take responsibility for authenticating the material of the play and to report the findings of their own research (17). Filewod writes: "At the core of the documentary impulse is an implicit critical statement that the conventional dramatic forms of the culture in question no longer express the truth of the society, usually because those conventional forms cannot accommodate rapid social change" (14). Or, in the case of feminist theatre, because they do not speak to the needs of a marginalized constituency of theatre-makers, who turn to new forms of creation to find a voice for themselves.

The development of feminist theatre in Toronto can be traced back to some of the same influences as collective creation; for example, one of the pioneers of this type of political theatre in Canada was Ray Whelan who, after apprenticing with Peter Cheeseman in Stoke-on-Trent, co-founded Open Circle Theatre in Toronto (19). Open Circle, in turn, led to the formation of two feminist theatre companies: in 1974, actors Francine Volker and Marcella Lustig left Open Circle to found Redlight Theatre, Toronto's first feminist theatre company, and in 1979, Cynthia Grant met Maureen White and Kim Renders while working on an Open Circle production (The Splendour and Death of Joaquin Murieta by Pablo Neruda) and got them involved in a workshop production of The True Story of Ida Johnson.  

Another connection between the collective creation/alternative theatre scene and feminist theatre was Theatre Passe Muraille, the most influential home of collective creation

---

35 Ray Whelan, Sylvia Tucker and Marcella Lustig had all been involved with George Luscombe's Toronto Workshop Productions (founded in 1959), and went on to found Open Circle. Open Circle identified local issues, created a text based on interviews with people affected, and made shows accessible to those people; it was "community theatre" done professionally (Johnston 225). In a further connection, Francine Volker, who worked with Open Circle and co-founded Redlight, did a one-woman show with Nightwood in 1987, called The Paraskeva Principle.
at this time. Under the direction of Paul Thompson, the Passe Muraille style was a combination of dialect realism, improvisation, and presentational storytelling, guided by Thompson’s belief that theatre can locate and define the motifs and images which identify a culture and point to the formative myths of a society (25). The combination of a realistic “identifiable base” with a non-realistic presentational technique freed the actors from naturalistic portraiture and resulted in a kind of gestural storytelling (27). Another important factor was the freedom of the actors to discover not only the form and structure of a play but also its content and scope. Thompson claimed to have no preconceptions of what the play would be like, allowing it to emerge entirely from the rehearsal process (30). Besides legitimizing the collective creation as a genre of play-making and influencing the style of Nightwood productions like Love and Work Enough, Passe Muraille provided SEED money, rehearsal space and support for other artists. Thompson was an early supporter of Nightwood and arranged for the transfer of The True Story of Ida Johnson from the Annex Theatre to a longer run at Adelaide Court, as well as subsequent financial assistance.

Collectivity, as a philosophy and working method, was ideal for the founders of Nightwood, who were searching for an opportunity for theatrical freedom. Kim Renders later explained: "I wanted to develop my own performance vocabulary with a group of people; I thought that would be more useful than roaming the streets as a freelance actor." 36 Being part of a collective allowed Renders the opportunity, not only to act, but also to write, direct, and to exercise her artistic skills through design work, a range of input unavailable to an actor hired by a conventional company.

36 Kim Renders, personal interview, 11 May 1996.
Besides providing opportunities for personal growth, the collective experience fosters a sense of group identity. As Filewod explains:

... in collective creation, the group mind must reconcile its differences to create a community statement. This can begin in one of two ways: either the cast is united by ideological consensus in the analysis of the subject... or the circumstances of making the play become a shared experience which becomes part of the substance of the play itself (35).

In Nightwood's case, both elements were present simultaneously. The members of each collective creation were united through a common ideology (usually feminist, but in the case of a project like Peace Banquet, an anti-nuclear weapons stance), and a shared interest in a particular kind of experimental, multi-media aesthetic. Furthermore, financial constraints and a sense of being marginalized and avant-garde, gave them a feeling of group unity and common purpose. Chris Brookes of Newfoundland's Mummers Troupe has said: "Any political theatre which intends to really move its audience (I am referring to activism, not emotionalism), over the long term and on a wide social level, must find a language not just of issues and ideology, but of ritual and ceremony rooted in a sense of collective belief beyond language...." (114). Nightwood clearly intended something of this kind with a large-scale spectacle like Mass/Age, or an audience-participation piece like Peace Banquet, where the ceremony of a dinner party in which both actors and audience partake is combined with a heightened sense of social relevance.

Filewod sees collective creation and documentary theatre as a necessary stage of post-colonial consolidation. It is a form which seeks to define images, thematic patterns, metaphors and performance techniques that can express cultural realities overlooked or repudiated by the received colonial traditions (184). Filewod also notes that the faster,
presentational acting style has come to be associated with avant-garde companies in general (186). Nightwood is located at this intersection between the nationalist, alternative movement and the international avant-garde; an appropriate example is the 1980 production Glazed Tempera, a collective creation celebrating the work of Canadian artist Alex Colville in a highly imagistic, non-linear, presentational style. In its early years, Nightwood was associated with both Canadian (Sharon Riis) and non-Canadian (Charlotte Perkins Gilman) writers, Passe Muraille but also Mabou Mines. I have argued earlier that there is an accident versus intention dialectic at work in the development of Nightwood, a combination of conscious mandate and adaptation to the given circumstances which reflects both a feminist openness and the economic realities of a small, alternative theatre company. It is important to keep this dialectic in mind when trying to establish influence and lines of inheritance. Is Nightwood part of an international avant-garde, an international feminist movement, or a nationalist, even Toronto-specific, alternative theatre scene? Cynthia Zimmerman has argued that women's theatre in Canada arose out of the nationalist, rather than the feminist movement,37 but one might just as easily speak of early feminist companies like Nellie McClung (1968) and Redlight (1974) as co-existing with and even influencing the nationalist movement, or emphasize the parallel development of feminist theatre internationally with companies like England's Monstrous Regiment, for example. The proliferation and continuing diversity of theatre which defines itself as alternative will make any attempt to attribute single lines of influence very complicated.

37 "So while the feminist movement was in full swing in Great Britain, America and elsewhere and while it was generating plays by women in those places, in the early seventies in Canada it was the nationalist movement that was the proud parent" (17).
Even the definition of "alternative" has become increasingly problematized. In an article published a few years after his book, Alan Filewod questions some assumptions about the alternative theatre movement.38 Filewod argues that terms such as "alternative" and "mainstream" enabled critics to define the emerging theatre movement of the 1960s and '70s, but that the terms are no longer valid and are often used only metaphorically (201). Filewod points out that the term "mainstream" seems particularly inappropriate when describing the marginal position of all theatre in Canada and further objects to the absence of the audience in this binary opposition (202). He concludes that there are actually two models of alternative theatre, one being a political theatre that speaks for a defined constituency, and which may include a variety of institutional structures and aesthetic approaches; the other is a theatre that defines alternative in terms of its relations to the institutional structures of Canadian culture (209). When these two overlap, as they did in Toronto in the 1970s, the result is a confusion as one term ("alternative") is used to describe both. He also points out that the existence today of "fringe" and "popular theatre" companies and festivals constitutes yet another level of alternative.

I would argue that Nightwood bridges the two models of political theatre Filewod identifies. During Nightwood's early years with the Theatre Centre, it was defined as an alternative to the institutional structures of Canadian culture, marginal even in comparison to the alternate theatres like Passe Muraille. In interviews and articles, the Theatre Centre member companies defined themselves in terms of their physical space, their artistic vision, and their marginal status, on the outer edge of the mainstream/alternative opposition.

Nightwood was further specialized in being run by and producing works by women, thereby fitting into Filewod's other category: a political theatre that speaks for a defined constituency, and which may include a variety of institutional structures and aesthetic approaches. In Nightwood's case, this meant identifying themselves as both an experimental and a women's theatre company.

Different critics have attributed varying degrees of importance to the collective creation in Canadian theatre. Zimmerman, for example, states: "The collective creation method is usually a way station for writers, a stop en route to greater artistic control over their own work" (19). Filewod, on the other hand, notes that "...in the 1980s there has been a notable resurgence of agitprop among women's groups" ("Erasing" 210); the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance was formed in 1981 to promote socially active theatre, and many of its member groups are women's companies. Pol Pelletier, co-founder and artistic director of Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, a Montreal separatist collective founded in 1979, presents yet another perspective when she claims: "Collective creations are important and significant, although they are not the greatest artistic successes." 39 Today the Company of Sirens, co-founded by Cynthia Grant in 1986, would be closer to the tradition of popular theatre than Nightwood, but as long as Nightwood continues to define itself by its political and social as well as its artistic goals, it will also be a part of this theatre legacy.

3. The Collective in Feminist Theatre

The significance of the collective model for feminist theatre has two primary factors: how the collective working process embodies feminist principles of equality and how it influences the aesthetics of the work produced. I will refer to both considerations throughout the following discussion, as in many ways they are indivisible.

In its early days, Nightwood was associated with a number of other feminist collectives, such as Women's Cultural Building which organized the first Five Minute Feminist Cabaret and the Women's Perspectives series in 1983. As part of Women's Perspectives, the Anna Project formed to collectively create This is for You, Anna, a show that would identify Nightwood in the public eye for years to come. Of the Anna Project members, only Maureen White was also a Nightwood member, but two others, Baputa Rubess and Ann-Marie MacDonald, went on to extensive involvement including sitting on the Board of Directors. In addition, many of the women involved with Women's Cultural Building continued their involvement with Nightwood, from Tori Smith who was on the Partisan Gallery's Women's Collective and who later became the stage manager for This is for You, Anna, to Kate Lushington, who became Nightwood's Artistic Coordinator in 1988.

These examples illustrate how collectivity as a process serves to bring many women together who might otherwise never meet or work together; the free flow of ideas, resources, and individuals is facilitated by the spirit of collaboration and a sense of common purpose. Also suggested is the important role of the audience to a feminist collective, as a spectator may easily become a participant on future projects and the nurturance of a mutually supportive artist/audience relationship strengthens both the theatre company and the
feminist community.

As we have seen, another defining factor in collective creation is the relative unimportance of the written text. Many projects that began at the Five Minute Feminist Cabaret or Groundswell Festivals have gone on to later productions, but far more have not, and this is not necessarily seen as a problem. A performance that did not produce a written text may have been a valuable learning experience for an actor; a written text that did not go on to further development may nonetheless have resulted in a new partnership between the playwright and the director. These kinds of intangible benefits are valued highly by a feminist company, although they may not translate into box office revenue or look impressive on a grant application.

On the other hand, there are collective projects which lead to a mainstage production and a published script. These are the plays that tend to be remembered and associated with the company's name, and in these cases, the emphasis shifts from the collective process to the qualities of the "finished" product. In Nightwood's case, collective creations such as This is for You, Anna and Smoke Damage are some of the company's most recognized works: they have been published, anthologized and re-mounted by other companies; they have been the subject of scholarly articles and are included in course curricula; they have entered the current canon of Canadian theatre. On the program for the Theatre Passe Muraille run of This is for You, Anna, the Anna Project noted their inclusion in mainstream culture (inclusion on university course curricula, for example), with pride; another example of the balance between a non-traditional process and a desire for mainstream acceptance that has been a

* Play program, This is for You, Anna, Theatre Passe Muraille, January 1986.
defining factor in Nightwood's development as a company.

Susan E. Bassnett-McGuire, in her article "Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre," traces the emergence of feminist theatre collectives from the left-wing movements for social change emerging in the 1960s in Europe. Bassnett-McGuire valorizes the tendency of small groups towards a collectively administered structure, concerning themselves as a company with both financial and artistic decision-making processes and crediting the entire group with the final show. She says that a production can be "described as women's theatre by what happens off rather than on-stage." She also notes that the cabaret form is often used because it establishes a "particular kind of performer-audience relationship that combines the distance of frame with the extreme closeness of frame breaking." This form of theatre reinforces the expectations of a (feminist) audience, and works off the interaction that results. A good example is Nightwood's annual Five Minute Feminist Cabaret, which serves not only as an evening of entertainment, or even as a fundraising opportunity exclusively, but also as a kind of group celebration, a reunion and reinforcing of one's ties with a particular community, and a statement of personal solidarity. In this context, an individual's attendance at an event or performance is an opportunity for them to demonstrate their support for that work in a more overt way than is usual for a general theatre-going public. While attendance at any event implies a certain support or at least interest, an explicitly feminist event makes attendance into a political statement.

Bassnett-McGuire describes another kind of audience relationship in her discussion of Britain's Women's Theatre Group (founded in 1973), whose performances were seen as mere preludes to the group discussions with their audiences that followed. Collectives like the
Women’s Theatre Group tend to play mostly to audiences of young, middle-class women who are already "converted," and Bassnett-McGuire argues that this destroys any attempt at a Brechtian balance between empathy/involvement and detachment; instead, the aim is to establish a rapport between actor and audience that transcends theatre and extends into life. The performers in the Women’s Theatre Group fight against their own objectification by making the audience into a "support group," and the act of theatre creation into a project of establishing identity (458).

Another feminist company to which we may usefully compare Nightwood’s experience is Burning City Women. In a book called Guerilla Street Theater, the company published an account of itself, explaining that its members were originally part of Burning City Street Theater, but that, as women, they felt a great need to be with each other and to initiate a project amongst themselves. Note that their piece is not credited to any one member of the collective and they do not even list their names. They state: "The same impulse that has caused women to make theater together has been active in encouraging women to form collectives together, to put out newspapers together, write books together and make love together" (389). Clearly this is a company that sees itself as part of a women's culture. Interestingly, Nightwood could also be seen as part of this "impulse," as its genesis was in a Women’s Press collective that formed to edit Sharon Riis’ novel The True Story of Ida Johnson, inspiring Cynthia Grant to organize readings and an eventual theatrical adaptation.

The seven members of Burning City Women describe their working method as collective and improvisational: "One woman would tell us an event or series of events in her
life and the rest of us would act it out." The result was a series of six short plays, collectively entitled *What is a Woman? A Revolutionary Soap-Box Opera*, which was performed at the Festival of Underground Theatre in Toronto in 1970. The plays reflect a cultural feminist perspective and aim to identify women's common experiences and search for identity within a very "sixties" context, dealing with such issues as body image, unwed motherhood, the negative impact of a sexist university education, and the mother-daughter relationship. The plays demonstrate experimental theatre techniques, such as abstract movement and overlapping dialogue, and also show evidence of the performers' training in street theatre through their use of simple, stylized props and masks and straightforward messages.

Burning City Women raised issues regarding the methods of feminist production which John E. Bonn, the Chairman of the Workers Theatre, identified back in the 1930s in regard to all political theatre: "Shall we learn from the bourgeois theater or not? Do we need a stationary theater or an Agitprop Theater? Shall we use scenery, costumes and make-up or not?" 41 Bonn argued that political theatre workers have different aims, but that an appropriate form could still be found by studying the bourgeois theatre: "We cannot wait or look for a ready made style for our new theater; we have to develop the style of the workers theater by bringing it in conformity with its tasks and its means of expression" (421). Companies like the Women's Theatre Group, Burning City Women and Nightwood can all be seen to struggle with these same issues ~ how to create political theatre in a manner which is different from the theatre they are reacting against. In each case, the answer seems to be a combination of the collective process with a reconsideration of the actor-audience

In Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences*, we find three quotations which help to explain the terms by which feminist theatre practitioners communicate with their audience in a new way. To begin, Alan Sinfield is quoted as saying: "'Any artistic form depends upon some readiness in the receiver to co-operate with its aims and conventions'" (4). This seems particularly applicable to feminist theatre, which requires an audience which is at least willing to listen to its perspective. Next, Una Chaudhuri states: "'The description of how a play works on a spectator -- rather than what it means -- can supply the terms our criticism needs in order to eraze the gap between theory and its object'" (15). Again, this is highly relevant to the unique relationship between a feminist play and its audience, one that extends beyond subject matter and into a kind of shared project of celebrating cultural production. And finally, Daphna Ben Chaim explains: "'The combination... of unreality with recognizable human characteristics seems to be the minimum requirement for identification, and both of these conditions are variable and provide the borders within which distance operates'" (17). An intense personal relationship and a minimum awareness of fictionality is "low" distance, the aim of realism. I would say that most feminist plays aim at an intense personal relationship and a high awareness of fictionality, producing another kind of distance altogether.

Bennett uses Cynthia Grant and the Company of Sirens as an example of theatre-makers who want to work directly with the audience. Bennett suggests that the Company of Sirens completely rejects the mainstream of theatre:

Cynthia Grant made it clear that her decision to leave her post as artistic director of the successful Nightwood Theatre in Toronto was the result of a
growing dissatisfaction in working within an established institution. Her present participation in a co-operative venture, the Company of Sirens, permits a more direct and important contact between actors and audience without the constraints of the conventional theatre system (62).

Bennett then quotes Grant as saying:

Part of the move out of Nightwood had to do with making feminist theatre more accessible. Large numbers of people are put off by the idea of coming into a theatre, so we are taking theatre to them. We are very excited about playing venues as diverse as a union hall in Windsor or a cultural community centre here in Toronto (62).

Given how relatively marginal Nightwood already is within Toronto theatre, one gets an idea of just how far away from the mainstream a company like the Sirens seeks to operate.

Theatre is naturally a collaborative art form, and in some cases the notion of "collectivity" is perhaps more accurately described as a kind of heightened and consciously implemented collaboration. Banuta Rubess, who has participated in a number of Nightwood productions and sat on the Board, is known as an actor, director and playwright, and has done most of her directing in collectives and/or in situations where she is directing her own work. Rubess says that it is often a painful and difficult process for women to come into power and the collective process allows women to begin thinking of themselves in positions of authority. Rubess outlines three different collective models in which she has worked: in the first model, there is no director, but there is a splitting up of responsibility in advance, with each person taking some authority at some aspect. This model is often marked by the group sitting and speaking in a circle, and harkens back to Bassnett-McGuire's description

---

42 Banuta Rubess, speaking to Canadian Theatre and Drama class, University of Toronto, 11 March 1993.
of "closed circle" or discussion theatre. In the second model, the collective has an outside
director, but Rubess cautions that this can lead to conflict over who has final say and the
collective members may end up experiencing a sense of aesthetic powerlessness. In the third
model, the director is part of the collective and serves to translate the collective process by
inspiring the actors to be concerned for each other onstage and to understand the larger
context of what they are doing.

Rubess observes that two realizations are important for a collective to function
effectively; first, it must be acknowledged that not everyone can do everything, so people
should be encouraged to do what they are best at and also to discover other things they can
do along the way. Second, each collective member must be committed to and understand
why they are working as a collective. The first point explains why, even with the collective
creations, the programs from Nightwood productions generally list certain people as being
responsible for particular functions, while the show itself is credited to the group as a whole.
The second point signals the greatest potential danger of working collectively, which is the
question of "ownership," an issue which can be illustrated by the example of Smoke Damage.

In the summer of 1983, a collective called the Midnight Hags was initiated by Mary
Ann Lambooy, a director from Ottawa. The collective created Burning Times, which was
performed at the Theatre Centre (located at 666 King Street West) from August 17 to 28,
produced with the assistance of the Canada Council Explorations Program and the Ontario
Arts Council. The program for the production gives a good indication of how carefully
feminist collectives try to assign credit for their work: the play is said to be written by Baquta
Rubess in collaboration with Peggy Christopherson, Mary Ann Lambooy, Ann-Marie
MacDonald, Mary Marzo, Kim Renders, and Maureen White. The play was directed by Mary Ann Lambooy in collaboration with the same names as above, plus Banuta Rubess: the cast collaborated with both the writer (Rubess) and the director (Lambooy), and they also collaborated with each other. Furthermore, the project is stated to have been "conceived by" and produced by Mary Ann Lambooy, while the set and costume design is credited to "the company." Midnight Hags was considered a professional company operating within the jurisdiction of Canadian Actor's Equity Association. Kim Renders and Maureen White were also members of Nightwood Theatre, and both Ann-Marie MacDonald and Rubess had been part of previous shows, so there was considerable interconnection with Nightwood from the start.

A further program note clarifies the play's source material, which is reminiscent of Filewod's comments about collective creations aiming for internal authentication of their version of history. The program note begins: "Burning Times is based on fact and fiction, poetry and personal anecdote." It goes on to stress the authenticity of the quotations from the Malleus Maleficarum by Kramer and Sprenger (1486), mentions a 1927 edition of the book published by Montague Summers which is also quoted, and cites other books of a similar nature. The program note concludes: "All the various individual case histories presented in this piece are based on documents." The aim of this note is clearly to assure the audience that the examples of persecution and misogynist writing used in the performance are not inventions of the collective; the tone implies that the audience should find these examples as appalling as the collective does. In her interview in Fair Play, Rubess explained that

---

43 Burning Times Program, Theatre Centre, August 1983.
Lambooy invited her "...to work on a collective creation called *Burning Times*, which we were going to workshop. We did two weeks of improvisations in a search for characters for these five women in the company, gestural texts, story lines, etc. After these two weeks I took the loads and loads of notes that had accumulated and went off for about three weeks to write a first draft. We then got together and workshopped the script" (61).

According to Kim Renders, even during the *Burning Times* process there were conflicts between Mary Ann Lambooy and the rest of the company about how the collective should be defined, which had to be resolved through an appeal to Equity. Shortly after the *Burning Times* run, Cynthia Grant and Nightwood Theatre began arrangements to re-work and remount the show with Rubess and the original collective, minus Mary Ann Lambooy who had gone back to Ottawa. There was an immediate difference of opinion about the appropriateness of this action. In a letter from Mary Ann Lambooy to Cynthia Grant dated September 20, 1983, she states that, in regard to their previous discussion about Nightwood's interest in re-working and reproducing *Burning Times*, she has come to the conclusion that she does not want this done so shortly after its premiere: "Under the Copyright Act, I am the first owner of the copyright for *Burning Times* and am registered as such with the Copyright Office. Should Nightwood oppose my decision and reproduce any part of *Burning Times*, other than the sections open to public domain e.g. *Malleus Maleficarum*, such action would constitute an infringement of copyright. I do not wish to have to be put to the initiative of enforcing my rights but if I have to I certainly will." Lambooy concludes by saying she regrets the severe tone of her letter but feels she must avert a serious situation.

**Kim Renders, personal interview, 11 May 1996. The dispute was resolved in Lambooy's favour, in the sense that a proposed strike by the actors was prevented by Equity's intervention.**
Cynthia Grant's response, dated September 30, 1983 is that all contractual arrangements for the new play, which is being called *Smoke Damage*, have been made with Babuta Rubess "whom we understand to be the principal playwright." If, after seeing the play, Lambooy still has a question about the ownership, Nightwood will be willing to discuss it. The implication is that if Lambooy has a conflict, it is with Rubess and not Nightwood, which does not recognize the situation as a problem. Rubess has said that: "*Smoke Damage* marked the first time I began to think of myself as a real writer." (Fair Play 62), and certainly she was treated that way by Nightwood.

*Smoke Damage* was produced by Nightwood at St. Paul’s Square, September 30 to October 23, 1983. The program stated that it was written by Rubess in collaboration with the cast: Peggy Christopherson, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Mary Marzo, Kim Renders, and Maureen White. The "direction consultants" were Rubess and Grant. The program used the same "note of interest" regarding the source material as was used for *Burning Times*, and both the program and the press release acknowledged that the current play was developed from *Burning Times* and mention Lambooy's involvement with that project. The program also stressed that the play was developed through a collective process. In 1985, when *Smoke Damage* was published by Playwrights Union of Canada, the same credits and information were used again.

The play demonstrates many of the same qualities as *This is for You, Anna*, which Rubess, MacDonald and White all worked on as well. There is a use of repetitive actions, such as sweeping, washing, and the opening and closing of doors; the play makes use of emblematic props such as a green cloth, a bouquet of flowers, and dripping water; there are
symbolic costumes, such as men's suit jackets as metonyms for Kramer and Sprenger, the figures of male authority; there are wild changes in tone from comedy to horror and changes in style from realism to absurdism to musical theatre; different time periods -- medieval, Renaissance, contemporary -- are interwoven, as well as dream sequences; there is a layering of scenes with images, soundtrack, and simultaneous action, building to an accumulative effect; and finally, there are scenes which relate the persecution of witches to the contemporary persecution of women, as in for example the character of Madeleine, the abused wife.

Although Smoke Damage did not do well at the box office, it received good reviews and, as noted, was eventually published. In response to Ray Conlogue's October 5 review in the Globe and Mail, a letter to the editor was published on October 26. The letter, signed by Roger Ware "and six others," was headed "Reassessment of credit." The letter writers were disturbed that Mary Ann Lambooy had not been mentioned in the review; that she had "conceived of the theme of the play, assembled the cast, hired the writer and directed the development of the play largely into its current form," and that the review had incorrectly attributed these functions to Cynthia Grant. Grant responded in another letter to the editor, saying that Conlogue's review was "positive and well-considered" and that if there was any re-assessment to be done "it would be in acknowledging the collective input of the company toward the creation of the script as well as the staging of Smoke Damage." Grant acknowledged that the same writer and cast worked on both shows and that both were collective creations, so "it is natural that a stylistic and textual progression consistent with the intentions of the original workshop production would be apparent in the further
development of *Burning Times* into *Smoke Damage.*" Grant also pointed out that the *Smoke Damage* program credited Lambooy for her work on *Burning Times* but that, since it was a collective work, it would be inaccurate to say she "largely directed the show into its current form," or to attribute a final product to any one guiding hand.

At this point, the dispute became a legal matter, as both sides engaged legal counsel and sought to come to some agreement over matters of royalty and further production. Nightwood's documentation included their contract with Banuta Rubess and her copyright for *Burning Times*, which was issued prior to Lambooy's. The company's correspondence to Lambooy (November 8, 1983), summarized Nightwood's handling of the matter: they had credited *Burning Times* in the press release, and on the program they had credited *Burning Times* and Lambooy's role as "initiator and producer" of that show. Grant also reiterated that Nightwood's contract for *Smoke Damage* was with Rubess, the principal author, and it is her responsibility if there was any copyright infringement. Copyright for *Burning Times* "was issued to Rubess on September 6, 1983, and *Smoke Damage* is in the process of being issued a separate copyright." The tone of this letter is conciliatory and a copy was sent to the Ontario Arts Council.

The response from Lambooy comes on November 11. In this letter, she refers to a conversation she had with Grant on November 9, in which Grant made a verbal offer of $400 "as royalties for Nightwood Theatre's production of *Smoke Damage.*" This was followed by a formal offer in which terms were set:

1. Nightwood agrees to pay Lambooy $400 "in settlement of any claim she may have at this time or in the future for
breach of copyright or any other reason;  
2. Lambooy waives claims against Nightwood concerning its production of *Smoke Damage*;  
3. Nightwood will continue to acknowledge Lambooy as "initiator and producer" of *Burning Times*;  
4. Both parties acknowledge Bağuta Rubess as the principal author of both *Burning Times* and *Smoke Damage*, in collaboration with the companies in each case.

The letter concludes by asking Lambooy to sign a copy of it and return it, upon which they will forward her a cheque.

Lambooy responded on December 2, 1983 by saying that she refused to sign the letter and accept the conditions because: she will not give up copyright for *Burning Times* in regard to future productions (it is not clear from the correspondence that this was ever asked of her); and she will not acknowledge a principal author of *Burning Times*. Lambooy wants the Nightwood letter to be amended so that the $400 represents a royalty fee and settlement for the recent production of *Smoke Damage*.

The last piece of correspondence on this matter, dated December of 1983, came for the first time from the *Smoke Damage* collective, Peggy Christopherson, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Mary Marzo, Kim Renders, Bağuta Rubess, and Maureen White, and was addressed to Lambooy as a kind of position statement and final offer. They again offered a settlement of $400 for her to waive all present and future actions against them for the September/October 1983 production of *Smoke Damage*. For future productions, they worked
out a distribution of royalty payments ("We presume that you know that there were losses on the Nightwood production and no royalty payments"). The agreement was that Rubess gets all revenue up to $500 as playwright's royalties and any amount above that goes: 51% to Rubess, 45% to the Smoke Damage collective, and 4% to Lambooy. On the second page there was an interesting paragraph which questioned Lambooy's status as the producer of the original production. The collective thought that the producer was the society "Midnight Hags," for which Ann-Marie MacDonald had served as official secretary, and of which they were all members. They were under the impression that it had been this society (that is, their collective group) which had received the funding grant and held the bank account and were now wondering if it was in fact some other legal entity of which they were not aware? In any case, they concluded that they were willing to credit either Lambooy or Midnight Hags as the producer, whichever she would prefer. The implication is, I think, that they are questioning Lambooy's claim to having been the producer or having had as much importance to the original production as she claims.

This unfortunate incident illustrates that collectives sometimes work better in theory than in practice. Part of the problem may be inherent in the process of collective creation itself, in that "job descriptions" may be largely self-defined and therefore easily subject to dispute. Individuals who put a lot of time and effort into a project are not always able to give up a sense of personal "ownership" of that work for the greater good of the company, and there are many who argue that they should not have to. But the issues can be further complicated when the collective members are assumed to share the same feminist principles; unspoken assumptions can be made that everyone is more in agreement than they really are,
and individuals can be afraid of voicing dissenting views for fear of looking "not feminist enough." On the other hand, the majority of the women in this collective do seem to have worked well within the model. Reviews of *Smoke Damage* spoke about the obvious energy and commitment to the material that the actors displayed, and the end result was one of Nightwood's most successful plays. Apparently, collective creation may involve a discrepancy between process and product; in some cases, as we saw in the earlier discussion of Groundswell, a beneficial feminist process does not necessarily result in a concrete product, while in the case of *Smoke Damage*, an extremely troubled feminist process still resulted in a valuable feminist play.

We will conclude our discussion with the example of Nightwood's final collective creation, *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita*, co-produced in 1987 with the Humbert Humbert Project. The creation started out with great promise, receiving ad hoc funding from the Canada Council as one of only seven applications out of 60 to receive grants, and winning special funds from the Ontario Arts Council multidisciplinary jury and $5,000 from the Woodlawn Foundation for development of its visual component. The piece was inspired by a book of photographs entitled *Re-Visions* by New York artist Marcia Resnick, published by Coach House Press in 1978 and dedicated to Humbert Humbert. Images and text in the book depict "the life of a bad girl from 10 to 19"; the play takes her further, to the age of 31.

In their project application, the collective wrote: "From the very start the project has been an exchange of skills -- [Louise] Garfield's studies in movement have offset White and Rubess' improvisation games and Thompson's insights in writing techniques and semiotics. Since the scenario is developed collectively, the initial process constituted a learning process
in and of itself." In her interview in Fair Play, Rubess described an incident in the creation of the piece which illustrates the collaborative method:

The very funny and erotic bread image in Lolita . . . evolved in a curious way. It was inspired first by a picture in Marcia Resnick's Re-Visions . . . of a girl crushing a loaf of white bread between her thighs with a caption reading something like, 'She learned the facts of life from a friend during a trip to a bread factory.' The choreographer, Louise Garfield, asked Maureen White to do a movement study with the bread and without her pants, and she did, bless her. The movement study was very abstract, though, so we decided we would not use it. We also didn't like the nudity. Yet, the picture stayed with me and when we were trying to resolve a different section of the work, I took the bread and said, 'Look at this,' and I began playing with it in a way that was inspired by watching Maureen . . . it was a most successful image (72).

As part of the development process, a twenty-minute, multimedia version of the project was presented at Groundswell (March 1986). In their subsequent application for funding, images from this version are described in detail: four slide projectors allowed images, text and action to integrate; as a male voice crooned "You're leaving me baby," a slide of a hand holding a candy cigarette swooped and slid across the entire space of the theatre; selections of text were projected on a sleeping figure and a closing door. The slides were not intended to function merely as an addition to the theatrical scenery but as active agents of the performance. In the final version, the multimedia component was represented by a five-minute film created by director Peter Mettler. Lolita appeared on film to address the characters onstage, as the past interacting with the present. The onstage characters, stereotypical "bad girls," were former students in an acting class taught by Lolita, reunited at her death to explore her legacy. The Last Will and Testament of Lolita ran from June 2 to 21, 1987 in association with Theatre Passe
Muraille. Subtitled "A vile pink comedy," the play was advertised with the lines: "Four bad girls steal, revise and reconstruct the Lolita Myth," and "created and performed by the strange and wild feminist theatre collective of Louise Garfield, Bajuta Rubess, Peggy Thompson, and Maureen White," with Jim Warren as the Sandman and Jackie Burroughs on film as Miss Lolita.

Despite its promising beginnings, Lolita was not well-received and even its creators came to regard it as a failure. Rubess commented:

The only collective creation that I've worked on that really didn't achieve its potential was The Last Will and Testament of Lolita, a work I frequently forget is a part of my career. The circumstances surrounding it weren't the most favourable. I think we were collectively under an emotional dark cloud. When I watch the videotape of the production, I feel quite regretful, because it's so clear where the piece is strong and where it suddenly comes apart. We were trying to wed madcap humour with strong image work, and thereby alienated some part of the audience most of the time. Either they just wanted to laugh, or they just wanted to be mesmerized. I do want to say that there was a substantial part of the audience which accepted and appreciated the thing as a whole. But we knew we could have done better. It was a heartache (61).

In the interview, Rubess uses Lolita as an example of what she considers to be a gender bias amongst theatre reviewers: "What I resent about much male criticism of writing by women is the grudging tone. For example, Lolita got 'terrible with flashes of brilliance,' which makes no sense to me. It should have read 'Brilliant with some major flaws.' In general, our critics are terrible. Most aren't at all versed in theatre language and they look for failure. Their focus is on why things fail and not why they succeed." She is most likely referring to the review by Christopher Hume in which he wrote: "Despite occasional flashes of brilliance, the play
doesn't hold together." *5 The reviewers in general had difficulty critiquing a play with no one writer or director; they frequently commented that a director was needed to "whip Lolita into shape" and give the play focus and cohesion. It is impossible to know, in retrospect, if Lolita would have been a "better" show if it had not been done collectively -- certainly, it would have been a different show. It is the combined efforts and enthusiasms (or lack thereof) which spark the creative process in a collective; individual moments of genius may not add up to an overall production, but the effort and its multifaceted result may convey something about the process and the feminism of its participants.

Rubess has said that it was about this time when she lost interest in writing about women's issues,*6 and her comments to the media about Lolita reflect a fear of being "ghettoized." As we have seen, one of the motivating factors behind the decision to work collectively is the desire to communicate with the audience in a new way. It appears that perhaps the Humbert Humbert Project was unsure of its audience, and therefore the collective failed to communicate the vision of its creators.

In our discussion of Canada's collective creation tradition, the popularity of collectivity amongst feminist groups, and its continuing usage in the sphere of popular theatre, the value of collective creation has been seen to lie in both the process and the product. How this balance works itself out, however, can take different turns, and this element of risk seems appropriate to theatre-makers aiming to define themselves as alternative.


Chapter Four: Postmodernism, Feminism, and Nightwood Theatre

To this point we have explored some of the central issues of feminist theory as they pertain to the creation of feminist theatre, and more specifically, to the history of Nightwood Theatre. We have looked at the differences between feminist theory of the cultural, material, and liberal schools and have explored in some detail the on-going debate between cultural and materialist feminism regarding the female subject. We have also examined the question of form as it relates to the creation of feminist theatre and have asked if certain modes of production, namely the collective creation model, are more appropriate to feminist practitioners. In this final chapter, we will attempt to place feminist theatre within the context of postmodern theory in order to determine if there can be such a thing as postmodern feminist theatre.

While the previous chapters have focused on the practical implications of theory -- that is, how can we use theoretical concepts to probe what has taken place in feminist theatre practice -- this chapter turns to look more closely at contemporary theory and asks if theatre practice may be used as a means to elucidate a theoretical dilemma. It seems to me that the question of whether or not feminism (and feminist theatre) can be postmodern is not merely a matter of academic speculation, but speaks to some of the challenges feminism and its cultural expression encounter with a contemporary audience. One manifestation of this challenge is the term "post-feminist" to suggest a philosophy which has benefited from the feminist movement but moved beyond it. This is obviously a problematic term in popular
usage, since it can be read as implying that all battles have been won, but since there is a tendency amongst feminists to qualify their use of the label, perhaps "post-feminist" is a logical outcome of such hesitation. Part of this discomfort with a monolithic feminism is, I will argue, the product of some of the basic assumptions of postmodernism and its radical influence on changing aesthetic and political temperaments since the resurgence of feminism in the sixties and seventies.

As we shall see, feminism has also influenced postmodernism, or at least its image. In her book The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues that feminism has had a big impact on postmodernism, in that it has affected our understanding of aesthetic and political interactions at the level of representation: feminism has influenced the way we understand the political to impact on the private and the public, changing the way we think about culture, knowledge, and art (19-20). It is at the level of representation that feminism and postmodernism are most often conflated, especially when defining their cultural expression in art forms like theatre; the same characteristics are used to describe both feminist and postmodern theatre because both are using techniques which de-naturalize and question the dominant ideology.

1 Judith Butler, for example, discusses in detail the need to question the construction of feminism as a stable category (see my discussion later in this chapter). Butler says this re-thinking is necessary because, in conforming to the requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism exposes itself to charges of misrepresentation: so many women will reject it or its definition will become fragmented (112).

Another example is the collection of essays in Language in her Eye; in each of these pieces, contemporary Canadian women writers struggle to find themselves within their definitions of feminism.

Finally, I am basing this observation on my interviews with the women who have run Nightwood, particularly the women who are currently in charge.
While postmodernism is often criticized for its lack of a political agenda, Hutcheon argues that the existence of a critique is part of the very definition of postmodernism. She situates it as part of the "unfinished project of the 1960s" because it promotes a distrust of "ideologies of power and the power of ideologies" (10). On the other hand, postmodernism is also less oppositional and idealistic than earlier movements and must acknowledge its complicity with the values it comments upon; postmodern art, for example, may criticize and parody references to popular culture, even as it depends on those references for its own substance and simultaneously celebrates them on some level. According to Hutcheon, this dual nature, containing both critique and complicity, defines postmodernism, although one is always reminded that postmodernism is a shifting and multifaceted condition, rather than something definite and monolithic.

Hutcheon acknowledges that postmodernism remains complicitous with economic capitalism and liberal humanism, and that postmodern theorists are deeply and knowingly implicated in the centre they attempt to subvert. Feminism has resisted postmodernism's deconstructing and undermining impulse because feminism has traditionally emphasized a more productive approach, constructing and providing support for new models, for example. The idea of complicity with the dominant culture does not fit well in a feminist agenda. While postmodernism has no theory of positive action on a social level, all feminisms do (22). For example, Hutcheon sees a level of difference between feminism and postmodernism in the art they produce. If both feminism and postmodernism always have a "bottom line," (for feminism the idea of equality and justice, for postmodernism the co-existence of complicity and critique) I think Hutcheon is suggesting that it is always more evident in feminist art.
However, I would argue that postmodernism and feminism become more alike as time goes on. Just as postmodernism continues the project of the 1960s without the same idealism and oppositional understanding that characterized those earlier movements (us versus them), so too does feminism move on from its re-birth in the sixties with ever more complexity and fragmentation. Complicity is not full affirmation or adherence, and theorists like Shannon Bell and Janelle Reinelt have embraced the acknowledgment of complicity as a move toward opening feminism to its own "others." Bell argues that the postmodern influence, by acknowledging complicity and the incorporation of parts of the dominant discourse, actually "improves" feminism by allowing it to explain the ideological loopholes in patriarchy, those occasions when patriarchy enables its own subversion. It is not simply a matter of "knowing one's enemy," but rather using one's enemy against itself. De Lauretis identifies the basis for feminism's expansion in the contemporary focus on gender rather than sex, a distinction we will return to later in this chapter, and one which returns us to the subject position in feminist theory. The performance of gender suggests an awareness of the dominant culture not required by a "natural" state of sexual difference, and further suggests the possibility of parody as a representational strategy; we will return to the uses of parody in postmodern theatre with a discussion of Nightwood's Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) later in this chapter.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to present an in-depth examination of the already heavily theorized field of postmodernism. Instead, I will focus on the work of several theorists who have examined the relationship between feminism and postmodernism and have reached somewhat different conclusions, and will also look at examples of Nightwood productions
to explore the ways in which they are and are not postmodern, thus allowing the examples to test the hypotheses of the theorists.

1. Postmodern Feminism

In addition to the original categories of material, cultural, and liberal feminism, Sue-Ellen Case, for example, will further complicate their differences by using terms like "psychoanalytic essentialism" and "materialist poststructuralism" (Performing Feminisms 12). While it would be difficult to chart a strictly linear development in feminist thought, there has been obvious diversification in opinion around many issues and a subsequent proliferation in terminology and "types" of feminism. Shannon Bell, for example, charts a progression in feminist thought on the topic of prostitution which could be considered a model for feminism generally. In the 1970s, feminism produced three ideological positions: liberal, socialist/materialist and radical/cultural. In reference to her study of prostitution, Bell explains: "All three feminisms are modernist in the sense that the prostitute is fit into a theorized totality of feminist space; there is no space for the prostitute herself as speaking subject, particularly if her speech might contradict the feminist construction of her body. With the entrance of postmodern feminism, the debate changed radically in the late 1980s" (73). Bell continues:

Postmodern feminism's most significant accomplishment has been to open space for the others of liberal, socialist and radical feminism to speak and theorize their own subject positions. Postmodern feminism has shown that the three dominant feminisms can oppress women of difference through the appropriation or occlusion of their spaces and the silencing of their voices. Postmodern feminism has also shown that it is impossible to keep the
ideological positions of different feminisms clear-cut and separate: feminisms overlap and feminisms incorporate parts of the dominant discourse they critique (Bell 73, my emphasis).

It appears that one of the factors that makes her feminism "postmodern" is, for Bell, the recognition that there has been a feminist orthodoxy which is now being opened up by those it had previously "othered." Further, Bell addresses the possibility that feminism may incorporate parts of the dominant discourse it critiques without decreasing its own efficacy, that in fact, this complicity has always existed and serves to explain the paradoxical relationship between repression and resistance. Following this line of reasoning, we could argue that postmodern feminism is an inevitable development in the complication of feminism as a movement and a necessary challenge to the totalizing tendencies of the other feminisms. The idea of complicity is a crucial concept in the debate over whether there can be a postmodern feminism; as we shall see, while Bell finds it an easy idea to assimilate, other theorists such as Lois McNay find it much more problematic.

Like Shannon Bell, Toril Moi has discussed the idea that a feminist critique might incorporate part of the dominant discourse: "Feminists must be able to account for the paradoxically productive aspects of patriarchal ideology (the moments in which the ideology backfires on itself, as it were) as well as for its obvious oppressive implications if they are to answer the tricky question of how it is that some women manage to counter patriarchal strategies despite the odds stacked against them" (64). Her comments imply that feminist critics must consider the "historical development" of patriarchy and feminism as an inter-related system of power relations that perpetuates repression, but also makes rebellion inevitable. Every instance of the dominant ideology attempting to establish and enforce
gender can be understood in an endless variety of contexts, allowing for both regulatory and subversive interpretations. As we have seen, it is just this "endless variety" that some feminists find appealing, and others find disturbing, about postmodernism -- surely some version must be more "true," more feminist, than others.

Lois McNay summarizes the postmodern feminist vision as theoretical but with a historical stress, non-universalist (comparative rather than universalizing), and dispensing with the idea of a subject of history. She writes: "Unitary notions of woman and feminine identity would be replaced with more complex and pluralistic constructions of social identity" (121). McNay finds a disturbing contradiction between a non-universalist postmodern feminism that rejects grand narratives, and the more traditional feminist analysis of sexual inequality which necessarily requires large narratives about changes in social organization. She argues that postmodern microanalysis is not adequate for analyzing the social situation of women and that clearly not all the assumptions of feminism can be as open to refutation as she feels postmodernism demands (122).

A central tenet of postmodernism is that it offers no privileged, unproblematic position from which to speak, that it rejects all grand narratives and totalizations. From this point of view, feminism's weakness is that, while it regards patriarchal discourses as fictions, it proceeds as if its belief in the oppression of women is closer to the truth. Both are ideological stands, but Hutcheon counters that feminism is in the stronger position because, while it might use postmodern techniques, it never suffers postmodernism's confusion. Because it does have a position and a "truth," feminism can offer ways to understand aesthetic and social practices in the production of and in relation to gender relations (152).
As important as it is to find the places where feminism and postmodernism meet, it is also important to understand the objections of those who argue against such a meeting. Their objections revolve around the idea of truth and what feminists can claim as the basic requirements for social change. In the process of identifying or justifying those "basic requirements," the debate leads back to the problem of essentialism, as feminists and postmodernists work towards an understanding of the body, sex, and gender, which does not rely on essentialized notions of identity.

Lois McNay, in her book *Foucault and Feminism*, addresses many of the same issues as Hutcheon, but from a different perspective. For McNay, the central problem with the feminist use of postmodernism is "the extent to which a philosophical form of critique that rejects any type of certainty or value judgement conflicts with, or even undermines, feminist politics whose principal aim of overcoming the subordination of women necessarily rests on certain basic value judgements and truth claims" (2). McNay says that in the final analysis, postmodern feminism is:

...unviable... because at some basic level, feminist critique necessarily rests on normative judgements about what constitutes legitimate and non-legitimate forms of action in relation to the political goal of overcoming the subordination of women. Feminists cannot afford to sacrifice such validity judgements for the more relativist position of performative or local justification espoused by postmodern theorists (117).

While feminist theorists like Bell are optimistic, and Hutcheon allows for some compromise, McNay is opposed to the possibility of a convergence between feminism and postmodernism; for her, postmodern deconstruction of categories such as subjectivity and agency denies women the chance of articulating and analyzing their experiences, just as they are beginning
to realize the possibility of overcoming their marginalization. This objection brings to mind the arguments about feminist theatre and realism we addressed in Chapter Two: no matter how suspect realism may be as a form, it is difficult for those who are only now getting an opportunity to put their own narratives onstage to disavow it as a tool. While McNay agrees feminism needs to be able to deal with difference in a non-essentializing way, she argues that feminism is already coming to terms with these issues because of criticism from women of colour and Third World women, and therefore does not need further fragmentation (7). I would certainly agree that feminism needs to confront difference within its discourse, and that this has in fact been an on-going objective of feminist theorists, including the use of categories such as the ones I have employed throughout this thesis: to acknowledge the differences between liberal and radical feminism, for example, is to engage in this process, which is perhaps inherent to feminism. But is there a point at which feminism becomes too fragmented, as McNay suggests?

Those feminists who object to essentialism do so because its politics remain in the realm of the aesthetic and psychosexual. As Judith Butler points out, many women simply do not identify with a notion of femininity based on an aestheticized and non-phallic version of the body, which does not address social oppression and associated issues:

Although oppression of women is based on the appropriation of their bodies by patriarchy, it does not follow, therefore, that oppression derives from the body or sex, or that the notion of a natural sexual difference can be used to explain gender inequalities. Rather, the 'natural' body must be understood as a device central to the legitimation of certain strategies of oppression (20-21). McNay agrees that: "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to derive from the natural body in any one way" (22). She argues
however, that it is still, in our present society, necessary for feminists to analyze the process through which the female body is transformed into a feminine one -- the female body and feminine gender are not radically discontinuous as the sex/gender distinction implies (23). As I have argued earlier, whether we believe the sex difference is natural or constructed, we still experience ourselves in the world as a part of a gender, even as an unsuccessful part. Gender is constitutive of identity but never determines it completely (McNay 23). Gender is not the only way we experience our identity, and may not be the main way, contrary to what radical feminists believe: age, class, race, nationality, language, sexuality, profession, disability, even body type, may be more relevant to the construction of identity, especially in certain circumstances. Internalization of representations of the female body by women is fundamental to the formation of feminine identity, but the process is not straightforward and unproblematic: most women do not slip into their roles easily, if at all (23). I would argue that this tends to support both the theory of gender as a construct and also the uneasy sense that a simple equation of gender with identity is incomplete.

In his later work, Foucault developed what he called technologies of subjectification -- practices and techniques through which individuals actively fashion their own identities. McNay explains that this is not a realization of an individual's innate potential because practices are always determined by the social context (4). This relates to the work of de Lauretis and Butler, and their argument that gender can be created as an on-going process that we work at on a local, subjective level: "Ethics of the self is not a cult of authenticity, but rather an endless task of self-production" (McNay 98).

Foucault objects to the modern tendency to individualization, which for him is
normalization: attaching an individual to an identity which she must have and others must recognize. Identity is not a matter of finding oneself but of inventing oneself, interrogating the limits of subjectivity and boundaries of identity so the possibility of transgressing them and creating new types of subjective experience are opened up (McNay 89). According to Foucault, a radical personal politics, developed through self-criticism and investigation into the events that have led us to constitute and recognize ourselves as subjects, is necessary to the success of any kind of political change at the more general level of ordering social relations. This is not a one-way transformation: the move from the personal to the political also brings issues of "private" identity into politicized space. In contrast, the feminine ethics of an essentialist understanding only goes one way, from good individual feminine values to the bad political realm of patriarchy, which would seem to contradict or at least problematize the slogan "the personal is political," and which certainly contradicts the idea of power relations working both ways (McNay 100).

How can Foucault's work challenge feminists to think up an ethics which does not rest on a fixed or naturalized notion of "woman," on an essential link between feminine desire and its representation? As we saw earlier, Butler believes a re-thinking is necessary because, by conforming to the requirement of representational politics that feminism articulate a stable subject, feminism exposes itself to charges of misrepresentation: so many women will reject that stable subject as not appropriate to themselves, or will continue to re-define it to the point of fragmentation (112), as we see, perhaps, with the use of the term "post-feminist." For Butler, identity is an effect, meaning it is neither fully determined nor arbitrary and artificial. The body forms the surface of gender identity as gender is a repeated stylization of
the body -- a set of repeated acts within a regulatory frame that eventually produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being.

What becomes apparent in this discussion is that there are two very different perspectives on feminism being advocated. Lois McNay is concerned that postmodernism's rejection of totalization and metanarratives is incompatible with feminism's social analysis of inequality, that feminism must be able to rely on a base of certain truth claims and ideals of normative behaviour. She allows that these need not proceed from an essentialist, dualistic understanding of sex, but is not prepared to completely unhinge sex from gender, or other social categories (race and so on) from identity. Foucault and Butler, on the other hand, see identity as so radically personal that only through an approach which sees identity as constructed on an on-going basis can we then come to re-order social relations in a less oppressive fashion. One approach seeks to define a different set of normalizing behaviours based on gender equality, while the other wants to do away with normalizing behaviours and notions of fixed gender altogether. One wants to define feminism in terms of certain shared beliefs about identity politics, while the other believes identity is so personal that any definition of feminism will exclude too many. This is perhaps a too schematized and oppositional model for the opinions being expressed here, but it does serve as a very interesting expression of the spectrum of possibility under consideration within this field of inquiry. We will turn now to look more closely at the question of gender performance as it relates to a postmodern understanding of identity that necessarily problematizes more traditional feminist analyses, and also as it relates to feminist theatre.
2. Postmodernism and Feminist Theatre

Feminist theatre is marginalized by its content and by the relatively small audience it can hope to reach, but often also by its experimentation with form. Many of the characteristics claimed by feminist theatre are held in common with other theatres that define themselves as radical in some way. In an article entitled "Contemporary Women's Voices in French Theatre," Judith Graves Miller points out that some of the principles commonly attributed to feminist theatre were also shared by the experimental theatre of the 1960s, which was in turn heavily influenced by theorists like Artaud, who also prized metamorphosis and transmutation, associative principles of connection, and organically evolving spaces (19). It is not surprising that feminist theatre would share many of the qualities of the larger experimental theatre movement of the 1960s since, as we saw in Chapter Three, it was born out of and alongside and in the forefront of that wave of experimentation and enthusiasm. Graves Miller points out that postmodern theatre also claims multiple discourses, the absence of linear plotting, the inscription of silence onstage, and the impossibility of mastering discourse. The difference between the postmodern artist and the artist of the feminist experimental theatre lies in their engagement with what they believe to be "true": postmodernism plays with the possibility of meaning, while feminist theatre gropes towards meaning (19).

This contradiction is taken up by Janelle Reinelt in her article "Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance." She writes that, after the initial multiplication and proliferation of female characters onstage in the late sixties and early seventies, women became increasingly suspicious about the social construction of gender: "Women's experience is
recognized as not 'natural,' not unmediated, not able to be represented at all apart from the sign systems of the prevailing hegemony" (49). In response to this impasse, theorists such as Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis argue that representation must acknowledge the specific cultural and historical situation of the individual woman and must be constructed through practising "law-expanding behaviours" (Technologies of Gender 18). Here we have a vision of what a postmodern feminist theatre might look like: it is very much a work in progress, one which takes place on a small, subjective scale rather than as part of any grand, totalizing narratives or generalizations about gendered experience. It is the antithesis of cultural feminist theatre, which seeks to evoke the commonality of women through appeals to nature and the body. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life, to point out that what we unthinkingly experience as natural is in fact cultural, made by us, not given to us (2). We can immediately see how this relates to the idea of gender as a construction rather than a natural phenomenon. Postmodern feminism could therefore be said to be about particularity and context, about constructing one's own gender through the on-going, never finished process of daily invention, depending on the endless variety of one's circumstances.

As we have seen, theorists like Shannon Bell and Lois McNay have found it useful to incorporate some of the ideas of Michel Foucault into their considerations of postmodern feminism. One of Foucault's most important concepts is the idea that there are no relations of power without resistances, that repression produces its own resistance. Feminist historians have attempted to show how, within the oppressive constraints that operate around ideas such as femininity, there are contradictions and instabilities which women have used as a
means to undermine the system; the goal is a postmodern theory of gender relations which can account, not only for patriarchy's repressions, but also its failures to repress. It is necessary to look at the mechanisms of domination but also the "microphysics" of power. An insistence on women as passive victims of male oppression oversimplifies the complexities of women's subordination by placing too much stress on the universal nature of oppression and on an undifferentiated enemy defined only as patriarchy. When there is a lack of any differentiated analysis of women's experience, it becomes devalued or obscured and there is no recognition that gender is not the only form of or determining influence on the oppression in women's lives: "Undoubtedly, there are structures of domination, in particular constructions of gender, which ensure the overall subordinate position of women in society. However, in their daily lives many women do not experience themselves as oppressed and, indeed, they exercise an amount of power and influence over other individuals. To be a female social subject is not always to be a woman" (McNay 67). The distinctions between and among women of different economic strata are particularly applicable here. Women are engendered over a vast number of subject positions; as we have seen, there is a discrepancy or slippage between Woman as representation and women as historical beings and subjects.²

This is particularly interesting in relation to Peggy Phelan's comments regarding representation, which she says always follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends, and it is never totalizing. For Phelan, this "excess" meaning makes multiple and

² This relates to the process that saw an earlier concern with how women were portrayed onstage or in literature supplemented by a more fundamental concern with whether or not women can be represented at all. Questions raised by Laura Mulvey, for example, about realist narrative as inherently sadistic and the male gaze making any imaging of women problematic, initiated much feminist discussion around the construction of a subjective self.
resistant readings possible: "Precisely because of representation's supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change" (2). My idea here is that there is a correlation between a vision of power relations which sees repression producing its own subversions and a vision of theatre which sees representation as producing its own excess meanings, its multiple resistant readings. This is nicely summed up by the Nightwood production of Goodnight Desdemona, which uses a text (Othello) in which traditional power relations result in death for the female character, and shows how the internal contradictions of that text produce its own undermining protest in the viewer (we feel, for example, how preventable and unfair Desdemona's death is). As a reading of that text, Goodnight Desdemona foregrounds the act of feminist resistance (its plotline revolves around a female academic choosing to re-investigate the authority of the text). As theatre, it uses the undermining of its own theatrical tradition and conventions to produce its comic effect and make its feminist meaning. Perhaps we can argue that, because of the "excess" of representation, theatre as an art form lends itself easily to postmodernism, with its multiple contexts and impulse against totalization. In this case, we find yet another connection between postmodernism and feminist theatre, through the contemporary understanding of representation and ideology, both in the realm of theory and in popular culture. To do the "work" of gender construction onstage is the basis of postmodern feminist performance.

The self-reflexive, parodic art of postmodernism underlines the realization that all cultural forms of representation in high art or mass media are ideologically grounded, that they cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations. This, in turn, goes against
the view that postmodernism is disqualified from political involvement because of complicity, its narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories, and its seemingly limited accessibility to those who recognize the source of the parodic appropriation and the theory behind it. Hutcheon says that this criticism is naive: "Postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations -- its images and stories -- are anything but neutral, however aestheticized they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity" (3).

To explain how postmodernism is political, Hutcheon introduces Barthes' notion of the "doxa," meaning public opinion and consensus, the Voice of Nature. Postmodernism works to "de-doxify" our cultural representations and their political import. The de-doxifying impulse of postmodern art means that it contains an inherent critique, but one that is bound up with its own complicity with power and domination, and one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it wants to analyze and maybe even undermine. The ambiguities of this position are translated into both the form and content of postmodern art, which self-consciously participates in and challenges ideology at the same time (Hutcheon 4).

De-doxifying is inherently a part of the feminist agenda: to reply to binary oppositions, feminism points out that cultural production takes place within a social system and its values. In contrast to the impulse towards totalization, postmodern writing does not hide the act of narrativization, and feminist art always seeks to speak from and validate the experience of those left out of grand narratives:

... it is also not accidental that feminist theory's recent self-positioning both inside and outside dominant ideologies, using representation both to reveal misrepresentation and to offer new possibilities, coincides with the (admittedly
more) complicitous critique of postmodernism. Both try to avoid the bad faith of believing they can stand outside ideology, but both want to reclaim their right to contest the power of the dominant one, even from a compromised position (23).

Hutcheon wants to believe that, while postmodernism may not do anything itself in the way of social change, it at least shows what needs doing and suggests what can be done (or undone). I would argue that feminist theatre goes further in undermining the dominant system regardless of subject, since the act of producing the work is in itself contributing to social change.

Postmodernism takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement, rather like putting inverted commas around what one says: the effect is to highlight and subvert in a knowing and ironic way: "Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity" (Hutcheon 1). This seems immediately applicable to theatre, with its long tradition of letting the audience in on the irony of an on-stage situation and communicating ulterior motives through a variety of theatrical devices, such as the soliloquy. It also suggests the ironic tone of some feminist performance, where the actors' distance from their gendered roles is communicated to the audience as part of the comic effect.³

³ This is discussed in detail by Jill Dolan and others in their treatment of performances by Split Britches (see several of the articles in Acting Out: Feminist Performances). The fact that the audience knows the two performers personally and knows the butch and femme roles they take within their own relationship, allows the performers to play against those roles for comic effect.

The same phenomenon could be described in the performances created by Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan. Part of the humour in watching Dempsey deliver her monologues in the exaggerated costumes of beauty pageant contestants and 1950s housewives is the spectators' familiarity with Dempsey as a feminist activist-- she is not simply making fun of the characters she is playing, but using them in her on-going commentary.
Hutcheon's ideas about postmodern art are also particularly applicable to theatre. She says that art is traditionally grounded on foundations that are expressive (artist-oriented), mimetic (world-imitative) or formalist (art as object), but the impact of feminist, gay, Marxist, black, postcolonial and poststructuralist theory has led to a merger of concerns and a new focus: the investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning. Culture is seen as the effect of representations, not their source (6). Art forms self-consciously foreground an awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of cultural knowledge and do so by raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation: "At this conjuncture, a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past" (7). Again, the specific nature of theatre seems especially relevant here: the postmodern actor (or the feminist actor or gay actor, etc.) is less concerned with becoming a character (becoming transparent so that the character is what is seen), than in being him or her "self," and highlighting the process by which that self was formed. It is their own identity, the meaning that they bring to the performance in being seen as themselves, which gives the event its importance.4

Interestingly, Hutcheon briefly considers theatre as a postmodern art form when she talks about the postmodern tendency to blur high and mass culture: "There are other art forms that operate more directly (if equally self-consciously) on the representations of mass

4 Sandra L. Richards, "Caught in the Act of Social Definition: On the Road with Anna Deveare Smith," Acting Out: Feminist Performances. Deveare Smith's work is appropriate here because, although she "impersonates" other people whom she has interviewed (in her performance piece Fires in the Mirror, for example), the meaning of the performance comes from the audience's simultaneous awareness of the performer as a black woman. Fires in the Mirror was performed by Nightwood Board member Mariam Carvell in Toronto in 1996.
culture which surround us daily, such as the plays of Sam Shepard" (10). Television is also considered as a medium similarly engaged with mass culture. According to Hutcheon, television is consistently referred to as postmodern, (Jean Baudrillard went so far as to say television is paradigmatic because its transparent sign offers seemingly direct access to a signified reality), but she disagrees -- because television has an unproblematized, purely commodified complicity, it lacks the critique needed to define the "postmodern paradox" (10).

A comparison of the viewing experiences of television and theatre illustrates the ways in which theatre is, in fact, the more inherently postmodern medium. For example, in an article entitled "Image and Imagination: The Concept of Electronic Theatre," Richard Bruce Kirkley argues that the experience of watching television in our own homes produces a more passive receptive attitude towards the medium. When the television experience is approximated in the theatre, I believe the audience perceives it as fundamentally different, and somehow less important, than the presence of a live actor or even film. My example is the one-woman show, Motherhood, Madness, and the Shape of the Universe, by Nightwood co-founder Kim Renders, which was performed at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace in May of 1994. About ten minutes before her appearance onstage, Renders showed a video of herself and her two children walking through fields and forest, picking mushrooms and chatting casually. The video was shown on two small, television-sized screens and the house lights remained on as spectators continued to arrive and take their seats. Most of the audience remained in pre-show attitude, continuing to talk amongst themselves, while others concentrated on the video and reacted to it; the atmosphere was something like being in a

---

5 One significant difference is that, while watching a film or play is usually a communal activity, watching television is usually experienced anonymously.
sports bar with a baseball game on a tv in the corner. Only when the lights went down, signalling the start of the performance, did the entire audience become quiet and focus their attention on the screens in anticipation. Audience behaviour was partly determined by the fact that the video was shown prior to the advertised starting time and the lights were still up, indicating that the video was not strictly part of the show. I would argue, however, that if the size of the screen had been larger or the performance had been by a live actor, the audience would have been far less likely to continue talking and ignoring the presentation.

What does this example, and the differences between film and theatre viewing experiences, imply about the way theatre audiences feel when television is shown as part of a theatrical event? I would suggest that there is a sense of disengagement, almost a sense of relaxing or drawing back, as spectators realize they are not called upon to participate in the same way. The imaginative stage world which they have been involved in creating is temporarily suspended while a different, less demanding viewing process goes on. To quote Kirkley:

The stage is an imaginative space where the world of drama is actively created in the minds and emotions of the audience, but the television screen is predominantly a realistic space where the world of drama is already created and exists independently of the viewer's thoughts and feelings. . . . When the means of representation are . . . refined to the point that the fictional world can be made to appear as if it is the exact reproduction of an objectively real event, then the perceiver's own imaginative experience shifts away from active participation towards a more passive acceptance (4-5).

This parallels the idea, introduced in earlier chapters, of the feminist actor aiming, not for transparency of self (television, traditional realist acting), but for opacity of self, the
foregrounding of personal identity (theatre, postmodern acting). I would argue that theatre will always have the potential to be more radical and dangerous than film or television because of its directness and immediacy. In this analysis, it would seem that theatre is also more postmodern, because it is less likely to be a totalizing viewing experience for the audience. As Freedman pointed out, performance (rather than western theatre as a literary genre) contains the seeds of its own deconstruction; and as hooks observed, the resistant reader looks for the contradictions where she may create her own understanding of the text. Compared with film and television, theatre lends itself most readily to the de-doxifying project of postmodernism.

One of the tools employed in this project is parody. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism coincides with a general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not reflect society so much as grant meaning and value within a particular society. Paradoxically, we believe we can never get out from under the weight of the long tradition of representation but, at the same time, are losing faith in its inexhaustibility and power. This paradox takes the form of parody: "By both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalize them" (Hutcheon 8). Parody is a mixture of originality and borrowing, an intertextuality that signals textual history, reminds us of re-interpretation and reconceptualizes the process of meaning. Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) by Ann-Marie MacDonald provides a good example, as it mixes borrowed passages from Shakespeare with MacDonald’s imaginative context, relying on the audience’s familiarity with the source material in order to create a new interpretation of their cultural significance -- both the way
they represent and also maintain a certain theatrical and literary culture.

Although she is reluctant to conflate postmodernism and feminism because of their different levels of social agency, Hutcheon does suggest that feminist representation may benefit from postmodernism through the device of parody. She suggests that perhaps "... postmodern strategies can be deployed by feminist artists to deconstructive ends" in order to begin the move toward change which is not part of postmodernism itself (149). One of the theoretical questions raised in feminist representation is the idea of the male gaze: that is, if the gaze is inherently male, as some feminist theorists suggest, then how can we make feminist visual art or representation? Hutcheon suggests that postmodern parody offers an exit strategy to this impasse: "By using postmodern parodic modes of installing and then subverting conventions, such as the maleness of the gaze, representation of women can be de-doxified" (151). The authority of representation can be challenged and subverted from within, if one accepts that the critique will be complicitous.

Feminist art uses the postmodern parodic strategy by subverting representations of women through excess, irony and fragmented recontextualization, all of which work to disrupt the passive consumption of such images. Peggy Phelan's assessment that representation always contains an excess of meaning comes to mind here; in a sense, one could say that parody is a method of manipulating that already-existing excess. Teresa de Lauretis has said that feminism points to gender as both the effect and the excess of representation.6 Again, if gender is part of presentation's excess, then parody will almost

---

6 Teresa de Lauretis says that the feminist version of this paradox is the "subject of feminism" as it is being constructed in feminism today, being both inside and outside the ideology of gender and feeling the double pull (10).
inevitably be employed to manage that excess to feminist and non-feminist ends. Hutcheon cautions that complicity is unavoidable in deconstructive techniques like parody because the artist must first install what she wants to subvert, and it also inevitably conditions the radicality of the kind of critique and the possibility of suggesting change (152). The project of postmodern feminist theatre, then, is to use its apparent complicity with convention to manoeuvre a feminist subversion from within, using self-conscious parody to highlight and manipulate the gendered excesses of representation.

If we perform ourselves as gendered beings, then theatre seems an appropriate place for gender performance to be highlighted, deconstructed, subverted and re-invented. The history of theatre includes many instances of such playing, but only now are we doing so with this particular motivation.

Kate Bornstein, who is a male to female transsexual performance artist, gave a Cross-Gender Performance Workshop as part of Buddies in Bad Times Summer School in 1989. Bornstein considers herself neither male nor female. In an interview with Shannon Bell, she stated:

The first thing to do is to ask the question: What is gender? This is a question that does not get asked: people mostly ask 'what is the difference between men and women?' They begin by presupposing a specific bi-polar gender system. . . . I think the answer is that there is no such thing as gender, other than what we say it is. . . . Gender is a cult. Membership in gender is not based on informed consent. There is no way out without being ridiculed and harassed. There is peer pressure that is being brought to bear on everyone in this cult. There is no humour about gender. The only humour is from the people who
transgress gender (111-112). Bornstein is an example of the kind of postmodern performer discussed earlier, one who brings meaning to the performance by virtue of who and what she is, as opposed to the character she is portraying, one who remains opaque rather than transparent. The idea that she is not only constructing herself, but also contributing to the on-going definition of gender through her performance, makes it both a political act and postmodern art. Since Bornstein can successfully pass as a woman, thereby avoiding undue attention to her gender unless she chooses to expose her personal history, she maintains a degree of complicity in the dominant culture she critiques, marking her performance as postmodern. In her onstage performance, as well as her "real life" performance, Bornstein is a representation of a woman, and the excess of that representation, in the form of gender, is what she manipulates and plays.

Like Bornstein, Judith Butler has also argued that, in everyday life, gender performance occurs under duress. She states:

Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates (sic) the idea of gender, and

---

7 Shannon Bell, "Kate Bornstein: A Transgender Transsexual Postmodern Tiresias," The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds. New York: St. Martin's Press, 104-120. Bell discusses The Opposite Sex...is Neither!, a one-woman performance piece written and performed by Bornstein in 1991. Bornstein plays Maggie, a goddess-in-training whose training exercise is to allow her body to be a conduit for seven people who are neither male nor female. Bornstein also did another play called Hidden: A Gender, based on her own experience of being a heterosexual man who became a lesbian woman.
without those acts, there would be no gender at all (6).

Butler argues that gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex, but must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced (Gender Trouble 6).

Theatre is an appropriate place to explore these difficult questions. On a basic level, theatre is about adopting a new identity, playing at being someone else and convincing the audience to accept the illusion. Dramatic literature is full of plotlines which revolve around mistaken identity, disguise and trickery and the further complications of gender confusion, as when the audience believes, or chooses to believe, that one sex has become the other. We want to believe that there is a "real," stable identity and gender beneath the performance, but surely part of the timeless delight audiences' derive from being fooled is the realization that gender can be taken on and off, applied to this body or that, and the profound emancipation, or threatening chaos, this suggests.

Shannon Bell deals with postmodern performance in Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body. According to Bell, the defining characteristics of postmodernism are fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, multiplicity, difference, and ambiguity (4), qualities reminiscent of Case's definition of contiguity. In the cultural-ideological domain, the two definitive features of postmodernism are a decentering of the humanist subject (the conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject, the site for viewing, creating and apprehending reality); and the bypassing of meta-narratives and meta-theories aimed at understanding and representing the world: "The postmodern subject is decentered and
detotalized, a fragmented subject who is a site of disunity and conflict and who consequently can be seen to engage simultaneously in political change and in the preservation of the status quo" (5). Bell also defines deconstruction as a way of reading a text which focuses on its inconsistencies -- ambiguities, gaps, and silences -- to show how the internal logic of the text subverts itself (6). Every act of reading is a new production of meaning and often a new text out of the so-called original text. A plurality of meanings can be appropriated and read from the same text, so ultimately the text's meaning is undecidable. The reader grafts meaning onto the original text and the writer also grafts new text onto "original" text: "there is no original text, all texts are inscribed in the margin of some pre-existing texts" (7).

These are interesting ideas when applied to Ann-Marie MacDonald's play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet). Subtitled "A Comical Shakespearean Romance," the play was commissioned and produced by Nightwood and opened March 31, 1988 at the Annex Theatre with Baputa Rubess as director and dramaturge. The production won a Chalmers Canadian Play award and the text (published by Toronto's Coach House Press) received the Governor-General's award for Drama for 1990. A revised version travelled to the Great Canadian Theatre Company (Ottawa), Vancouver East Cultural Centre, Northern Light Theatre (Edmonton), and then re-opened in Toronto at the Canadian Stage Company's Berkeley Street Theatre on March 28, 1990.

MacDonald's play is episodic in structure, alternating between different time frames and different fictional worlds, and uses ambiguity and indeterminacy to develop not only the play's comedy, but also its clever subversion of audience expectation. The concept of grafting new texts onto old is highly relevant to Goodnight Desdemona, which uses two plays by
Shakespeare (Othello and Romeo and Juliet) as inspiration and source material for the plotline and language. The postmodern denial of an "original" source for familiar texts is used to parallel both the heroine's story (Constance's search for the Author) and the playwright's text (the play Goodnight Desdemona); MacDonald concludes that the "source" was the heroine's own mind all along, that is, that the new grafted texts are as valid as any so-called original. The play cleverly works with the concept of authority by having Constance, an exploited female academic with no personal "authority," searching for the source material of a highly respected male literary authority (Shakespeare) and discovering that she herself is that Author. This draws attention, of course, to the play as a work created by an author, Ann-Marie MacDonald, which is further emphasized by having familiar characters and lines reappropriated into a new text; the experience is a highly satisfying one for the audience, as they can recognize the familiar source and take pleasure in its witty reinterpretation, thus admiring both authors simultaneously. While the plotlines of his plays are critiqued, the audience is never actually required to give up their affection and respect for Shakespeare, which suggests a certain complicity with dramatic tradition that is very postmodern.

Another element that Bell introduces in her discussion of postmodern performance is Foucault's idea of genealogy: the construction of noncontinuous history and lineages of descent, which foregrounds what has been omitted, excluded or marginalized by grand historical projects. When tradition gives a particular interpretation of an event or a historical development, Foucault recommends that we examine the implications of the reverse or opposite interpretation (10). Again, this applies to Goodnight Desdemona, which takes the traditional versions of Desdemona's and Juliet's stories and reverses them. This is done for
comic effect, but it also serves to point out the ideology underlying their traditional creation as passive victims. When MacDonald reconstructs them as powerful women capable of efficacious action, she not only creates delightful characters, but also empowering ones. MacDonald herself reads this as a Jungian exercise, but it can also be seen as a postmodern deconstruction of the Shakespearean texts to reveal the moments when their internal, patriarchal logic undermines itself in the construction of the female characters. As noted earlier, the audience member (especially the contemporary feminist) is not entirely satisfied with Desdemona's and Juliet's preventable deaths and objects to their function as sacrifices within male narratives.

Despite the variety of definitions around postmodernism, there is some agreement about postmodernism's characteristics: parody and self reflexivity, worldliness, or a tension between the worldly and reflexive, and the historical and parodic which provokes an investigation into how we make culture. Postmodernism is also marked by the transgression of boundaries between genres, high and mass culture, and between theory and practice, with theory playing a more evident part in the practical work (Bell 18). Goodnight Desdemona employs parody, of course, and its self-conscious use of Shakespearean verse and magical stage tricks draw attention to its status as theatre; Rubess remarks, in the Introduction to the published text, that the stage effects have more in common with 19th century theatre.

---

8In the published text, both a quotation in the dedication and the Introduction by Baguta Rubess emphasize the existence of a Jungian subtext. The story happens in the subconscious mind: the character of Constance "stews in her office like base matter in the alchemical dish; she reaches the nigredo/nadir of her existence and this allows her to reconsider her life, her self, as if in a dream." In this interpretation, Desdemona and Juliet are archetypes of Constance's own unconscious, while Othello and Tybalt are permutations of Professor Night and the Chorus, Iago and Yorick are all versions of her own, goading animus.
than with cinematic technique, a comment which is particularly interesting in light of our earlier comparison of theatre and film as postmodern media. The play also transgresses high and popular culture boundaries; since Shakespeare has come to be regarded as the epitome of high art in our society, to employ his plays for other uses — whether comic, political, or both — is in itself read as a transgressive act. And again, the reworking of the Shakespearean plotlines, almost iconic in their familiarity, draws attention to their hegemonic status in our cultural imagination.

As we have seen, feminism and postmodernism are often conflated because of their common interest in representation. Linda Hutcheon states: "Whether the medium is linguistic or visual, we are always dealing with systems of meaning operating within certain codes and conventions that are socially produced and historically conditioned. This is the postmodern focus that has replaced the modernist/romantic one of individual expression" (143). This brings us to another commonality, the question of individual desire. Both postmodernism and feminism deal with desire as more than individual fulfillment or a coherent subjectivity, but see the desiring subject as inscribed in and by certain ideologically determined subject-positions (144). Both postmodern and feminist art show that desire and pleasure are socially validated and normalized: postmodernism wants to disrupt and exploit this discovery, while feminism wants to disrupt and change it (152). Once again, Goodnight Desdemona provides a fruitful example of this project, as the play confronts and surprises the audience's expectations regarding their own desire for the characters and the characters' for each other. In the scenes involving Romeo and Juliet, Constance is mistaken for a boy and so found desirable by both Juliet (fitting in with the Shakespearean tradition of mistaken
identity) and also Romeo (a homoerotic desire not explored explicitly in Shakespeare). When Juliet discovers that Constance is actually female, she still desires her, again confounding audience expectation and Shakespearean convention.

The erotic element is a surprising layer which could be used to different ends in performance. The 1990 production emphasized broad characterizations, a robust physicality and fast-moving action; into this almost clown-like exuberance, the sudden foregrounding of Constance as an object of desire was both comic and touching because she, as a character, found it so unexpected. As performed by Kate Lynch, Constance could be read as both sexually repressed -- which made the attentions of the other, more colourful characters humourous -- and also androgynous, which meant that their mistakes regarding her gender were understandable. This adds yet another layer of possible interpretation, since the audience reads the boyish, androgynous female character as confused about her sexual identity -- an interesting reference to Shakespeare’s boy actors, perhaps? On the other hand, Tanja Jacobs originally appeared as Constance in 1988, and production photos suggest a broader acting style and a physical presence which reads as unambiguously female. The casting choice for Constance, in particular, affects the audience’s possible readings of the play’s eroticism.

The character of Constance Ledbelly is an exploited and hapless academic who is working on the thesis that Shakespeare used a source by some unknown author to create Romeo and Juliet and Othello, but suppressed the comic Fool character in order to turn them into tragedies. He then gave his source book to his friend Gustav the alchemist to preserve in an undecipherable code. Connie is trying to de-code the Gustav manuscript. Scenes from
*Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* are played behind her as she writes. Already we can see the postmodern blurring between high and mass culture and the appropriation of a variety of textual devices - mysterious authors, alchemy and codes from melodrama, for example, with a contemporary theatrical style which allows for different realities to exist onstage simultaneously. We are also introduced to the postmodern questioning of history -- the idea that Shakespeare may not have written the plays attributed to him, that other, equally valid versions of the truth may exist, and that history is constructed through the mechanisms of narrative creation and context.

Throwing her possessions away into a wastebasket, (a comic assortment of Brownie Wings, appendix and so on, which parodies alchemical conjuring), Connie can suddenly understand the cover of the Gustav manuscript and disappears into the wastebasket herself, emerging to intervene between Othello and Iago and thus prevent Desdemona's death. The canonical text of Shakespeare’s *Othello* is parodied, as Desdemona's preventable death is in fact prevented. This simple comic act points to the larger implications of the original text, namely that the female character must die in order to advance the plotline (what Laura Mulvey describes as narrative sadism). *Goodnight Desdemona* does not simply critique the Shakespearean text or its characters, however, but seeks to rehabilitate them to its own ends, thereby activating the element of complicity that Hutcheon identifies as postmodern; the characters are in fact treated with great affection, and it is their status as familiar tragic characters who have become comic that gives them their particular, doubled status in this play, far more so than if they were purely MacDonald's own creations.

Connie and Desdemona become friends and begin to search for the Author. They
decide that the Author must be the original source and that Connie must locate the Wise Fool, who will be the mouthpiece for the Author and reveal his identity. Act 3 again opens with Connie intervening in a pivotal Shakespearean scene, this time the fight between Romeo, Mercutio and Tybalt. The three men all think she is a boy and Romeo finds her very attractive as such. In the second scene, we find Romeo and Juliet the next morning, and discover that they are already bored with each other. Romeo leaves to look for Connie and Juliet cries to her Nurse, who cheers her up with a reminder of tonight's party. Constance thinks she's found the Fool with the manuscript but it's really just a servant with party invitations. These are all comic devices, of course, but also postmodern in the sense that every familiar tale is quite different when seen from another perspective: doomed romantic lovers become squabbling teenagers with short attention spans, meaningful messengers turn out to carry only party invitations. Again, the implication is that all stories, all grand historical narratives, may be similarly deflated when seen from another context.

In scene 7 Constance is in Juliet's chamber. Upon learning that Connie is not a young boy but an older woman, Juliet still wants to make love with her. Connie finds a page of the manuscript in Juliet's shirt and reads it; there is a warp effect and Desdemona appears. Comic business ensues as Desdemona and Connie are re-united, Connie plays dead to escape Tybalt, and they all end up at the crypt that night. Entering with Connie's "body," Tybalt sees Romeo dressed in women's clothing and carts him off lustfully. This leaves Connie, Juliet and Desdemona to sort out their roles as tragic heroines: Connie chastises them both for being obsessed with death and says she was a Fool to think they would be different. They agree and vow to change their ways; Connie realizes she is the Fool and the Author.
There are a number of postmodern elements here, the first being the idea that there is, in fact, no original Author — because Connie is constructing this new text in her own mind, her version of the truth is as valid as the so-called original text. There is also the element of postmodern complicity, because MacDonald is using the audience's love of and familiarity with Shakespeare for her own ends, critiquing and problematizing the audience's fondness but not actually condemning or completely rejecting it and in fact, going so far as to share in it. Baguta Rubess, the director of Goodnight Desdemona has said that she thinks the play has a basic forgiveness and seduction that their audiences appreciated, and Barbara Godard has noted that the play re-engages, through parodic intervention, with a social narrative which is about violence and absence and manages to make it an entirely different experience for the audience. There is also an interesting postmodern element in the fact that the characters of Juliet and Desdemona are accused of complicity in their own destruction, as Constance reprimands them for their obsession with death. MacDonald is managing to slip in a subtle reminder of what we have been addressing as Foucault's idea of power relations, the notion that repression also allows for resistance. The two characters are given the agency to make a choice about whether they comply or resist the death-obsession of their fictional culture, just as we as contemporary audiences can resistantly read the narrative inevitability of their deaths in Shakespeare's texts.

There is also a lot going on here with the idea of gender construction, cross-dressing and desire. Peggy Phelan has written that passing as straight is relatively easy since

---

heterosexuality is generally assumed, and that this fact highlights the "normative" and unmarked nature of heterosexuality—when homosexuality is revealed, it is the unmarked nature of heterosexuality that is made visible (Phelan 96). Judith Butler has also commented on the special role of the transvestite performer. She says that an audience member may want to claim that a performer is "really a man," for example, and may want to believe that his appearance contradicts a reality of gender "underneath." Butler argues:

The transvestite, however, can do more than simply express the distinction between sex and gender, but challenges, at least implicitly, the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity. If the 'reality' of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized 'sex' or 'gender' which gender performances ostensibly express. Indeed, the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations (Gender Trouble 136).

Butler says that the performance is not an imitation, but rather a parody of the very idea of an original. Perhaps this is where feminist performance is most closely aligned with the postmodern projects of de-doxifying and contesting the status of an original or natural essence, in the area of gender performance. Of course, the ambiguities of mistaken identity and cross-dressing have played an important part in theatre throughout history, and it is this tradition that MacDonald is using in her Shakespearean parody. But while the homoerotic element may well have been present for Shakespeare's viewers (as boys played women playing boys), MacDonald makes it an explicit aspect of her character's choices (Romeo's desire for Constance as a boy, Juliet's desire for her as a woman) and thereby both parodies
Shakespeare's subtext and confronts the contemporary viewer's expectations. In the earlier, unpublished version of the script, the play basically ends in the same way, with Connie realizing that she is the Fool/Author, but she has the three women make a pact as a trinity. Connie wants to sign the stone of the tomb, on which "P.S." is carved, but she is out of ink. She pricks each of their fingers and green blood comes out; Connie signs her name on the stone in the green blood. There is a further Act 5, where Connie is back in her office with her head in the basket. Claude Night enters, in despair, and is startled to see her. She gets him by the throat and threatens to expose him as a fraud. He admits Ramona has already discovered this (via the trail of green ink) and will expose him before the Dean. She has pawned his engagement ring and will go to Oxford with Julie/Jill (another small reversal of audience expectation, as Connie's rival for Claude's affections turns out to be a lesbian). Claude begs for Connie's help and she begins to soften but then realizes what he wants is to win Ramona back by claiming to have cracked the manuscript code. Claude offers Connie the Oxford post in exchange for the code.

Connie sees that her pen has turned to gold, realizes that her adventure really did happen and that "P.S." stood for "philosopher's stone." She agrees to take the Oxford post, gives the manuscript to Claude Night and leaves. At first, Night cannot find the key to the code, but then suddenly finds he can read the cover and the warp effect starts, signalling that he is about to embark on the same adventure. This earlier ending gives Connie a chance for revenge, and also makes the meaning more explicitly postmodern: Connie is no longer unique, and anyone can write the alchemical side of their unconscious, i.e. their own text.

---

10 For further discussion, see Lorraine Helms, "Playing the Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism and Shakespearean Performance," Performing Feminisms.
to realize themselves as "Author."

A number of other examples from Nightwood's production history could also be discussed in terms of postmodern elements, although perhaps none could be defined as entirely postmodern. As has been noted, many of the characteristics that are defined (by Hutcheon, McNay, and Bell) as postmodern can also be applied to much feminist theatre, but the feminist insistence on truth, meaning, and a message of social equality tends to prevent feminist theatre from being postmodern in an uncomplicated way.

One of the most obvious postmodern qualities is the transgression of discrete boundaries between genres, and the blurring of distinctions between private and public. A good example of this characteristic is ahdri zhina mandiela's play *dark diaspora...in dub*, which began as a Groundswell piece and was eventually sponsored by Nightwood for the Toronto Fringe Festival in 1991. The play is actually a series of poems, which are spoken and danced in performance much in the manner of Ntozake Shange's ground-breaking work, *For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976). Like that earlier work, the piece is performed by a group of women, rather than an individual, which serves to break up the unitary subject position. Furthermore, the play blurs public instances of racism and economic hardship with personal issues of identity and emotional development, transgressing the strict separation between public and private spheres, the personal and the political, to show how they are interrelated.

The work has a fragmentary, nonlinear form which seeks to communicate a vision of society from the standpoint of gender, race, and lesbian sexuality, thereby challenging a definition of feminism which does not consciously acknowledge whom it excludes. It is also
postmodern in the sense that it is localized, understood as an act of identity-formation in progress, while it is very much feminist in its implicit call for a world in which this process can be carried out with fewer constraints and less violence. As Bell explains: "Postmodernity revalues the aesthetic as a site for the intervention of little narratives; it is in little 'ephemeral stories' that the assumptions of the great, institutionalized narrative(s) are questioned, (re)presented, challenged and undermined" (137). Bell points out that performance art is an excellent medium for presenting small, individualized life stories: "In fact, women's performance art is mostly about personal experience: 'real-life' presence of the artist, actor, author. . . . Performance is one of the most effective means for those who have been constructed by others as objects of desire and undesirable objects to enter into discourse and create an immediate subject position from which to address the social" (138). Performance art/theatre is an effective medium for the other because it exemplifies postmodern aesthetics. There is a dissolution of distinctions between the real and the representation of the real, the disruption of strict boundaries and distinctions. The performance text is a work in progress which changes with each production; the audience is drawn into interaction with the performer and spectatorship is a part of the work, destroying traditional voyeurism.

This is very much applicable to performances like *dark diaspora ...in dub, Afrika Solo* by Djanet Sears, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* by Monique Mojica, and other Nightwood-sponsored productions by women of colour. While the women onstage are not necessarily portraying themselves (or at least, not all the time), the fact that they have written and are performing the piece, that the piece is about being a woman of colour and that they themselves are women of colour, all have a crucial impact on how the piece works and is
received by an audience. The very fact that a black woman, for example, is speaking her own words onstage is charged with cultural importance; this is made obvious by the fact that *Afrika Solo*, published by Sister Vision Press in 1990, was the first play by a black woman to be published in Canada.

Bell discusses another play that Nightwood had some involvement with, *A Particular Class of Women*, in terms of what she calls prostitute performance art. This genre further transgresses in three ways: like feminist performance, it transgresses the performance genre; it transgresses the feminist subgenre from the position of the "low" other, those excluded from the category "feminist"; and finally, it includes a self-referential disclosure and critique of this transgression. Again, these points could also be applied to the works by women of colour cited above, in that all three struggle with their relationship to what is considered a white women's movement, and self-consciously refer to their conflicted position within many categories, including the style and legitimacy of their performance.

Hutcheon criticizes postmodernism for not taking the step into political action, but I wonder if this is less of a problem or a goal for feminist theatre, at least in Nightwood's case. Unlike the kind of political manifesto or document of social policy Hutcheon seems to be referring to, the plays done by Nightwood portray a situation, make it recognizable, but seldom include a direct command for specific action for fear of appearing too didactic. Part or most of the social action has occurred in the very creation of the piece of theatre, who made it and how. Feminism has granted new and emphatic value to the notion of experience and has raised the question of what constitutes a valid historical narrative (160). The empowerment of marginalized women, whether as characters or authors, and the act of
telling their stories creatively, is in itself both feminist and postmodern.

Hutcheon concludes that postmodernism and feminism cannot be conflated, but have a two-way involvement. Feminism has challenged postmodernism to consider gender within its critiques of humanism and the de-naturalization of the split between public and private, personal and political, while postmodernism offers feminism yet another set of strategies. Feminism is a politics, postmodernism is not, but all representation is political (167).
Conclusion

Feminism, as a social movement, aims to explain the current social order and to instigate change. As we have seen, one of the most important projects of feminism is to point out the constructed nature of culture, to create enough distance from our own assumptions about gender, race, class and all our other identifying categories, so that we may come to see them, not as natural or inevitable, but as serving certain interests at the expense of others.

Feminist theatre has played an important part in the social aims of feminism. From its role as a consciousness-raising tool and a forum to express women's experiences, as a means to re-discover a tradition of women's artistic expression, and as a sophisticated platform from which to question the construction of gendered identity, theatre is a highly effective art form for feminist purposes. Theatre is a social event, both in the process of creation and in its presentation, and thus the very act of women gathering to create and receive together serves a feminist function of coalition-building.

How feminist theatre will address crucial questions about identity and politics gives rise to differences in approach and philosophy, which reflect these same differences within the social movement of feminism. Cultural and materialist feminism approach the question of identity and subjecthood differently. A semiotic examination of each type of feminism reveals how the subject is signified by the woman onstage, raising questions about the body and the role of the spectator which cultural and materialist feminism answer differently.

The question of a female form of theatre is also related, as Diamond and Freedman
discuss in their articles. Can a woman speak from the subject position on a traditionally enframed stage, within the conventions of realism, or must a new mode of performance be employed which deconstructs the history of theatre even as it asserts a new feminist subjecthood? In her article, Freedman discusses the possibilities for representation, and concludes that it is only when the female performer disrupts the gaze, that is, subverts the traditional relationship between performer and spectator, that feminist representation is possible. My discussion of several examples from Nightwood's production history illustrate some of the ways in which new relationships are forged through the use of cultural and materialist feminist strategies. I conclude, however, that the act of defining a theatre as feminist creates the necessary horizon of expectation in the audience, so that the spectator engages with the performance in an unusually personal way, either in the spirit of one who is already "converted" and seeks to have her beliefs strengthened and broadened as well as reinforced, or at the opposite end of the viewing spectrum, as one hostile to the aims of feminism and expecting to be offended. Along the range of the spectrum are all the multiple identity positions possible for feminists who see themselves as postmodern, post-feminist, materialist feminist, and so on.

Nightwood produced many collective creations in the early years and was run administratively as a collective, meaning that although individuals might have certain titles and responsibilities, the power and credit were shared amongst the four founders, each of whom contributed to the artistic vision of the company as a whole. This structure changed over the years, with both the position of Artistic Director and the configuration of the Board going through various adjustments; the title was changed to Artistic Coordinator for a period
of several years in an attempt to reflect the collective philosophy, and the Board went from
being artist-run to community-based. The last collective creation produced by Nightwood
was *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita* and the company ceased to identify itself as a
collective in 1990. Collective creation has played a crucial role in the development of
Canadian theatre and in feminist theatre, although it no longer holds the same prominence
it once did in either movement; Nightwood’s move away from collectivity as a structure and
a working model paralleled the same move in the larger society.

Judith Butler argues that the formation of language and politics that represents
women as "the subject" of feminism is itself a discursive formation and the effect of a given
version of representational politics. The feminist subject turns out to be discursively
constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation. In
other words, because feminism has relied on a politics of personal identity in which some
belong and others do not, it has come to be about persons who can represent themselves as
feminist, or are represented by feminism, according to a relatively stable definition of
“woman.” According to Butler, the presumed universality and unity of the subject of
feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in
which it functions (4). As we have seen, representation can never be totalizing and always
has an excess -- and in feminism’s case, that excess has been all those it has "othered."
Shannon Bell defines postmodern feminism by its willingness to be challenged by those
others, to embrace rather than fend off its inability to totalize.

As we have seen, some women initially rejected the idea of ghettoizing themselves in
a women's company, dealing only with women's issues. As the need for a place where women
could find opportunities to be heard, to work, and to gain access to funding became more apparent, Nightwood took on that function. As more and more women became involved, Nightwood responded by re-structuring and implementing vehicles like Groundswell, where a large number of women could try out ideas and get their projects into a developmental process. As individual women sought to reach a wider audience and work with a finished script, Nightwood again adapted by moving away from collective creation and producing mainstage plays. When Nightwood came to understand the need and the opportunity to widen its organization to new communities, the mandate was re-written and the process begun to be more inclusive, and that policy in turn changed the direction and identity of Nightwood. Throughout its history, Nightwood has responded to pressures from within and forces from without, making decisions and plans that did not always work out, limited by financial constraint, influenced by individual personalities, aspiring to produce both works of artistic merit and social relevancy. As such, its process has both reflected and been shaped by the evolution of feminism and the increasing complexity of feminist theory.

The productions that Nightwood has mounted, from early imagistic work like Glazed Tempera, to scripted works like War Babies and The Herring Gull's Egg, to works by women of colour like Mango Chumney, each came out of a different set of priorities that were reflected in the nature of the performance. In turn, the aesthetics of the performance, and the nature of the artistic expression, change the way the audience perceives Nightwood as a company and moves Nightwood to pursue new projects, new artists and audiences. Viewed in this way, the mandate of the company evolves in an inter-related, spiralling motion, as each piece of theatre builds on the last.
Nightwood Chronology

1979
Theatre Centre established by Nightwood, Buddies in Bad Times, Necessary Angel, Actors Lab, AKA Performance Interface, and Theatre Autumn Leaf.

Sept. 6-15, 1979 *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, at the NDWT Side-Door Theatre and later at the Adelaide Court Theatre. A Nightwood Theatre production adapted from the novel by Sharon Riis. Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe and Maureen White in the cast, Cynthia Grant the director.

1980

April 1980 *Self-Accusation* by Peter Handke, with Cynthia Grant and Richard Shoichet, at the Theatre Centre.

May 1980
Nightwood's first involvement with the Rhubarb! Festival. Nightwood's contributions:
1. *Psycho-Nuclear Breakdown* by Cynthia Grant; 2. *Gently Down the Stream* by Kim Renders;

June 19 - 28, 1980
*Glazed Tempera*, inspired by the works of Alex Colville, presented by Nightwood Theatre at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace.

November 1980
second Rhubarb! that year, part of the 80/81 season at the Theatre Centre. Nightwood's contributions:
1. *The Best of Myles* by Flann O'Brien, adapted by Maureen White and Mary Durkan;

221
1981

Jan. 28-Feb. 8, 1981
Theatre Autumn Leaf and Nightwood present in repertory at the Theatre Centre: The Audition and Specimens, and For Rachel directed by Renders; the piece had been workshopped at the Factory Theatre Lab. In second week of performance, accompanied by Epilogue, directed by Grant.

May 1981
Flashbacks of Tomorrow (Memorias del Mañana), a collective presentation by Nightwood, Open Experience Hispanic-Canadian Theatre and Los Compañeros, as part of the Toronto Theatre Festival’s Open Stage, at Toronto Free Theatre.

Summer 1981
Theatre Centre moved to 666 King St. West.

October 1-18, 1981
The Yellow Wallpaper produced by Nightwood at the Theatre Centre, adapted from the story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and with additional text by Cynthia Grant and Mary Vingoe; starring Vingoe and directed by Grant.

1982

March 5-21, 1982
Hooligans produced by Nightwood Theatre at the Theatre Centre, written by Jan Kudelka and Mary Vingoe in collaboration with the company (Ian A. Black, Jay Bowen, Cynthia Grant, Irene Pauzer, Kim Renders, Linda Stephen, Bruce Vavrina), from an idea by Irene Pauzer (who played Isadora) and from the diaries and writings of Isadora Duncan, Edward Gordon Craig, Sergei Esenin, Kathleen Bruce and Robert Falcon Scott. Directed by Grant.

August 25-29, 1982
Mass/Age, a collective, multi-media spectacle of life in a nuclear age, performed by Jay Bowen, Kim Renders, Daniel Brooks, Allan Risdill, Gordon Masten, and Maureen White, directed by Grant, presented at Harbourfront Centre.
September 8, 1982
A Concert for Peace, at the Music Hall (125 Danforth), featuring Nightwood Theatre.

November 1982
Rhubarb! at the Theatre Centre, included *Soft Boiled #3*.

1983

March 1983
Women's Cultural Building presents a Festival of Women Building Culture: March 8, the first Five Minute Feminist Cabaret was held at the Horseshoe Tavern; May 26-29, Women's Perspective Festival, an art exhibit sponsored by Partisan Gallery, included "Caution: Women at Work." The three pieces by Nightwood were:

June 1983
Nightwood presents *Antigone* by Sophocles, adapted by Patricia Keeney-Smith, directed by Cynthia Grant, with a chorus of 40 actors and musicians, at St. Paul's Square, 121 Avenue Road.

August 18 - 28, 1983
Midnight Hags presents *Burning Times*, at the Theatre Centre

September 1983
Nightwood presents *Smoke Damage: A story of the witch hunts* at St. Paul's Square.

November 1983
1984

January 1984
Rhubarb! at the Theatre Centre: White, Vingoe and Grant appeared in Nancy Drew Goes in search of her Missing Mother, by Ann-Marie MacDonald and Beverley Cooper, which became part of a late night series at Theatre Passe Muraille in 1984, then was given a full production in 1985, called Clue in the Fast Lane, directed by Maureen White.

Temptonga a one-woman show by Ida Carnevali, was developed further at the 1986 Groundswell Festival.

March 22 - April 1, 1984
La Musica ("an interlude in a divorce") by Marguerite Duras, performed by Grant and Bob Nasmith at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace.

April 17, 1984
The Toronto/Volgograd Initiative presents Pink Ries! by Brian Metcalfe, directed by Grant, cast included Vingoe, at the George Ignatief Theatre.

June 1984
The Theatre Centre moved to the Poor Alex Theatre on Brunswick Street; tenants were Crow's Theatre, Nightwood and Theatre Smith-Gilmour.

Spring 1984
The Anna Project toured Southern Ontario; This is for You, Anna was nominated in 1984 for a Dora Mavor Moore award for artistic excellence and theatrical innovation.

Summer 1984

Love and Work Enough ("A celebration of Ontario's pioneer women"), created collectively by its five actors, directed by Mary Vingoe with Cynthia Grant, toured for 5 weeks, then toured again in fall 1984 and into '85 to 150 schools across Ontario, co-produced with Theatre Direct Canada. Winner of a Dora Mavor Moore award as best production in the children's category.

September 5 - 23, 1984
Nightwood presents Pope Joan ("A non-historical comedy") by Banuta Rubess, produced and directed by Cynthia Grant at Theatre Centre. Cast included Maureen White, Mary Durkan,
Mary Vingoe, Dean Gilmour, Andy Jones, and Charles Tomlinson. The Toronto Drama Bench nominated *Pope Joan* as a finalist for a Chalmers award.

**Fall 1984**

The Theatre Centre R&D Festival. Nightwood contributions were: *The Woman Who Slept With Men to Take the War Out of Them* by Deena Metzger; and *The Medical Show* by Amanda Hale.

**1985**

**February 1985**

*Re-Production* by Amanda Hale, presented by Nightwood in Ottawa at a conference of the National Association of Women and the Law.

**April 1985**

Nightwood and Factory Theatre sponsored a reading of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc* by Jovette Marchessault.

**May 1985**

Plutonium Players from San Francisco presented *Ladies Against Women* at the Theatre Centre as a fundraiser for Nightwood.

**May - June 1985**

The Next Stage: Women Transforming the Theatre, at Festival of Theatre of the Americas in Montreal.

**Summer 1985**

*Canadian Theatre Review* 43: special issue on Women in Theatre included "Notes from the Front Line" with photos and short statements by each of Nightwood's founding four, as well as a script for and articles about *This is for You, Anna.*

**September 1985**

Nightwood restructured and hired a General Manager, Linda Brown. Mary Vingoe was appointed the Interim Artistic Director.

**October 3 - 6, 1985**

*Penelope*, a re-telling of Homer's *Ulysses* with the poetry of Margaret Atwood, adapted by
Cynthia Grant, Peggy Sample and Susan Seagrove at the Theatre Centre.

October - November 1985

Transformations, staged readings at the Theatre Centre: Oct. 24-25 - War Babies by Margaret Hollingsworth, directed by Mary Vingoe; Oct. 26-27 - Portrait of Dora by Hélène Cixous, directed by Banuta Rubess; Oct. 31-Nov. 1 - Signs of Life by Joan Schenkar, directed by Svetlana Zylin; Nov. 2-3 - Masterpieces by Sarah Daniels, directed by Mary Durkan.

November 1985

This is for You, Anna tours England.

1986

Cynthia Grant left Nightwood to co-found the Company of Sirens.

January 14-16, 1986

This is for You, Anna returns to Toronto after its English tour for a run at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace.

March 10, 1986

4th annual Five Minute Feminist Cabaret at Lee's Palace, presented by Nightwood and Women's Cultural Building: Djanet Sears presented the earliest version of Afrika Solo.

March 13-17, 1986


**May 14-June 1, 1986**

Nightwood presents *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near*, Violette Leduc by Jovette Marchessault, translated by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, directed by Cynthia Grant, starring Kim Renders, at the Theatre Centre.

**June 1986**

DuMaurier World Stage Festival production of *This is for You, Anna*.

**1987**

**January 22-30, 1987**

Nightwood presents *My Boyfriend's Back and There's Gonna Be Laundry - A Lone Woman Show* written and performed by Sandra Shamas at the Factory Theatre Studio Cafe.

**January 22 - February 1, 1987**

at the Annex Theatre, Second annual Groundswell:


**February - March 1987**

Nightwood presents in association with Toronto Free Theatre, *War Babies* by Margaret Hollingsworth, directed by Mary Vingoe.
March 9 1987
at Theatre Passe Muraille, Nightwood, with the Women's Cultural Building, presents the 5th Annual 5 Minute Feminist Cabaret. A Fertile Imagination by Susan Cole, was first conceived and presented as a monologue.

May 1987
Nightwood is still at the Poor Alex but is no longer part of the Theatre Centre.

June 2 - 21, 1987
Nightwood and The Humbert Humbert Project (Project) in association with Theatre Passe Muraille present The Last Will and Testament of Lolita.

August 1987
Maureen White began work as Artistic Coordinator.

November 1987
at the Annex Theatre, 3rd annual Groundswell:
1. Let's Go to Your Place by Kate Lushington and the Clichettes, directed by Maureen White;
2. Venus Pearls by Colleen Wagner, directed by Mary Durkan; 3. Idylls by Wanda Buchanan, Susan Coyne, and Paula Wing; 4. The Euguelionne by Louky Bersiniak, directed by Grant;
5. How I Differ from the Norm by Mary Hawkins, directed by Maggie Huculak; 6. Ebony Voices by collective members Jo-Anne Atherley, Margaret Joseph, Alana McKnight, Carolyn Harris, and Vivine Scarlett; 7. Settlements by Beverly Yhap, directed by Kathleen Flaherty;

December 1987
Nightwood and Theatre Direct present a School Tour of The Kingdom of LoudAsCanBe.

1988

January 16 - 31, 1988
at the Factory Theatre Studio Cafe, Nightwood presents Up Against the Wallpaper, written

**March 1988**

Maureen White was laid off.

**March 31 - April 23, 1988**

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* "a comical Shakespearean romance" by Anne-Marie MacDonald, commissioned and presented by Nightwood, directed and dramaturged by Bajuta Rubess, at the Annex Theatre. Nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore award and won a Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play award.

**September 1988**

Kate Lushington was hired in July and began work as Artistic Director in September.

**December 1988**

Fourth annual Groundswell:


**1989**

**March 23 to April 16, 1989**

Nightwood presents *The Paraskeva Principle* ("A slightly red comedy celebrating the life and art of Paraskeva Clark") written and performed by Francine Volker, directed by Jo Ann McIntyre, at the Annex Theatre.
May 4 - 28, 1989

Nightwood presents The Herring Gull’s Egg, written by Mary Vingoe and directed by Maureen White, at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace.

Fall 1989

First issue of Nightwords Newsletter.

November 16-26 1989


1990

January 1990

Nightwood toured Goodnight Desdemona to the Great Canadian Theatre Company (Ottawa), Vancouver East Cultural Centre, Northern Light Theatre (Edmonton), and then opened at the Canadian Stage Company’s Berkeley St. Theatre on March 28, 1990.

February 9 - March 4 1990

Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots by Monique Mojica, a co-production with Nightwood, directed by Muriel Miguel, at the Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace.

October 1990

Kate Tucker is hired as Business Manager and Lynda Hill is now the associate artistic coordinator.
Fall 1990

newsletter is re-titled Night Talk; Nightwood moved to their current space on Adelaide Street; Diana Braithwaite is the Playwright in Residence.

November 11, 1990

Write Off! fund-raising event at the Annex Theatre.

November 15-25, 1990


1991

February 1-24, 1991


April 18, 1991

at Young People's Theatre, An Evening with Sandra Shamas and Itah Sadu, a benefit for Nightwood and the Friends of Shopping Bag Ladies.
Summer 1991
Sister Reach: Nightwood's anti-racist outreach project was run by Annette Clough, resource and outreach coordinator, and Pauline Peters, associate artist.

June 28 - July 7, 1991
Nightwood Theatre presents the current production of *dark diaspora...in dub* by ahdri zhina mandiela, a Fringe Festival show at the Poor Alex.

October 24 to November 3, 1991
at the Tarragon Extra Space, "Hot Flashes" Seventh annual Groundswell:

Fall 1991
Monique Mojica is the playwright-in-residence

1992

January/February 1992
at the Poor Alex, Nightwood Theatre presents Diana Braithwaite's The Wonder Quartet:
1. *The Wonder of Man: A Black Woman's Trip Through the Galaxy*, directed by Djanet Sears, (Jan. 21-Feb.9); 2. *Martha and Elvira* directed by Alison Sealy-Smith (Feb. 11-16); 3. *Do Not Adjust Your Sets* directed by ahdri zhina mandiela, (Feb.11-16); 4. *Time to Forget* directed by Braithwaite, a workshop production of a play originated at the Write Off fundraiser, about a family Christmas.
March 8, 1992
Bathurst Street Theatre, 10th annual Five Minute Feminist Cabaret, "500 years of resistance."
New artistic selection committee: Lillian Allen, Maxine Bailey, Ruth Dworin, Sally Han, Lee Pui Ming, Kate Lushington and Monique Mojica.

October - November 1992
Tarragon Theatre, "Making Waves," 8th annual Groundswell:

1993
February - March, 1993
Nightwood Studio, *Dryland: A Story Cycle* written and performed by Pauline Peters, directed by Diane Roberts.

March 15, 1993
Young People's Theatre, 11th annual Feminist Cabaret. Diane Roberts is the artistic director and Alisa Palmer the assistant director.

May 14-16, 1993
at the Nightwood Studio, *Untitled*, a workshop exploration of issues of race and friendship with Kate Lushington, Djanet Sears and Monique Mojica.
June 13 and 14, 1993

June 26 and 27, 1993
Nightwood Studio, co-produced with b.current productions, *Calypsos and Coups* by M. Nourbese Philips.

July 1993
Kate Lushington resigns as artistic director as of Dec. 1. and Diane Roberts continues as Associate Artistic Director.

October 9-30, 1993
*Charming and Rose: True Love* by Kelley Jo Burke, directed by Kate Lushington, at the Theatre Centre.

1994
March 1994
the new artistic team is announced: Leslie Lester is Producer, Diane Roberts and Alisa Palmer, Artistic Co-Directors.

March 29 to April 3, 1994
Poor Alex Theatre, 9th annual Groundswell:

August 1994
Die in Debt presents in association with Nightwood Theatre, *Oedipus* by Ned Dickens, directed by Sarah Stanley.
Fall 1994
Nighttalk newsletter in new, one page format; Djanet Sears is playwright in residence for 1994/95 season.

November 7, 1994
first annual fund-raising party at El Convento Rico nightclub.

November 15-December 4, 1994
Wearing the Bone, subtitled "A revolution in paradise," written and directed by Alisa Palmer, presented by Nightwood at the Theatre Centre West.

1995
March 24-April 2, 1995
Theatre Centre West, 10th Groundswell:

March 29, 1995
10th Anniversary Groundswell Panel Presentation, hosted by Diane Roberts and Alisa Palmer: discussion on the topic "Art in Your Face: what is women's theatre development and what should it be?". The moderator was Sally Han and panellists were Diana Leblanc, Sandra Laronde, adhri zhina mandiela, Baquta Rubess, Judith Thompson, and Jean Yoon; Alison Sealy-Smith and Kim Renders also participated.
May 1995
Nightwood Studio, The Coloured Girls Project, a workshop written and directed by Diane Roberts.

Fall 1995
Soraya Peerbaye is an Associate Artist and the Groundswell Coordinator; Playwrite in residence for 1995/96 is Kim Renders.

November 1995 to March 1996
The Female Body series - a series of workshops on voice, movement, dance, and performance:

1996

Jay Pitter is the Associate Producer; Diane Roberts announces that she is leaving her position as Artistic Co-Director. Alisa Palmer is now sole Artistic Director, with Soraya Peerbaye as associate director.

March 8-30, 1996
Mango Chutney by Dilara Ally, directed by Diane Roberts, at the Music Gallery.

March 24, 1996

Brigantine Room at Harbourfront, the return of FemCab after a two year hiatus. Produced by Dina Graser, directed by Alisa Palmer, and curated by Graser, Palmer, Leslie Lester, Soraya Peerbaye and Jay Pitter. Hosted by Marium Carvell and Elvira Kurt.

May 8-12, 1996

11th Groundswell at the Factory Studio Cafe:
1. Fed by Fairies by Sabina Fella, directed by Alisa Palmer; 2. Moist Again/Fragments for a History of... created and directed by Trisha Lamie; 3. The Gypsy Texts, created and performed by Tannis Kowalchuk, directed by Palmer; 4. The Madwoman and the Fool: A Harlem Duet,

Oct. 26-Nov. 10, 1996

Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace, Sugar 'n' Spice in association with Nightwood present *Afrocentric* by David Odhiambo, directed by Maxine Bailey.

**Plans for 1997**

March 4-11 - Creativity Cave in association with Nightwood presents *Green is the Colour of Spring* by Jay Pitter

March 7 - FemCab

April 19- May 18 - at the Tarragon Extra Space, *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears.
Bibliography


Anna Project. "This is For You, Anna: A spectacle of revenge." *Canadian Theatre Review* 43 (Fall 1985): 127-166.

Bailey, Martha J. "Editor's Column." *Queens Quarterly* 96/1 (Spring 1989): 219.


Sidnell, Michael J. "Used Words." *Canadian Theatre Review* 75 (Summer 1993): 4-7.


