Re-viewing Reception: Criticism of Feminist Theatre in Montreal and Toronto, 1976 to Present

by

Laura Michelle MacArthur

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
University of Toronto

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Abstract
While the power dynamics between theatre critics and artists are inevitably imbalanced, as the written word reaches a wider audience and lives much longer than does performance, for feminist artists, the stakes in this relationship are heightened due to the disjunction in identity and ideology that often separates them from mainstream reviewers. This study exposes the gendered nature of theatre criticism, examining the dialogue about feminist theatre in which critics, audiences, and artists are engaged, and identifying its consequences beyond the box office.

Case studies are drawn from Nightwood Theatre (1979-present) in Toronto and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes (TEF) (1979-1987) in Montreal as well as the work of the TEF’s co-founder Pol Pelletier before 1979 and after 1987 in order to examine key issues in the critical reception of feminist theatre in Canada, including: censorship, the relationship between art and politics, translation, and how artists speak back to their critics. This dissertation argues that the standards employed by mainstream reviewers, while most often not intentionally discriminatory against women, run counter to the central qualities of much feminist theatre.
Reviewers’ tendency to separate text and spectacle and their consistent reification of universality and objectivity as critical ideals work in contradistinction to feminist theatre, which has historically placed greater emphasis on performance over written text and foregrounded the particularized nature of identity and experience.

Drawing extensively on archival materials and applying a materialist feminist framework to the study of theatre criticism, this dissertation examines the history of feminist theatre and performance in Canada from a different perspective than it has previously been studied and suggests new ways to understand the relationship between critics, artists, and audiences. Through its case studies emerge several practical suggestions about responsible and ethical critical writing that can be applied beyond the scope of feminist theatre.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandmother, Madeleine Castonguay, who passed away shortly before I finished writing. My grandmother had limited access to formal education, but she was the wisest person I have had the honour of knowing and has inspired this research in many ways. In one of our last conversations I told her I would name my first child after her, so it is only fitting that my thesis, the product of a (sometimes) painstaking labour and delivery, is dedicated to her.

I also dedicate this to my parents, Judy and Dave, and to my brother, Jonathan. My mom showed up at my first marathon with noisemakers and a homemade sign; she lost her voice from cheering and had blisters worse than mine from walking all over the city to watch the race. This is a reflection of the kind of cheerleader she has been my entire life. Her love, support, and gentle inquiries about how my “paper” is going have gotten me through my longest marathon yet. My stepdad shares my mother’s work ethic, optimism, and calm in the face of any storm, and I am truly grateful to him for his tireless cheerleading as well. My brother’s creativity and passion for what he does inspire me more than he realizes, and his razor sharp wit has kept me laughing over the years.

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research on actresses, introduced new and vital questions to my work. Mariel’s French language skills far exceed my own, and more important than the eagle-eyed copy editing she provided in both languages, her knowledge of Canadian theatre history and her experience as a theatre reviewer have brought an indispensible perspective to my work. I always looked forward to committee meetings, and I give my deepest thanks to Nancy, Paula, and Mariel for their contributions to this project. Together we unanimously agreed that Dr. Erin Hurley would be our top choice for external examiner, and I was delighted and honoured that she accepted. Erin’s feedback has provoked my thinking, and I will continue to return to it as I map out the future directions of my research.

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Introduction: The Artist Seeks Revenge

The 1973 horror film *Theatre of Blood*, a cult classic starring Vincent Price, depicts actors’ deepest and darkest fantasies. Spurned by negative reviews for most of his career and snubbed by the Critics’ Circle for their best actor award, veteran Shakespearean performer Edward Lionheart (Price) embarks on a killing spree, murdering his critics one by one, each in a gruesome manner inspired by one of the Bard’s plays (one critic is decapitated in his sleep and discovered by his wife when she awakens, as Imogen found the headless body of Cloten in her bed in *Cymbeline*; another is tricked into eating his beloved pet poodles just as *Titus Andronicus*’s Queen Tamora unknowingly ate her children baked into a pie). Lionheart is aided by a group of alcoholic vagrants living in an abandoned theatre and by his daughter, Edwina, who by day seduces the critic trying to solve the mystery of his disappearing colleagues and by night disguises herself in drag to lure her father’s victims to their deaths.

Edwina is played by Diana Rigg, who was perhaps enacting a revenge fantasy of her own in this role. Rigg, like many actors, was subject to harsh criticism throughout her career on stage and screen; in 1982, she published a compilation of some of the nastiest notices she and her contemporaries had received. The book, appropriately titled *No Turn Unstoned: The Worst Ever Theatrical Reviews*, includes a famous review written about Rigg: referring to the actor’s nude scene in Ronald Millar’s play *Abelard and Heloise*, *New York Magazine*’s John Simon quipped, “Diana Rigg is built like a brick mausoleum with insufficient flying buttresses” (qtd. in Rigg 64). While this could push some actors into the depths of humiliation and body image issues, Rigg recalls, “I still remember distinctly the dismay and hurt I felt on reading John Simon’s review […] but after some weeks I began to see the funny side of it, and not much later was quoting it
freely” (9). Indeed, it was Rigg’s sense of humour rather than a burning desire for revenge that led her to write the book, and critics are the first among those listed in her acknowledgements.

*Theatre of Blood* and *No Turn Unstoned* reveal the complexities of the relationship between critics and artists. Though it may be tempting to regard critics as power-hungry parasites and artists as their helpless victims, the reality is much more complex than this. As Rigg points out in her introduction, critics have played an integral role in pushing the art forward throughout the history of theatre. And, as her readers no doubt understand from the pleasure derived from reading the reviews she has collected, there is an art to criticism, even when it is at its nastiest. At its best, criticism is engaging, insightful, and can be appreciated independently of the work it discusses. Conversely, as both the real Diana Rigg and the fictional Edward and Edwina Lionheart show, artists have the power to speak back to their critics, whether it be through taking control of the printed word themselves or the more extreme and illegal measures depicted in *Theatre of Blood.* Moreover, beyond the bruised egos of actors, these works allude to the fact that criticism has a real and significant impact on the theatre and the world outside of it. John Simon’s assessment of Rigg provides one example of the influence of theatre reviews, revealing the double standard applied to actors’ bodies that places women under much greater

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1 Theatre history reveals a range of strategies employed by artists to have the last word in the critical dialogue. David Roberts shares some amusing examples in his article “‘As Rude As You Like—Honest’: Theatre Criticism and the Law.” These include “a glass of wine in the face (Tom Sutcliffe), a death threat (Nicholas de Jongh), or a punch in the nose (Richard Edmonds and not a few others)” (266). Josette Féral, in “The Artwork Judges Them,” details a famous incident in the Quebec context, wherein a harsh review published in *Le Devoir* in 1983 prompted Montreal theatres to boycott the newspaper, refusing to advertise in it or to offer complimentary tickets to its reviewers, and fanning the flames in an already tense relationship between critics and artists in the city (308-309). A parallel incident happened more recently in Toronto, when seasoned radio and web critic Lynn Slotkin was denied her complimentary tickets to Stratford after she filed a negative review of one of its productions in 2012 (Susan G. Cole documented this incident in *NOW* online; further reading is referenced in the works cited list).
scrutiny than men. As the feminist scholarship I examine in Chapter One suggests, focusing on female performers’ appearances in this way reinforces the perception that women’s value is rooted in their bodies and creates problematic dichotomies separating men and women, and mind and body that resonate beyond the theatre. Theatre criticism, like all writing, is gendered, and in this study I am interested in uncovering how we write about women’s theatre, and what the material and ideological implications are.

I was first inspired to begin this research as a Masters student at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies (then called the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama) at the University of Toronto. Kelly Thornton, artistic director of Nightwood Theatre, came to one of my classes to speak about her company’s creative process. This was shortly after Nightwood’s production of Lisa Codrington’s *Cast Iron* had been torn apart in the mainstream press, with critics from *The Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star* complaining that they could not understand the Bajan dialect featured in the play. Thornton was still reeling. The conversation shifted as our class quickly sided with Thornton and began passionately rallying against the state of theatre criticism in Toronto; as a feminist, I shared Thornton’s anger but wanted to know more. Were these reviews of *Cast Iron* and Thornton’s experience indicative of a larger problem? How do critics write about feminist companies like Nightwood? And what does this all mean for broader perceptions of women, gender, and feminism?

As I discuss in Chapter One, I am interested in the reception of feminist theatre in particular because the stakes for these companies and artists in their relationship with critics are high. The feminist theatre movement in Canada peaked in the late 1970s and 1980s; companies during this time inhabited the margins of the theatre scene due to the radical nature of their work and often, an explicit desire to be disassociated from the mainstream. While existing on the
periphery enabled feminist artists to create innovative work and express counter-hegemonic views with less fear of censorship, these artists often struggled for funding and were therefore more dependent on ticket sales for revenue. Negative reviews, therefore, could have a magnified impact on them, affecting box office sales, reputation, and grant applications. More significantly, there is an obvious disjunction between the identities of critics and those creating and attending feminist theatre: putting gender identity aside (theatre reviewing in newspapers continues to be dominated by men, while feminist theatre companies and audiences are generally constituted by women), mainstream newspapers are not driven by the same motivations as feminist theatres. There is a clear disconnect—often, a clash—in ideology between these two parties that becomes evident in the analysis of reviews.

My study is rooted in a few key assumptions. First, as noted above, I assert that there are significant material and ideological implications emerging from the artist-critic relationship. Whereas artists and audiences often focus on the correlation between reviews and ticket sales, the outcomes of critical discourse are much vaster: reviews influence how a theatre company is perceived and/or perceives itself; impact the historical record; and reflect and shape attitudes about art, society, and politics. As I discuss in Chapter One, it is difficult to measure these outcomes, but a careful analysis of the discourse of reviews and the histories of the theatres and artists they involve suggests several ways in which theatre and society more generally are influenced by criticism. A second assumption guiding my study is that theatre criticism is gendered: the act of reviewing is a gendered act, beginning with the spectator-performer dynamic enforced by the theatrical apparatus, and extending to the act of writing itself, wherein mainstream critics, regardless of their actual identities, often assume a voice rooted in patriarchal values and address a reader whose profile matches their own (assumed) identity. A final key
assumption of this study is that artists and critics are engaged in a critical dialogue with one another that begins before the curtain rises, encompassing paratheatrical materials, performance, published reviews, talk-back sessions, online conversations, and more. Criticism is not the exclusive territory of newspaper reviewers and scholars, but an activity that takes many different forms. Seeing it in this way, I argue, endows artists with more responsibility and power in their relationship with critics.

My primary case studies consist of Nightwood Theatre (1979-present) in Toronto and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes (TEF) (1979-1987) in Montreal as well as the work of the TEF’s co-founder Pol Pelletier before 1979 and after 1987. As two of the longest running and most influential feminist theatre companies in Canada, Nightwood and the TEF provide a depth and breadth of material with which to analyze the relationship between feminist theatre and criticism over time, as does the work of Pelletier, whose career has spanned over thirty years. Both companies and Pelletier have produced work dealing with contentious and radical subject matter, inciting debates within the media and wider public about gender and women’s issues as well as censorship. Montreal and Toronto, as distinct centres of theatrical activity and feminist activism in Canada, also provide fertile ground for comparisons to emerge between the respective artist-critic relationships.

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2 I include Pelletier’s work before 1979 as she was a member of the collective that created La nef des sorcières (A Clash of Symbols) in 1976. This production is noted for its influence on feminist theatre in Quebec and for the sensation it caused in the media due to its subject matter and experimental style. Additionally, Pelletier’s work after the dissolution of the TEF is included, as she has carried on the company’s tradition of creating radical and experimental work.

3 Nightwood and the TEF broke relatively new ground on Toronto and Montreal stages by bringing issues such as domestic violence, rape, and reproductive rights to the fore—all pressing issues in the second wave of feminism, at its peak when the companies were founded.
The argument developed across these case studies is that the standards employed by mainstream critics to evaluate theatre, while usually not explicitly sexist or intentionally discriminatory against women, run counter to the central qualities of much feminist theatre. The theatre reviews analyzed in my study reveal a consistent, underlying emphasis on the separation of text and spectacle (often favouring one over the other), universality, and objectivity, three core values rooted in and sustained by patriarchal ideology, theatre tradition, and the generic qualities of the newspaper review itself. Feminist theatre, on the other hand, has historically placed greater emphasis on performance over written text for various reasons (and indeed, has often tried to displace the power of the written word)\(^4\); focuses on the particular over the universal, telling stories of marginalized peoples whose experiences are underrepresented on stage; and celebrates and illuminates the complex and heterogeneous nature of identity rather than feigning neutrality and homogeneity. While not all reviews about feminist theatre are negative or shockingly sexist by any means (though some are), the disjunction that exists between this kind of theatre and the institution of criticism has particular implications. The gendered nature of criticism has an immediate impact on feminist artists by influencing identity, both in terms of how feminist artists identify themselves and how others perceive them, and by influencing how feminist artists and companies are remembered in the historical record. Beyond this, mainstream theatre criticism shapes and sustains perceptions of gender and feminism more broadly. Before outlining my case studies, I will define the central terms of this study: feminist theatre and theatre criticism.

\(^4\) I emphasize “written” word because some Quebec feminist theatre, including many of the examples featured in this study, is characterized as “text-heavy.” However, performance is inextricably bound to text in the théâtre-femmes, as the power of language finds its fulfillment only when it is spoken on stage.
Feminist Theatre/Théâtre-Femmes

The project of defining feminist theatre is a difficult one. Susan Bennett addresses this issue in the introduction to her edited collection, *Feminist Theatre and Performance*, quoting Charlotte Canning’s discussion of her own troubles doing so for her monograph on feminist theatre in the US: “I became more and more disenchanted with the project of struggling toward a definition, however provisional, as ultimately artificial, exclusionary, and discriminatory” (qtd. in Bennett vii). Aligning her approach with Canning’s, one that identifies “practices, relationships, and methods that characterize the process of doing feminist theatre” (Canning qtd. in Bennett vii), Bennett writes, “In short, then, feminist theatre is a lot of different things—creators, communities, practitioners, audiences, styles, practices, critics” (vii). I share Canning’s and Bennett’s hesitance at defining feminist theatre and like them, believe it is more productive to see it as a range of different possibilities and incarnations. As feminism itself incorporates a variety of strategies to redress the fact of male dominance, avoiding a monolithic understanding of feminist theatre takes into account the heterogeneous, plural, and fluid nature of feminism. The differences between Nightwood, the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, and Pol Pelletier, and the distinct ways each has developed reflect the importance of adopting a looser and purposely vague frame. At the core of their work, however—and the work of other artists and companies who call themselves or who have been called “feminist”—is a drive for transformation. Lizbeth Goodman places emphasis on this in her definition of feminist theatre: “political theatre oriented toward change, produced by women with feminist concerns” (*Feminist Theatres* 1). And so, when I use the term feminist theatre, I refer to approaches to theatre creation and production that reflect a commitment to feminism(s) and to change, whether personal, socio-political, or artistic.
While all of the artists and companies in my study can fit into the framework I have outlined, it is important to note that in Quebec, the term “feminist theatre” is not often used; instead, artists and companies creating transformative, women-oriented theatre fall under the rubric of théâtre-femmes or théâtre des femmes. Lorraine Camerlain tracks the growth of the movement in her article, “En de multiples scènes” for a special issue of Canadian Theatre Review on feminist theatre published in 1985. While she warns that it would be reductive to propose a single definition of the abundance of theatre created by women in Quebec between 1974 and 1985, the period of time she delineates as witnessing the greatest burst of creativity, she provides the following general description of the movement:

[L]e théâtre des femmes désigne davantage celui dont le centre vital et nerveux est l’expression de la vie des femmes, de la pensée et du désir des femmes, celui qui cherche à inscrire le corps des femmes dans le corps social en lui donnant forme et espace dramatique, que celui qui est écrit par une femme, tout simplement. (74)

(T)héâtre des femmes further designates that of which the vital centre and nervous system is the expression of women’s lives, thoughts, and desires; that which seeks to inscribe women’s bodies in the social body by giving form and dramatic space; that which is written by a woman, quite simply.)

The emphasis on the body in Camerlain’s definition is significant, as it played a central role in women’s approaches to theatrical creation and production in Quebec during the 1970s and 1980s. Jane Moss links the importance of the body in the théâtre-femmes to the movement’s connection to French feminist theory and the concept of writing the body. Moss writes,

Although theatre has not been a primary medium for partisans of l’écriture feminine in France, Québec feminists have seen that on the stage they can focus attention on the female body through words and gestures. They can represent women’s bodies by re-presenting them. In collective works, monologues and musical dramas, they have placed the female body at center stage to be exposed, demystified, reclaimed, rehabilitated and reintegrated. These are gynocentric plays in which women authors and performers invite women spectators to see themselves mirrored in the spectacle of the female body. No longer objectified by male writers who used actresses to

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5 This and all subsequent translations in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise indicated.
depict their own phobias or fantasies, the female body becomes the subject, the primary generator of dramatic text. (18)

As my case studies in Chapters Two and Three demonstrate, the centrality of the female body in the théâtre-femmes has led to clear differences between feminist theatre in French and English Canada; it also bears an influence on its critical reception. Moreover, while women’s theatre in Quebec has developed in various ways since the 1970s and 1980s, Pol Pelletier continues to experiment with writing the body in her performance practices today.

Reviewing versus Criticism

The potential differences between criticism and reviewing, critics and reviewers are often debated and unresolved. For the purposes of this study I will use these terms interchangeably, aligning myself with Patrice Pavis who, in his entry for “theatre criticism” in his Dictionary of the Theatre, argues,

[W]e should not make a strict distinction between what a theatre critic does and what the author of an article in a theatre review or academic essay does. It does not seem possible to define a standard discourse of dramatic criticism, as the evaluation criteria vary widely depending on the aesthetic and ideological position of the author and his or her implicit conception of theatre and mise-en-scène. (390)

In addition to this, as I discuss in Chapter Five, the changing state of the newspaper and the printed word, combined with the unrelenting growth of the Internet has transformed the meaning of criticism and who has access to it. Just as theatre reviews published in dailies can sometimes amount to consumer reportage, blogs can play host to detailed, thoughtful analysis and vital documentation—there is a clear blurring of lines between the categories of criticism and reviewing, and both are shaped by factors such as ideology, media and genre, and individual

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6 Anton Wagner discusses the distinction between reviewing and criticism in the Canadian context in his introduction to Establishing Our Boundaries: English-Canadian Theatre Criticism. This question arises throughout the contributions to his collection and is not easily answered. See his section entitled “Reviewers and Critics,” pages 17-18.
experience. Even before the explosion of the blogosphere, Irving Wardle, writing a monograph on the history, theory, and practice of criticism simply entitled *Theatre Criticism*, insisted on demystifying the perception that the act is an exclusive one. He prefaces his book by explaining why he addresses his reader as “you”:

> Critics are commonly spoken of as if they were a race apart—like numismatists, taxonomists or hangmen. This is not the case. Everyone, certainly every theatre-goer, is to some extent a critic. Some speak of their opinions, some publish them; some pass through criticism and create material for the rest of us to criticize. The better we do it, the greater our chance of turning a transient pleasure into a permanent possession. (vii)

Defining criticism as an evaluative act in which critics, audiences, and—as I’ve asserted earlier—artists engage facilitates a more productive discussion of theatre creation and reception and distributes responsibility for the art, its progress, and its recorded history more broadly. I will develop this discussion further in Chapter One as I review the scholarly research and theorizing on theatre criticism.

While maintaining a broad working definition of criticism, I have focused my study on newspaper, magazine, and online theatre reviewing and chosen not to look at scholarly criticism with the exception of the occasional inclusion of reviews published in *Canadian Theatre Review* and *Jeu*, both of which bridge the two categories and attract a more diverse readership than traditional academic journals. Though blurred lines exist between journalistic criticism and scholarly criticism, there are some distinctions in terms of audience and publication that have a significant impact on the processes of theatre production and reception. Because reviews falling under the first category are addressed to a general audience and often published during a show’s run, they have a different and more immediate impact on theatrical production than scholarly criticism, which often addresses a more specific and limited audience and is published after a show has closed. I cannot ignore the fact, however, that these two categories often intersect, and
in particular that scholars rely on reviews to write history and criticism; I come back to this idea at different points in my study and discuss its implications in more depth in the conclusion.

**Re-Viewing Reception: Case Studies of Feminist Theatre and Criticism**

This dissertation is structured around case study groupings of Toronto and Montreal productions representative of key issues, themes, and debates surrounding feminist theatre and theatre criticism. These productions have been selected based on their historical significance to the companies and artists under study, their critical reception, and their potential to generate a comparative analysis with one another. While the case studies are placed in a rough chronological order, I am by no means attempting to write a linear or comprehensive history of the work of Nightwood Theatre, the TEF, or Pol Pelletier. Shelley Scott has done a formidable job of writing Nigthwood’s history, and, as I will discuss in my conclusion, the TEF and Pol Pelletier require the same kind of book-length project. Selecting a large and loose time frame for this project was important to me because it allowed me to track patterns in reception across temporal lines in addition to geographic ones. I began under the assumption that critics in the 1970s and early 1980s would display a greater degree of resistance to feminist theatre and its politics, and that their reviews would be littered with politically incorrect statements; I imagined that later reviews would show the marks of progress and a greater acceptance of feminism. This hypothesis was tested, challenged, and complicated through my research. The case studies reveal persistent (problematic) patterns in reception as well as progress; in some instances older notices reflect progressive views while later reviews seem dated and unsettling. The time frame has also provided me with a long view of these companies’ and artists’ relationship with critics that has helped me to track their developing dialogue and analyze its various reverberations.
Feminist Theatre and Critical Reception

This chapter begins with a brief examination of published interviews with Nightwood’s co-founders, in which they discuss the company’s identificatory turn from an avant-garde company of women to one that incorporated its members’ shared gender identity and feminist politics into its mandate and public profile. I use this as an entry point into the theory and research that inform this study, dividing it into two broad categories, theatre studies and sociology. Within the first category are several areas of research, including approaches to performance analysis, studies on theatre criticism itself, and feminist theory. Through my examination of this research and the more quantitative-based scholarship emerging from the field of sociology, I develop the case for studying theatre criticism in the distinct framework of feminist theatre, and expand my point made here that theatre criticism is not a parasitic art form, but one that exists independently and holds significant implications for the artistic and socio-political contexts in which it exists.

From Page to Stage and Back Again: Artists, Critics, and the Word

In her article tracing the evolution of Nightwood Theatre’s mandate, Shelley Scott describes the company’s origins: “Nightwood grew out of the alternative, collective theatre scene in Toronto and the international avant-garde and was initially committed to an experimental aesthetic” (“Collective Creation” 109). This description is equally fitting for the Montreal theatre scene at the time when the TEF was founded, the same year as Nightwood, in 1979. Louise Forsyth describes the 1970s as “a period throughout theatre in Québec when there was a proliferation of small theatre companies created by those passionately wishing to do experimental theatre work, to encourage personal and collective improvisation” (“Introduction: Québec Women Playwrights” vii). One of these companies was the Théâtre Expérimental de Montréal (TEM), co-founded by Pelletier in 1975. The gendered politics Pelletier experienced in
this company, as described in her solo show *Joie*, eventually led her to split from the TEM and co-founded the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes with the explicit aim of creating theatre by and for women.

Chapter Two looks at Nightwood’s and the TEF’s foundational productions and asks how their critical reception figured in both companies’ developing public profiles. The main Nightwood production I focus on is *The True Story of Ida Johnson* (1979), noted for the role its critical reception played in Nightwood’s evolving mandate. The Montreal production I examine is *La nef des sorcières* (translated as *A Clash of Symbols*) (1976). Though it precedes the founding of the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, I consider it as a foundational production because of its impact on feminist theatre in Quebec, an impact, I argue, that laid the groundwork for the TEF. Indeed, Pol Pelletier was involved in this production as a writer and performer, and brought its collective approach to creation to her work with the TEF.

These case studies reveal a central pattern that persists throughout this dissertation: how critics’ understanding of the text-spectacle relationship mediates their interpretation of gender and feminism in their reviews. Toronto critics’ response to *The True Story of Ida Johnson* and Nightwood’s other initial shows betrays a logocentric understanding of theatre, common to English Canadian theatre criticism at the time, that does not accommodate feminist approaches to creation and production. Montreal critics’ privileging of spectacle over text, on the other hand, means that *La nef des sorcières* and other early feminist performance did not fit into their paradigm of theatre. In addition to setting up a comparison between feminist theatre in the two cities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this chapter establishes their distinct critical environments.
Lost in Translation? *La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* in Montreal and Toronto

In the 1980s, both Nightwood and the TEF shifted their focus from producing collective creations to single-authored works. Shelley Scott sees this shift for Nightwood beginning around 1986, after Cynthia Grant’s departure to form the feminist collective Company of Sirens; this event “freed Nightwood to concentrate less on collective work and more on developing individual writing talent” (Cole qtd. in Scott, “Collective Creation” 116). Scott argues that this shift also signaled Nightwood’s move towards the mainstream. The TEF’s shift to single-authored work—detailed by Pelletier in *Joie* and attributed to the difficulty of maintaining the energy required by the collective creation process—happened much faster, after about two years of the company’s founding.

Jovette Marchessault’s *La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* (*The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc*) was produced by both companies during their transition periods. Marchessault’s play was one of the first single-authored scripts produced by the TEF when it debuted in 1981; Nightwood Theatre produced an English-language translation five years later in Toronto. The third chapter of this dissertation focuses on the reception of these respective productions of *La terre est trop courte* in Toronto and Montreal, using the case study to compare the contexts and practices of theatre criticism in the two cities and to ask broader questions about the role of translation in critical reception. How do reviewers deal with the added layer of translation in a production? What might account for a translation’s critical success or failure, and how do gender, feminist politics, and language intersect in critical reception? How can feminist companies mitigate the cultural differences embedded in translations to demonstrate their relevance to audiences and critics alike?

Here again the issue of the text-spectacle relationship surfaces as a persistent critical focus, with translation adding an extra layer of complexity to Toronto reviewers’ interpretation
of *The Edge of the Earth*. Criteria related to universality are also central in both contexts of reception, as critics’ perceived ability to relate to the play factors importantly into their assessment of it, though this is also influenced by translation in the instance of Toronto critics. Whereas my case study in Chapter Two looks at the role of performance in the critical dialogue, in this chapter I focus on paratheatrical materials, including programs, press releases, posters, and preview pieces, and how Nightwood and the TEF used them to establish the terms of their exchange with critics and audiences. Positioning artists as valuable contributors to critical discourse also leads to a questioning of their responsibility in facilitating understanding of their work.

**But is this theatre? The Art-Politics Divide and Mainstream Reviewing**

Pelletier left the TEF in 1985 and took a hiatus from professional theatre before embarking on her career as a solo artist in the 1990s. Most notable among her productions during this time are the autobiographical works about her life in the theatre, *Joie* (1992), *Océan* (1996), and *Or* (1997), which she performed in theatres and festivals in Canada, Europe, and Africa. The 1990s were characterized differently for Nightwood, as the company continued to move into the mainstream but produced plays that increasingly dealt with diversity among women, particularly issues of race and sexuality. In Chapter Four I examine the legacy of this history by focusing on the reception of two solo shows presented at the beginning of the new millennium: Pelletier’s *Nicole, c’est moi* (2004) and Nightwood’s presentation of Lisa Codrington’s *Cast Iron* (2005). Though skipping over the 1990s has left me with a noticeable gap in my roughly chronological structure, I see these two productions as being strongly informed by the work that came before them.

While these two productions are quite different, the reviews written about them elucidate another pattern in the critical reception of feminist theatre: the focus on politics over art, and the
questioning of whether feminist theatre qualifies as theatre to begin with. This pattern first surfaces in Chapter Two in the reception of *La nef des sorcières*; its endurance challenges the “progress hypothesis” I held before embarking on this research by showing that critics have asked the same questions of Pelletier’s work for over three decades. Nightwood’s work has not been challenged as consistently on these terms, but the reception of *Cast Iron* brought the relationship between feminist theatre and Canadian theatre (and the former’s place in the latter) to the fore. The separation of politics and art is related to another divide, that of content and form, which itself is perhaps a distant cousin of the text-spectacle divide. At the end of this chapter I build on the work of the previous two by looking at practical ways that criticism might avoid these binary frameworks, and the potential benefits of this for feminist artists.

**The Feminist Spectator as Blogger**

My final case study moves away from a focus on specific productions to an examination of how the Internet is changing the dynamic between feminist theatre and theatre criticism. Here I am particularly interested in the accessibility of the blogosphere, and how it expands the possibilities for critical dialogue between artists, audiences, and reviewers. Though their resources, capabilities, and uses of online activity differ, both Pol Pelletier and Nightwood have embraced the online world and exploited its various tools to shape the discourse surrounding their work, build community, and speak back to their critics. After establishing a theoretical and historical context for feminist activism online, I draw examples from Pelletier’s blogs and Nightwood’s Twitter account to discuss how the web addresses some of the problems with mainstream criticism identified throughout this dissertation.

In this chapter, objectivity, a core value underlying many of the reviews featured in my case studies, is examined more closely. Critics’ frequent ignorance of the ideological and material conditions influencing their engagement with performance leads to reviews that suppose
an invisible and neutral spectator whose opinion is presented as unquestionably authoritative and final. As I discuss in Chapter One, feminist theory has long challenged the existence of such a spectator. The blogosphere subverts mainstream criticism’s reification of objectivity by foregrounding subjectivity and celebrating individuality, and in this way provides a space for the kind of criticism scholars like Jill Dolan have been endorsing since the advent of feminist performance criticism. My chapter title pays tribute to Dolan’s long-standing commitment to both theorizing and practicing feminist spectatorship; I conclude my study with her most recent work on the topic.
Chapter One: Feminist Theatre and Critical Reception

Nightwood Theatre is known today as Canada’s longest-running professional feminist theatre company (Scott, Nightwood Theatre 23), an identity its members did not initially intend when they formed their collective in 1979. Though deeply involved with the burgeoning women’s movement at the time, co-founder Cynthia Grant saw experimentation with “post-structuralist/modern” aesthetics as the motivation for her work. Having recently returned from New York City, where she apprenticed with avant-garde theatre company Mabou Mines, Grant desired to “‘turn on’ the Toronto theatre community to new work with radical artistic vision” (“Still ‘Activist’” 149). Indeed, Grant asserts that she and her co-founders Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe, and Maureen White—who shared her drive for artistic innovation—expressly sought to avoid the label of “women’s theatre”:

[W]e 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. (“Notes from the Front Line” 45)

However, this label would be impossible to avoid. Mary Vingoe writes,

We were assumed to be working for political reasons even though our material was not highly political. We were assumed to be lesbians because, the logic went, for what other reason would four women want to work together? […] We were then and are still now considered to be women who run a theatre company, rather than artists who happen to be women. (48)

According to Grant, these assumptions were rooted in the critical response to Nightwood’s work, beginning with their inaugural production The True Story of Ida Johnson, an adaptation of a novel by Sharon Riis staged in 1979. The Toronto critics’ focus on gender in response to this production thrust the company into an ongoing “negotiation of identity” which eventually led them to incorporate their feminist politics into their public identity and mandate (Grant, “Still ‘Activist’” 149). Grant cites an interview with The Globe and Mail’s Ray Conlogue about The
True Story of Ida Johnson, in which Conlogue focused on what he saw as the collective’s decision to form a women’s theatre company rather than on their emerging style, as a “harbinger of the life ahead” (149).7 Grant concludes, “Yes, I’ve always been a woman and a feminist, but I didn’t realize that this would be in the forefront of how the world saw me as an artist” (149).

This instance of disjunction between Nightwood’s projected image and the mainstream press’s interpretation is symptomatic of the larger divide that has historically existed between artists and critics. Josette Féral, in “‘The Artwork Judges Them,’” sums up one of the root causes of this divide: “Theatre artists have a hard time accepting the fact that the critic is not only a self-proclaimed assessor of their work but also someone who can accuse them publicly” (309). The power afforded by the public nature of criticism is manifold and threatening to artists because, as Féral points out later in her article, the written word of the critic reaches a much wider audience than the performance he/she criticizes. Hence, if the “world” came to see Grant and her company in terms of their gender and political orientation, it was not because they saw The True Story of Ida Johnson, but likely because they read The Globe and Mail.

Nightwood’s eventual embrace of the feminist label would not ease its tense relationship with the Toronto critical establishment. The Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, a feminist-identified company from the beginning, would experience similar ups and downs in their relationship with Montreal critics, as would co-founder Pol Pelletier in her solo work. Indeed, the relationship between feminist theatre in Canada and criticism has been a particularly precarious one, as companies and individual artists identifying themselves with feminist politics have traditionally created work for audiences not necessarily represented by reviewers in the

7 Mary Vingoe describes Nightwood’s emerging style, exemplified in the The True Story of Ida Johnson and their next production, Glazed Tempera, as “a highly fluid mosaic of the poetic, the visual and a curious super realism” (“Notes from the Front Lines” 48).
mainstream press. These companies and artists also often exist on the margins of the theatre scene, and as a result the stakes in their power struggle with critics—such as audience attendance and financial support, for example—are often higher than they are for companies existing within the mainstream. Moving from Robert Wallace’s central premise in *Producing Marginality*, that “the processes of judgment brought to bear on Canadian theatre ultimately affect its nature” and “these processes create the distinctions within Canadian culture illustrated by the words ‘mainstream’ and ‘marginal’” (133-34), this project traces the material and ideological outcomes of the critical reception of feminist theatre in Canada.

Before turning to my case studies, it is necessary to explore Wallace’s assertion in more depth and to contextualize it within the broader scholarship on both theatre criticism and feminist theatre. In what ways does criticism affect the nature of (Canadian) theatre, and how exactly does it create distinctions between mainstream and marginal? How can we measure and make sense of the impact of criticism when it is embedded in larger systems of production and reception? Does the influence of criticism extend beyond the theatre itself—are there ideological outcomes, and if so, how can we understand them?

This chapter will lay out a theoretical framework for my study, focusing on the role of criticism in theatrical production and reception and how the existing scholarship addresses the four central questions above. I will outline the two major approaches to these questions: (1) the theatre studies perspective, which draws primarily from semiotics, reader response theory, and research on theatre audiences; and (2) the sociological perspective, which employs qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to study the role of arts criticism within broader social structures. In my examination of the theatre studies scholarship, I will look at how feminist
performance theory understands the performer-spectator relationship and the approaches to criticism that have emerged from this field.

**Understanding Criticism: Theatre Studies Approaches**

**Approaches to Performance Analysis**

Outside of academe, artists have long insisted on the tangible and significant impact of criticism on their work. David Roberts’ examination of theatre criticism and the law in his article “‘As Rude As You Like—Honest’” discusses cases dating back to 1901 in which performers and producers have sued reviewers for libel. Though the artists were not always successful in court—often because they could not prove malice, or intentional harm—the cases still rest on the common assumption that critics can damage professional reputations and box office revenue through their influence on public opinion. Kalina Stefanova’s respective studies of the relationship between critics and artists in New York and London, *Who calls the shots on the New York stages?* and *Who keeps the score on the London stages?*, test the same assumption: a compilation of interviews with prominent figures on both sides, the books provoke their most heated debate when it comes to their eponymous questions. While the critics interviewed by Stefanova hold varying opinions on their degree of power, most of the members of the New York and London theatre communities featured in the books agree that critics at least play a major role in generating publicity, which, again, has implications for reputation and box office.

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8 Roberts’ fascinating study outlines three areas in which critics and their subjects have been tested in English courts of appeal since the beginning of the twentieth century, each corresponding to a different aspect of the critic’s role:

first, as a representative of criticism with whom the general public may well disagree […]; second, as a publicist whose views may affect box office takings […]; and third, in Eric Bentley’s terms, as someone whose chief aim is ‘contact with the live actor’, and who in consequence treads that difficult ground in which professional and personal comment may be hard to distinguish. (269)
This sustained and invested interest in criticism within the theatre community has, interestingly, been unmatched within academe. Criticism has always been an integral part of the discipline of theatre studies—scholars engage in critical acts through their work and use criticism to analyze plays and reconstruct past performances—but it has been the object of study only sporadically. That criticism has an influence on theatre production and reception is well established, but the nature of that influence, including its specific material and ideological outcomes, has been a contentious and under-studied issue.

The earliest work on criticism in the discipline can be found within the various theories of audience reception developed from the fields of semiotics, linguistics, and sociology. While not a central focus, criticism is considered as one element within these fields’ broader explorations of how meaning is generated and interpreted in the theatre. Criticism is viewed as a key factor in the public discourse surrounding a production, which establishes theatregoers’ horizon of expectations and shapes their experience and the meanings they carry away with them. The approaches to the audience and its roles in the process of theatrical production and reception derived from these fields can also be applied to critics in a second way if we regard their work, the theatre review, as a document of reception, evidence of the meaning of a theatrical event as interpreted by a particular critic writing from a particular location. This application is useful in

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9 See for example Anne Ubersfeld’s *L’école du spectateur : lire le théâtre* 2, Fernando de Toro’s chapter on reception theory in *Theatre Semiotics. Text and Staging in Modern Theatre*, and Liviu Dospinescu’s “Attitudes recherche en phénoménologie de la réception théâtrale ou comment ‘une tourbière’ fait figure de réduction phénoménologique…” Each author takes up the issue of theatrical reception from a slightly different perspective: Ubersfeld draws largely from the field of semiotics; de Toro also draws from work on semiotics in literature and theatre, and near the end of his book outlines the newly-developing field (at the time of writing) of socio-semiotics; and Dospinescu draws from linguistics and theatre studies to arrive at his phenomenological approach. Patrice Pavis provides an invaluable summary of major theories of reception in *Analyzing Performance. Theater, Dance, and Film*. 
testing the expectations established by a company’s publicity materials and programs, as reviewers will often take cues from these materials.

Patrice Pavis has written extensively on performance analysis and its various approaches, elements, and tools. While his focus is not on criticism, his work can help shed light on the practice in several ways. In his landmark book *Analyzing Performance* Pavis outlines the major theoretical approaches to performance analysis, beginning with semiotics, its critiques, and its adaptations, and moving on to the influence of psychology and psychoanalysis, sociology, and anthropology on reception studies. Pavis’s discussion of these models not only encourages richer, more aware and informed critical practices in writing about performance, but also provides insight into how we “read” performance in the first place. Applied to a case study of critical reception, they can help in uncovering a critic’s approach and the factors that lead to his/her interpretation of a given production.

Moreover, Pavis’s brief discussion of the role of ideology in reception in both *Analyzing Performance* and his *Dictionary of the Theatre* is also useful in understanding the critic’s process of interpretation. This discussion complements the feminist scholarship taken up later on in this chapter, which is concerned with the influence, construction, and dissemination of ideology in performance as it relates to gender in particular. In *Analyzing Performance* Pavis draws on the work of Louis Althusser, Eli Rozik, and Baz Kershaw to develop his ideas of how ideology operates in the production-reception relationship. Pavis stresses the spectator’s need to identify with the hero in a text or performance on not only a psychological level, but an ideological one as well. He quotes Rozik, who writes, “The audience is basically much more interested in reconfirming their own values than caring for the happiness of the character with whom they identify; the hero is willingly sacrificed for the sake of what gives a sense of orientation in the
world” (264). If ideology factors so importantly for an audience, then in an examination of the critical reception of feminist theatre, some disjunctions might become apparent: What happens when the hero does not reaffirm the critic’s values? In fact, what happens when the hero challenges those values? Beyond the critic-performer dynamic, it is also important to interrogate how ideology operates in feminist theatre more generally, while being careful not to construct an audience as a homogenous mass sharing a single belief system—I take this up later on in my discussion of the myth of “preaching to the converted.” This, however, is hard to do, as ideology is a slippery term, difficult to pin down and locate. Moving from Kershaw’s assertion that, “ideology provides the framework within which [theatre] companies encode and audiences decode the signifiers of performance” (qtd. in Pavis, Analyzing Performance 264-65), Pavis argues, “In concrete terms, it is not easy to describe this transaction (which in fact entails neither encoding or decoding); for we lack sufficiently subtle working processes and tools to be able to specify the ways in which it functions” (265). In his Dictionary of the Theatre, however, Pavis outlines several questions that may help to uncover how ideology works; in the context of criticism, these questions are useful in understanding how criticism might influence the spectator’s experience and in applying them directly to the critic’s reading:

- What does the spectator expect from the theatre?
- What aspects of social reality does the spectator look for in the play?
- What connection is there between a mode of reception and the internal structure of the work […]? […]
- How can historicization be used to enable the audience to consider a given social system from the point of view of another social system? […]
- Can one distinguish between several different modes of theatre communication? (Dictionary 306)

Pavis’s questions and his discussion of ideology in Analyzing Performance point to the need of any study of reception to consider the socio-historical context of the production and corresponding critical work, and the production and play text themselves. The feminist
scholarship discussed below asserts that ideology is embedded in a work but often hidden, and Pavis’s work helps to uncover the different and complex ways ideology functions within the production-reception relationship.

Like Pavis, Roger Deldime in “Création, médiation, réception” offers methodologies with which to study criticism that bridge theoretical and empirical approaches. While he describes his strategies for analyzing creation, mediation (meaning criticism), and reception as “eclectic” (23)—a necessity, he argues, because theatre is an eclectic subject—Deldime draws largely on the fields of linguistics and sociology. For the mediation module, he proposes a series of ways to categorize and analyze the language of theatrical reviews in order to uncover the distinct political, philosophical, aesthetic, and affective tendencies of articles in the print media (14-15).

For example, he describes his analytical model in this way:

1. les indicateurs stylistiques se répartissent entre deux couples : langage intellectuel et langage affectif ; langue commune et langue particulière ; le degré de favorabilité indiquant le caractère positif, négatif ou neutre du critique ;

2. les indicateurs relatifs à la communication : communication informative et communicative instrumentale (qui vise à produire des effets sur le lecteur) ; communication unique et communication multiple ;

3. la quantification thématique (fréquence d’apparition des items et nombre des mots contenus dans chacun d’eux.) (14)

(1. stylistic indicators are split into two groups: intellectual language and affective language; common/shared language and particular language; the degree of favourability indicating the critic’s positive, negative or neutral character;

2. indicators related to communication: informative communication and instrumental communication (which aims to produce effects on the reader); unique communication and multiple communication;

3. thematic quantification (frequency of appearances of items and the number of words contained in each of them.) )
Deldime’s method amounts to a near-scientific way to deconstruct reviews. The kind of close reading he describes and his heightened attention to language can also be seen in the work of scholars such as Barbara Hodgdon and David Roberts, whose work I describe later on in this chapter, and Québécois scholars Yves Jubinville and Marie-Christine Lesage, whose work I draw on in Chapters Two and Four respectively.

Before exploring the material and ideological implications of the critical reception of feminist theatre, it is necessary to engage in a close reading of the discourse surrounding it—the reviews themselves. Adapting Deldime’s approach to the reviews of the particular productions that constitute my case studies allows me to answer the important question of how critics write about feminist theatre with thoroughness and precision. Categorizing the kind of language used and its communicative functions, quantifying the frequency of certain words or thematic references, as outlined above—to name just a couple elements of this kind of method—is an integral first step in uncovering discursive patterns.

Susan Bennett broke new ground in 1990 when she dedicated a complete study to developing a model of audience experience. ¹⁰ Her book *Theatre Audiences*, first published in 1990 with a second edition released in 1997, foregrounds the spectator’s role in theatrical meaning-making. Drawing on theories of reading, viewing, semiotics, and post-structuralism, Bennett’s model positions the spectator’s understanding and experience of theatre at the intersection of an outer frame containing “all those cultural elements which create and inform the theatrical event” and an inner frame containing “the dramatic production in a particular playing

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¹⁰ Herbert Blau also published a book on the topic in 1990 (simply titled *The Audience*), though his study is not cited nearly as often as Bennett’s, perhaps due to its density and highly theoretical nature, as some reviewers have pointed out. (See, for example, reviews by Philip Auslander in *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992), Michael Quinn in *Theatre Research International* 7.1 (1992), and Reed Whittemore in *Theatre Survey* 32.1 (1992).)
space” (139). A key element in the outer frame is criticism, which mediates the audience’s reading of the theatrical event before or after it takes place through the interpretive strategies it offers them (92-3).

Bennett is careful to note that while the critics behind these interpretive strategies often “act as representatives of mainstream cultural ideology and their shared assumptions of what constitutes theatre reflect their [socio-economic] status,” there is always a diversity of viewing publics, meaning that critics who write for “specialist or oppositional” publications may hold dissenting assumptions and values and thereby offer alternative critical discourses (93-94). I would add to this point that within these groupings of critics (mainstream and alternative) there is diversity. Bennett’s study ultimately reinforces the heterogeneity of theatre audiences, and it is important not to overlook the heterogeneity of reviewers as well. As my case studies throughout this dissertation reveal, there is significant variance in how critics respond to feminist theatre. In Chapter Four, one of my foci is the complex relationship between identity and criticism, specifically the tensions created between artists and critics occupying different positionalities, and between critics and the publications for which they write.

Bennett’s study provides insight into my first question, outlined at the beginning of this chapter, regarding the ways criticism affects the nature of theatre: as part of the outer frame, Bennett argues, criticism shapes both the audience’s horizon of expectations and, ultimately, the meanings they carry away with them. She writes,

In the Western theatre audience that this study assumes […] it is the tension between the inner frame of the fictional stage world, the audience’s moment by moment perception of that in the experience of a social group, and the outer frame of community (cultural construction and horizon of expectations) which determine the nature and satisfaction of the interpretive process. (156)
Bennett’s model of the audience reveals criticism to be embedded in larger networks of production and reception, making it difficult to isolate its effects. While many of the examples Bennett draws on point to the power of critics to affect the kinds of audiences (and numbers of people) who attend particular productions, her interest in criticism is restricted to its influence on the audience and their interpretive processes, and therefore is not focused specifically on the critic-performer relationship. Nevertheless, the underlying assumptions in Bennett’s work concerning the heterogeneity of theatre audiences and the agency of individual spectators are important to consider alongside the feminist theories of spectatorship and criticism that I discuss later in this chapter.

Ric Knowles’ *Reading the Material Theatre* (2004) engages in a detailed analysis of the various and varying conditions of production and reception that impact audience experience. Knowles develops and demonstrates a theoretical approach to performance analysis, drawn from “cultural materialism, theatre semiotics, and reception work in the field of cultural studies” (201), which takes the entire theatrical experience into account—from the theatre training and tradition informing a production to the public discourse surrounding it. Like Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences*, his thorough examination of the ways in which specific aspects of production and reception shape the audience’s process of meaning-making provides a strong model for analyzing the critic’s work and understanding his/her role as audience member.

Underlying each of my case studies is the question of how reviewers write about feminist theatre. Both Knowles’ and Bennett’s theoretical frameworks provide some insight into this question by helping to speculate about the particular readings each production has made possible—indeed, encouraged—and how reviews interpret, reinforce, or challenge these readings. If common language, interests, and conclusions emerge across reviews, then it is
important to consider their relationship to signals from the production (a result of varying and various conditions) and its interaction with the particular conditions of reception surrounding it.\footnote{11} Moreover, as Knowles and Bennett apply their models to case studies, both show how performance collides with conditions of production and conditions of reception to construct audiences, an argument that has also been made by feminist theorists like Jill Dolan.\footnote{12} In other words, these models show how elements such as script, creative team, venue, ticket price, and historical moment of reception create particular viewing positions and/or assume particular audiences. In examining the critical reception of the feminist theatre productions featured in my study, it is important to consider the audiences discursively constructed by each production and/or company/artist, the critics’ degree of identification or disidentification with them, and how this is reflected in reviews.

Knowles’ model of performance analysis moves beyond Bennett’s focus on the audience by looking closely at theatre-makers as well. His “materialist semiotic” approach understands meaning to be produced in the theatre as a negotiation at the intersection of three “shifting and mutually constitutive poles”: performance text (e.g. script, \textit{mise en scène}, design), conditions of production (e.g. rehearsal process, theatre architecture, historical/cultural context of production),

\footnote{11} Knowles’ brief example of the Canadian Opera Company’s advertising campaign for its 1996-97 season asserts a direct relationship between marketing and critical reception and interpretation. The COC’s ad campaigns highlighted different elements of each production—for example, Atom Egoyan’s direction for their production of \textit{Salome} and Maurice Sendak’s design for \textit{Hansel and Gretel}—and the reviews, in turn, consistently focused on these elements. In fact, the productions’ degree of critical success seemed very much weighted on the success of these highlighted elements.

\footnote{12} See, for example, Dolan’s case studies of liberal, radical and materialist feminist theatre in \textit{The Feminist Spectator as Critic}. 
and conditions of reception (e.g. publicity and reviews, ticket prices, neighbourhood of theatre, historical/cultural context of production) (3, 19). Knowles describes his triangular model:

Each pole of the triangle is constituted by multiple and multiply coded systems of production, systems of communication, and systems of reception, all working in concert or in tension both within their own “corner,” and along the axes that hold the poles together and in tension with one another. “Meaning” in a given performance situation—the social and cultural work done by the performance, its performativity and its force—is the effect of all of these systems and each pole of the interpretive triangle working dynamically and relationally together. The degree to which reception is (pre)determined by culturally dominant contexts and mechanisms of production, and the degree to which resistant meanings are available, depends upon the amount of productive tension and slippage within and among the corners. (19)

Knowles’ model is a central part of the critical framework of my investigation, which focuses on the pole of reception and its interaction with the other two poles. By understanding the three poles as mutually constitutive, this model fosters a view of criticism as both influenced by and having an influence on elements contained within the performance text and the conditions of production. The latter perspective facilitates an exploration of the ways in which criticism affects the nature of theatre and, significantly, of the potential impact of criticism outside of the theatre. Indeed, Knowles’ inclusion of “the social and cultural work done by the performance” in his definition of “meaning” implies that there is an impact outside of the theatre; he interrogates this possibility in his brief examination of the Canadian Opera Company’s invocation of social issues in its marketing and staging of Fidelio and Oedipus Rex with the Symphony of Psalms in the late 1990s, asking, “What does it mean to use marketing and dedications to invoke social concerns or social conscience around a production that makes these choices, and what sorts of cultural work do the productions in fact perform?” (98). He addresses the issue of cultural work more explicitly in his conclusion:

Theatrical productions take place in history and, as cultural productions, are inextricably connected to the material, historical, and cultural contexts from which they emerge and to which they speak. […] [Productions] change meaning as the
world in and through which they are received changes. Similarly (and simultaneously), changes in theatrical formations, relations, delivery systems, and modes of reception are themselves both produced by, and productive of, changes in the social formation itself. (202)

Knowles’ point here is worth emphasizing because it stresses the relationship between theatre and the social world, and, moreover, suggests that critical discourse can and does carry material and ideological implications. In the case of feminist theatre, I am interested in how the production-reception relationship within the theatre relates to women’s positioning in broader socio-political structures—this, of course, is difficult to measure, but crucial to explore.

Dorothy Hadfield acknowledges her debt to Knowles in her study of the production and reception of women’s plays in Toronto, *Re: Producing Women’s Dramatic History*; her methodology draws on his model of performance analysis and provides a useful example of how to adapt it within a feminist mode of inquiry.13 Hadfield traces the process of how women’s theatre becomes successful in the mainstream and assesses how audience and critical reception influence script publication. Hadfield also discusses the implications of script publication for the place of women’s work in the historical record, ultimately establishing a relationship between critical reception and what she aptly calls “the quality and type of historical remainders” (10) or “historical visibility” (256), and demonstrating how criticism sustains distinctions between mainstream and marginal theatre.

Integral to Hadfield’s study is an investigation of how ideas of feminism are manipulated (promoted or downplayed) by producers of women’s theatre and artists themselves in their attempts to shape public discourse, how these ideas are taken up by reviewers and also how

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13 Hadfield specifically thanks Knowles for sharing his thoughts on her work and “a manuscript version of what would eventually become *The Theatre of Form and Production of Meaning*” (14).
feminism is treated more generally in the critical interpretation of and response to women’s theatre. Reflecting on the power of the “feminist” label, she writes: “Once attached, the ‘feminist’ label also functions in public discourse to demarcate a certain mode of reading or to imply a certain function that the work may or may not satisfy” (42). Sharing Knowles’ assumption that performances do social and cultural work, Hadfield’s case studies make it clear that there are ideological outcomes to the critic-performer relationship that are felt beyond the theatre: criticism, in many of her examples, reflects and perpetuates mainstream notions of feminism and constructions of gender. Not only does it do this in the language it uses to analyze and evaluate theatre, but also in the role it performs in larger systems of production and reception. As Hadfield’s case studies show, negative critical reception can limit the possibilities of publication for a feminist text, which can in turn limit its opportunities for performance or academic study and hence its potential for political subversion. On the other hand, it is important to consider the power that can be stimulated from the margins, as publication or more mainstream production can allow a work to be co-opted for other means. If feminist theatre engages in a critique of “the issue of exclusion from male discourse and the representations in which it is embodied” (Dolan, The Feminist Spectator 3), how effective is the critique if it occurs from the margins and is not widely disseminated? In other words, it is necessary to question how criticism is related to a play’s ability to achieve political and social change, a goal of both feminism and feminist theatre. This is a question to which I continually return in this study.

From Hadfield’s work, as well as Bennett’s and Knowles’, I have derived a list of questions that will be important to consider as I aim to understand how criticism has constituted performance and the conditions of production for the feminist artists and companies under study. These questions include the following:
• How do preview pieces frame productions for audiences/offer interpretive guides that influence audiences’ horizons of expectations?
• How do advertising materials establish horizons of expectations—how do they set up the play and affect what is taken up by reviewers?
• How do reviews acknowledge and/or construct the collaborative nature of feminist theatre?
• How do reviews construct and/or respond to the playwright’s status, celebrity, and/or reputation?
• How is the review framed within the newspaper?
• What stories do press photos show?
• How do theatre companies or individual artists use public discourse strategically to position their productions and identities?
• How is criticism reintegrated into a company’s or artist’s marketing materials?
• Which modes of reading does the feminist label demarcate? What are the specific expectations that come with the label?

**Theorizing Criticism**

While scholarship on audiences and models of performance analysis provide useful strategies with which to approach a study of criticism and its influence on theatre production and reception, the small body of research focused on theatre reviewing itself provides important insights into the changing role of the critic in the popular press and in the academy. This research, albeit limited, emerged in the last twenty-five to thirty years, coinciding with a shift in the discipline from a text-centric approach to analyzing theatre to one that takes a more holistic look at the text in performance and the various social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is embedded, as reflected by the models explored in the previous section. Interestingly, a significant amount of this work on criticism has come out of the field of Shakespeare studies. In Chapter Five I draw on an article published in 2007 by Peter Holland in *Shakespeare Bulletin* about how scholars writing theatre criticism might take a page from their counterparts in the blogosphere. Attempting to review a production of *Coriolanus* with the heightened self-consciousness of a blogger but for an academic journal, Holland demonstrates what amounts to a materialist approach to analysis not unlike Susan Bennett’s and Ric Knowles’ methods.
Scholars including David Roberts and Barbara Hodgdon have taken similar approaches in individual articles on Shakespeare production. Roberts’ persistent interest in criticism has led him to make the case for increased scholarly attention to the practice in multiple articles. In “Shakespeare, Theatre Criticism, and the Acting Tradition,” Roberts shows how criticism has shaped and sustained the Shakespearean acting tradition over time. His understanding of the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between theatre and criticism speaks to the need—in Shakespeare studies and in theatre studies more broadly—to pay more attention to paratextual materials like reviews and their integral roles in theatre production and reception. Criticism is not a passive, static medium but an active, fluid one that has a direct impact on performance: not only does it “memorialize” productions from the past, it helps shape productions in the future. Barbara Hogdon’s article “Looking for Mr. Shakespeare After ‘The Revolution’” examines the reception of Robert Lepage’s 1992 intercultural adaptation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream with a particular focus on the ideological implications embedded within it. Hodgdon is careful to qualify her understanding of the “discursive formation” surrounding theatre performance as “contradictory and heterogeneous” rather than unified, with emergent cultural meanings evident “to particular spectators in a specific sociohistorical moment” (70). Her argument, that it is possible to read the critical discourses surrounding the production “not only as a struggle over the meaning of theatrical signs but as symptomatic of current cultural anxieties about gender, race, and nationality” (70), reflects the fact that underlying many theatre reviews there are broader socio-political debates occurring and significant power dynamics at work—a key understanding in my approach to studying criticism as well. Both authors advance the field of Shakespeare studies by, as Hogdgon suggests in her conclusion, shifting the locus of study from

“examining director-auteurs and the ideotexts of their mise-en-scènes [sic] or the theatrical apparatus itself” to “the point of historical reception, where ‘theatre’ collides with spectators who may transform it into ‘a strange, eventful history’” (86). Their case studies provide strong examples of how materialist approaches to analysis can be applied to historical research and scholarly criticism.

In 2010 the journal Shakespeare published a special issue on reviewing; included in this volume is another article by Peter Holland as well as one on blogging by Eleanor Collins which introduces innovative ideas about the future of criticism that have influenced my thinking on the topic (see Chapter Five). Inspired by a 2009 conference entitled “Reviewing Shakespearean Theatre: The State of the Art” in Stratford-upon-Avon, the special issue seeks to fill what it sees as a clear void in scholarship. In their introduction, co-editors Paul Edmonson, Paul Prescott, and Peter J. Smith emphasize the importance of theatre reviewing:

Theatre reviewing is, in short, a vital cultural activity that shapes much of what we remember of past performances and exerts a profound influence on our experience of theatre-making in the present. Reviews are key sites for the circulation of knowledge and opinion—sometimes licentious, sometimes abominable—and for the dissemination of critical expertise and practical theatre work to a broader reading public. (277)

They go on to state, “Yet in spite of its cultural and economic importance, its impact on reputations, box offices and the circulation of Shakespeare in wider culture, the activity of Shakespearean theatre reviewing is itself rarely placed under sustained scrutiny” (278). Taking reviews seriously in this way—acknowledging their impact on knowledge production, artists’

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15 Cahiers Élisabéthains published a companion volume on international theatre reviewing for its fortieth anniversary in 2012. Paul Prescott, who co-edited both special issues, has written a monograph on Shakespeare reviewing which Cambridge UP is publishing in late 2013 entitled Reviewing Shakespeare: Journalism and Performance from the Eighteenth Century to the Present.
reputations, the historical record, and economic systems, among other things—validates their role in shaping material and ideological conditions and encourages further examination of the relationship between theatre practice and theatre criticism, and journalistic criticism and scholarly criticism. Though the Stratford conference involved several different constituencies, including artists, members of the public, students, and teachers, what emerges most clearly in *Shakespeare’s* exercise in “meta-reviewing” (278) is a dialogue between journalists and scholars, with the latter party exploring the implications of their engagement with the former’s work in ways that promise to shape the discipline. My processes of researching and writing this study have led me to a similar self-examination; a question that recurs throughout is how reviews are used in scholarship.

**Studies of Criticism and Critical Reception in Canada**

Within the broader field of Canadian theatre history, it is only since the 1990s that “theatre reviews began to be analyzed in a concerted, cross-Canadian manner by cultural historians” (Wagner 15). Anton Wagner’s *Establishing Our Boundaries* is the first and only collection of its kind in English Canada. Bringing together essays on individual critics from pre-confederation to the late 1990s, Wagner’s book rests on the assumption that criticism has an important social function beyond its immediate role in the theatre. Wagner presents his collection’s unifying argument in his introduction, writing,

> Newspapers and magazines have reflected and shaped how we view and express ourselves and how we differentiate ourselves from others—how we establish our personal, collective, and political boundaries. Nowhere is this cultural debate more evident than in press coverage of foreign and indigenous theatre and drama in Canada. (3)

Playing a “major mediating role in [the] cultural conflict between indigenous amateur or semi-professional theatre and foreign professional companies and between emerging Canadian
playwrights and the international repertoire” (14), criticism, according to Wagner, is inextricably linked to Canadian theatre’s ongoing process of identity formation, which itself reflects and contributes to broader national projects of self-definition. The essays included in the collection document changing critical functions and concerns over time and across space, but all assert the influence of criticism in the development of Canadian drama, theatre, and performance.

Hervé Guay makes a similar argument in his study of theatre criticism in Montreal at the beginning of the twentieth century, and credits Wagner as an influence on his thinking about the relationship between criticism and cultural identity. Guay’s 2010 book *L’éveil culturel : Théâtre et presse à Montréal, 1898-1914*, based on his doctoral thesis, brings together seven case studies of influential French language critics under the hypothesis that, “la critique théâtrale a joué un rôle dans la mise au monde de l’identité culturelle du Canada français” (12) (“theatre criticism played a role in the birth of French Canada’s cultural identity”). As Guay points out in his introduction, there is a dearth of scholarship on theatre criticism in Quebec, with only a limited number of articles on the topic published in journals and anthologies.16 Jean-Marc Larrue’s “Theatre Criticism in Quebec 1945-1985” tracks the development of criticism in the province from post-WWII through the Quiet Revolution and then to the founding of *Jeu* in 1976. Gilbert David’s “Notes critiques sur la critique théâtrale au Québec,” included in a 1988 theme issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* on theatre criticism, picks-up where Larrue leaves off, providing a detailed analysis of the state of the practice in Quebec; David’s pointed criticisms of *Jeu* provide

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16 In recent years, the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire de la littérature et la culture québécoises (CRILCQ) has supported research projects attempting to fill this gap. The project entitled “La réception critique du théâtre des femmes au Québec, 1930-1995” has been invaluable in my own study. The researchers on this project have compiled comprehensive archives of theatre reviews and other materials for select productions including *La nef des sorcières* and *Nicole, c’est moi*, which I write about in Chapters Two and Four respectively.
a counterpoint to Larrue’s positive analysis of the journal. Wallace, in *Producing Marginality*, includes a case study of the critical reception of Francophone plays in Toronto, which raises important questions regarding translation and underscores the heterogeneity of theatre audiences in Canada.

Wagner and Guay interrogate cultural identity and how it is constituted by such factors as modernity, Canada’s relationship with the United States (and France, in the case of Quebec), and religion. Both authors show how processes of self-definition are continuous and contingent, and how cultural or national identity is often fraught, conflicting, and heterogeneous. My study rests on similar assumptions, but with a particular focus on gender and feminism and the place of each within projects of identity formation occurring through theatre reviewing. Indeed, while my original intention was to narrow my focus quite tightly on how discourses of gender and feminism are taken up by mainstream reviewing, given the inextricable link between criticism and national identity, it quickly became clear that my case studies could not be examined outside of that framework. The complex relationship between feminism and nationalism is an underlying concern of each chapter.

As with any discussion of national identity, when talking about “Canadian” or “Québécois” theatre it is important to ask which performers and performances are included in and which are excluded from such definitions. If, as Robert Wallace also argues, “criticism plays a formative role in the theatrical process; it both responds to and determines what Canadian theatre is” (36), then an examination of criticism’s relationship with theatre will consider its role in distinguishing between mainstream and marginal, dominant and subordinate. What kinds of theatre have been included or left behind in the various critical attempts to define and promote Canadian theatre? After the nationalist impulses of the 1970s and 1980s subsided and critics
began to champion drama and theatre that reflected universal values, which types of theatre fit this criteria and which did not, and what were/are the implications?\(^\text{17}\)

The question of Canadian criticism’s role in creating and sustaining categories of mainstream and marginal was a focus of work published in the late 1980s and early 1990s as theatre criticism in this country was transitioning into what Wagner has labeled its “post-nationalistic” phase. As the project of defining a national theatre and drama became increasingly problematic, critics began to shift their focus to identifying theatre that speaks to “universal” truths and meets conventional artistic standards of what constitutes “good” theatre. Both Robert Wallace’s *Producing Marginality* and the 1988 theme issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* on criticism discuss the implications of these critical values, which are seen as rooted in liberal-humanist ideology. Paul Leonard, in “Critical Questioning,” suggests that the two dominant critical approaches in Canada are an outgrowth of this often-hidden and self-effacing ideology:

> Humanism, which in Canadian cultural (and other) circles remains the dominant philosophical orientation, asserts the priority of an essential and transcendent ‘human nature.’ Indeed, liberal humanist ideology is so pervasive that few of its adherents even acknowledge it as ideology: as the phrase ‘human nature’ suggests, humanism generally takes itself to be natural, to be objective reality. (5)

Ann Wilson, whose article “Deadpan: Ideology and Criticism” follows Leonard’s in the 1988 special issue of *CTR*, focuses on New Criticism—one of the two approaches discussed by Leonard—and the implications of its relationship to humanism.\(^\text{18}\) For Wilson, critical practices

\(^{17}\) Wagner, in his introduction to *Establishing Our Boundaries*, tracks the development of theatre criticism in Canada since 1979 through three key phases: from an era of cultural nationalism that champions the creation of a national theatre, to a post-nationalist phase in the 1990s that searches for universal values inherent in drama and theatre, to finally a “particularist” viewpoint that questions the previous phase’s assumption of a single “truth” or meaning in a work of art.

\(^{18}\) Leonard calls the other dominant approach “ersatz Romanticism,” which he sees as carrying on the Romantic Movement’s “privileging of the author as the source of meaning and value in the artistic product” (5). He argues that despite the differing foci of their critical attention, both
like New Criticism that are informed by humanist values inevitably create distinctions between “high culture” and “low culture.” She writes,

New Criticism, which focuses on art as a universal and so ignores the determination of the particular moment in history, does not acknowledge its own politics because its premise is that art, beyond considerations of race, class and gender, expresses what is essentially human. New Criticism refuses to question the standards by which it measures artistic achievement because these are understood as objective criteria unmarked by ideology. This notion of “high culture,” which creates an elite by initiating people into “the company of educated individuals,” reinforces the power of the dominant culture. It is a form of imperialism […] which maintains the relation between colonizer and colonized by denying the value of the latter’s work except as exotica. (15)

Wilson prefaces this statement by pointing out that “high culture” is invariably associated with the work of white men, and follows it by suggesting that the ideology of high culture is such a potent force that most of us subscribe to its values even if we do not fit its ideal profile (14).19 She uses the example of theatre of social action (with which feminist theatre, including some of the earlier work of the companies under study in this project, is often aligned) to show how theatre that does not conform to the unacknowledged standards held by many mainstream critics gets positioned as lowbrow by default, its social and political value undermined. Though Wilson does not discuss it, closely associated to the highbrow-lwbrow dichotomy is the professional-amateur divide, similarly used to distinguish between theatre that meets mainstream critical standards and theatre that falls short of them, regardless of the company’s actual status or accreditation. Further, New Criticism’s focus on the dramatic text as the independent source of ersatz Romanticism and New Criticism, which locates meaning in the work itself, are ultimately informed by humanist ideology. Leonard sees the dominant critical approach in Canada as a hybrid of the two (6).

19 This last point will be important to consider in my study as I examine the work of critics who do not fit the “ideal profile” but nonetheless perpetuate the ideology of high culture. It cannot be assumed that women critics will be less harsh when evaluating women’s theatre, for example.
meaning negates the significance of live performance. This oversight has specific implications for theatre of social action and early feminist theatre, which see the script as evolving rather than fixed and focus on consciousness-raising through various methods of audience interaction.\textsuperscript{20}

Some significant changes have occurred within the academy and the institution of theatre criticism in Canada since the publication of the special issue of \textit{CTR} twenty-five years ago. Most importantly, New Criticism does not bear the theoretical or practical influence it did when Leonard and Wilson published their articles. While New Criticism is integral to Wilson’s argument in particular, her feminist analysis of criticism remains relevant. In my study, I look at values perpetuated by New Criticism that existed before the movement and continue to persist today, namely universalism and logocentrism and relatedly, the distinction between high culture and low culture. Wilson rightly scrutinizes the compatibility of these values with feminism, and this aspect of her approach is what I adapt in my own work. As my later case studies reveal, although reviewers have moved past the close reading promoted by New Criticism, their practices and standards support similar values; these values shape how they treat gender and feminism.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Ann Saddlemyer discusses the consequences of text-focused criticism on women’s theatre in “On the Necessity of Criticising Criticism.” She writes, “Every playwright requires an audience; for many women playwrights whose work depends upon and is based in a multi-levelled, non-traditional pattern of communication with the individuals in the darkened auditorium, performance becomes an even more important condition of assessment” (138).

\textsuperscript{21} Theatre critic Carol Woodis makes a similar argument to Wilson’s in her article, “Feminism and the Theatre Critic.” Writing in the decade following Wilson, Woodis does not name New Criticism per se as the culprit but concerns herself with the same neo-Aristotelian values that stem from it. These values are gendered and undergird most mainstream theatre reviews, Woodis argues, whether male- or female-authored: “We all write to a certain unspoken, scarcely even acknowledged, set of conventions in which a general sense of what is ‘good’ follows along lines still mainly laid down according to determinants settled long ago by the male rule of logic, reason and objectivity, which seem to deny the existence of any personalized hidden agendas” (195).
Though the high culture-low culture dichotomy does not always align with the mainstream-marginal dichotomy, as I will explore later on in my discussion of sociological approaches to criticism (for example, musical theatre might be considered lowbrow entertainment even though musicals produced by Mirvish are positioned in the mainstream within the Toronto theatre scene), Wilson’s observations quoted above about the former do translate to the latter. Indeed, Robert Wallace’s assertion that the mainstream-marginal distinction is created and enforced by the dominant culture parallels Wilson’s argument. Wallace defines marginality as “a historical condition constructed by the dominant culture and upheld by those who fail to question and resist its efficacy” (29). Later in his book he quotes Rick Salutin, who in *Marginal Notes* argues that while marginality may be a matter of attitude, it is also rooted in material power relations:

> We are not marginal because of the quirkiness of our ideas or the inadequacy of our arguments, but because of the power of those who define the centre. Those with the ability to issue the definitions—through the broadcast media, the newspapers and magazines, the schools and universities—control the criteria of centrality. They live there. (qtd. in Wallace 139)

Wallace’s definition of mainstream that emerges fits Wilson’s description of those practicing and subscribing to New Criticism:

> Primarily [the mainstream] is composed of people who can assert with authority and effect the humanist thinking […] that uses such intangible theories as common sense to posit that ‘eternal truths’ like the ‘excellence’ of ‘great art’ can be identified by their ‘universality.’ (Wallace 140)

The implications of occupying a marginal position are significant; Wallace’s case studies, for example, show that companies positioned outside of the mainstream have a more difficult time attaining grants and generating box office revenues, and these financial repercussions impact many other aspects of their work. However, Wallace also notes that because mainstream and marginal are relational concepts and not fixed categories, the potential exists to change their meanings and the power relations that constitute them. Wallace writes: “Like the authority
of judgment, marginality is created by power relations rooted in social networks: these can be changed if necessary and desirable enough to people” (134). Moreover, when viewed in this way, marginality itself can become a place of (subversive) power. Wallace argues that once we understand marginality as a construct sustained by the dominant culture and all those who neglect to challenge it, it can be “reformed’ as a strength that can prefigure historical change” (29-30). Wallace points to gay male and feminist communities “that have celebrated their marginal position even as they have deplored the social conditions that produce it” (30) in support of this argument.

Hence, while the humanist values reified by dominant critical practices may often place women’s theatre and feminist theatre in the margins, it is important to consider the complexities of their relationship to the “centre” and the fluid nature of this relationship—this is particularly relevant to my study as it examines the critical reception of feminist theatre over a thirty-year span. The critical reception of Nightwood and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes in their early years may have helped position them in the margins—and there were material and ideological implications of this, as I will explore—but both companies were able to use their positions strategically to critique the patriarchal ideology sustaining the centre or mainstream. Similarly, while Pol Pelletier has lamented the lack of recognition she has received in her career, her marginal position has allowed her to continue creating challenging, radical work. As Nightwood and the TEF grew and developed, they shed some of the aesthetic and organizational characteristics that were used to position them in the margins in the first place, adopting practices that more closely resembled those of mainstream companies (to different degrees). (This is especially true for Nightwood, whose survival today is partly a testament to these sacrifices, I argue.) It is my contention that each company’s as well as Pelletier’s relationship with the critics
is fundamental to their shifting positions within the mainstream-marginal power dynamic, and that through their own critical practices, Nightwood, the TEF, and Pelletier could reconstitute marginality as a valuable and powerful position. In the following section I expand on this idea further by exploring how feminist artists engage in their own critical acts.

**Feminist Performance Theory / Feminist Criticism**

The power dynamics of theatre reviewing have also been analyzed within a feminist theoretical framework. The earliest work on the topic emerged around the same time as scholars including Sue-Ellen Case and Jill Dolan began breaking new ground by examining the perspectives that feminism(s) might bring to the study and practice of theatre. Case’s *Feminism and Theatre* and Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, two key works in the burgeoning field and both published in 1988, view representation as a form of cultural production that is informed by and actively reproduces gender ideology. As Dolan puts it, materialist feminist performance criticism views cultural production “as a framework for the imposition of ideology, a framework which can be dissected and exposed as complicit in the formation of systems of social relations” (14). Here the connection to Wallace’s, Leonard’s, and Wilson’s work on theatre criticism is clear: these scholars show how reviews perpetuate particular sets of values that are often assumed to be held by their readership and reveal their implications in the theatre.

Women occasionally critiqued the gendered politics of reviewing prior to the twentieth century, but since the 1980s the challenge has been systematic, as the growing number of female playwrights, women’s theatre collectives, and the feminist scholarly project for revising masculine paradigms of knowledge foregrounded the necessity for specifically feminist theatre journalism. In the course of these critiques, the very premise of reviewing came under question. The rhetorical position of a speaker who is simultaneously independent and representative of a general public was not only historically inaccessible to women, but also contradicts feminist reviewing practices. (260)
and beyond. Feminist scholars writing about theatre criticism as a form of representation in the late 1980s demonstrate a similar understanding of the relationship between cultural production and gender ideology.

Carole Corbeil, in her article “Peeping Tom-Cats” (1987)—published in *This Magazine’s* regular column cheekily entitled “Female Complaints”—examines how gender ideology is reproduced through the performer-critic relationship. Corbeil, herself an artist and a critic, undertakes an analysis of the particularities of the theatre critic’s position of power, applying a feminist reading of the spectator-performer dynamic to the relationship between male reviewers and female artists. She describes the male critic’s position at the beginning of her article:

He is, that is, a sanctioned voyeur. This privileged position can lead to all sorts of excesses, especially when it comes to reviewing women actors. While it can be argued that both movies and theatre turn audiences into voyeurs, there is a special quality of detachment to the critic’s voyeurism. For the male critic, in particular, it mirrors the simple act of sexual ogling. He is the subject, the actor is object. The object is totally revealed, the subject concealed by the tradition of his authority. The subject, moreover, does not allow himself to fall under the object’s spell, unless the object fulfills certain criteria which the subject defines. (33)

Corbeil’s argument here, which she goes on to support with examples of reviews by Toronto male critics, particularly *The Globe and Mail*’s notorious Ray Conlogue, parallels Dolan’s thesis in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Dolan argues that the representational apparatus of traditional theatre sets up a subject-object relationship between the ideal spectator position (gendered as male) and female performer; this system of representation must be exposed and dismantled for women to assert their subjectivity on their own terms, onstage and off. Building on the work of feminist film theorists Teresa de Lauretis and Laura Mulvey, Dolan writes, “Performance usually addresses the male spectator as an active subject, and encourages him to identify with the male hero in the narrative. The same representations tend to objectify women performers and female spectators as passive, invisible, unspoken subjects” (2).
A key difference here, however, is that Dolan’s thesis is based on traditional, realist, often male-authored theatre, while Corbeil applies the subject-object dynamic to the reception of women’s theatre and feminist theatre—her most detailed example examines the critical reception of Nightwood’s *This Is for You, Anna*. This is significant because Corbeil’s argument implies that in spite of feminist theatre’s attempts to displace the ideal, hegemonic spectator identified by critics like Dolan, the traditional spectator-performer/subject-object power dynamic often prevails. Or, perhaps this dynamic prevails not in the theatre but after the performance event is over, in print criticism, where critics displaced from their usual positions of power as spectators can reestablish their authority through their written re-presentation of the performance. Lynda Burgoyne, in her assessment of the critical reception of feminist theatre in Montreal in 1994 for *Jeu*, works from this premise, using Dolan’s notion of the ideal spectator to argue that productions which refuse this address are often rejected by androcentric critics. She asks,

> N’est-il pas étrange, en effet, que tous ces textes qui ont en commun une signature féminine et un contenu qui trouble l’orthodoxie culturelle et sociale subissent sensiblement le même sort ? Parce que ces textes demandent à ses récepteurs d’opérer un renversement ou un branle-bas de leurs valeurs, ils sont déclarés insaisissables, hermétiques, “illisibles” en quelque sorte. (50)

(Is it not strange, in fact, that all texts featuring female authorship and content that troubles social and cultural orthodoxy are noticeably subjected to the same thing? Because these texts challenge their audiences’ values, they are declared incomprehensible, abstruse, unreadable in some way.)

Burgoyne’s question about which texts are deemed acceptable and which are not is pulled through my four case studies, which reveal the answer to be more complex than it might appear. Critics rarely cite female authorship or feminist politics as justification for a negative review; as such, their reasons for claiming “incomprehensibility” or “abstruseness” must be interrogated for possible links to feminist approaches to creation and production.
Though Corbeil’s article contains some essentialist distinctions between women and men—she concludes that women reviewers are more likely to look for possibilities of identification in theatre and to “be harsher than men critics when encountering male fantasies masquerading as women” (34)—her unequivocal feminist analysis of the critic-performer relationship provides a methodological model in its close reading of how reviewers treat gender and ideas of feminism. Corbeil’s conclusions that mainstream reviews treat women as sexual objects and perpetuate beauty ideals associated with youth and thinness may be commonplace now, but her conclusions about how feminism is taken up are perhaps more nuanced and relevant to a contemporary examination of criticism. Calling criticism as practiced in daily newspapers “a mixed bag of reportage and opinion,” a kind of event-reporting bearing subjective critical standards, Corbeil remarks: “Because critics’ opinions usurp the event, the use of feminism and feminist is considerably more complicated in reviews than it is in so-called ‘straight’ reporting” (35). No reporting is “straight” or objective, but, as Dorothy Hadfield also points out, when terms like “feminism” are used in critical writing they are often attached to evaluative statements that shape their meanings. For example, when Robert Crew writes, in a brief summary of the theatrical fare available at the 1986 World Stage Festival at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre, that

23 Linda Burgoyne avoids going down the same essentialist path as Corbeil by labeling the dominant critical voice in mainstream Montreal newspapers as “androcentric” or “male” but insisting that it can be occupied by both sexes:

[L]a critique mâle—l’appellation risque d’en énerver quelques-uns et quelques-unes—n’est pas exclusivement réservée à des individus de sexe masculin, même si elle s’applique à un discours qui est plus généralement véhiculé par ceux-ci. On admettra aussi que tous les hommes ne la pratiquent inévitablement. (47)

(Male criticism—a term which risks bothering some—is not exclusively reserved for individuals of the male sex, even if it applies to a discourse that is more often used by men. We also admit that not all men inevitably use it.)
Nightwood’s *This Is for You, Anna* is a “feminist work [that] is powerful without being shrill, committed yet balanced” (D20), he implies that feminism and feminist theatre risk being, and are perhaps normally, aggressive and unfairly biased. Lynda Burgoyne’s findings in her analysis of Montreal reviews yield similar conclusions about the use of the terms “feminism” and “feminist.” Burgoyne also notes that in generally positive reviews of feminist productions, androcentric critics work to reinsert the performance inside established norms by, for example, focusing on an actor’s performance instead of the political content of the piece (51). Chapters Four and Five show the persistence of these attitudes towards feminism in the new millennium; this is especially evident in the critical reception of Pol Pelletier’s solo work.

Corbeil’s assertion quoted above, that critical writing “usurps the event,” connects to Féral’s point quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that the written word of the critic reaches a much wider audience than the performance he/she criticizes. As Hadfield’s study also shows, reviews of feminist theatre are powerful not only because they remain some of the few records of the otherwise ephemeral events, but also because they communicate ideas about feminism to large audiences, and these messages have ideological and material outcomes. Corbeil argues:

The general rule is this: good feminism is cheerful, spirited and does not accuse men; bad feminism is sour, bitter, and accuses men. A corollary to this rule is that good feminism makes for good theatre, while bad feminism makes for bad theatre. (35)

My study tests Corbeil’s and Hadfield’s arguments, exploring how discourses of feminism have been taken up by reviewers and tracing possible changes in the critical engagement with feminism(s) through time. From the 1970s to the 2000s, feminism has evolved significantly, as have the social attitudes towards it. Though Nightwood and the TEF may have faced hostility towards their politics in their early days as the women’s movement gained momentum but also faced cultural backlash, the current post-feminist climate poses different challenges for feminist
and women theatre artists and creates different conditions of reception for critics. Indeed, as Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris outline in their introduction to their edited collection *Feminist Futures*?, the current post-feminist climate also requires an examination of “if and in what ways feminism may still be an element (major or otherwise) of theatre and performance practice of the twenty-first century” and “whether or not feminism may still obtain as a mobilizing force shaping political, social and artistic futures” (1). I am interested in how the changing face of feminism might influence critical interpretation; as such my case studies contextualize the artistic work under examination within the evolving feminist movements in Toronto and Montreal. Moreover, in examining the outcomes of the critical reception of feminist theatre in Canada, a central question of this study is how reviews sustain dominant ideas of feminism. Jill Dolan describes her project in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*: “My intent is to uncover ideological meanings that otherwise go unnoticed and continue to perpetuate cultural assumptions that are oppressive to women and other disenfranchised groups” (18). I share her objective, only my focus is on critical writing as a form of cultural production while hers is on theatre.

Ann Saddlemyer’s 1987 essay “On the Necessity of Criticizing Criticism” acknowledges the gendered power dynamics of mainstream criticism, which she sees as having a pivotal role in the visibility or invisibility of women’s theatre: “[U]ntil more women playwrights are accepted by mainstream theatres, they will not be noticed (in the full sense of that word) by serious

**24** Like Aston and Harris, I understand post-feminism as not merely a movement in opposition to second wave feminism or a call for a revitalized, “new” feminism, as it is sometimes defined, but also as the pervasive—but highly problematic—idea that feminism, “for good or ill, has done its job and is now redundant, over, finished, no longer required” (2).

**25** Dolan’s materialist feminist methodology “emphasizes the ideological nature of all cultural products” (15). She writes, “Dominant ideology has been naturalized as nonideology, since the perceptions of the more powerful have come to serve as standards for the less powerful, who do not have the same access to the media and artistic outlets that create public opinion” (15).
reviewers. And reviews in turn beget further productions” (137). And so while Saddlemeyer, like Corbeil and Burgoyne, warns that we must be wary of how reviewers treat discourses of gender and feminism—“What happens when the reviewer acknowledges that the playwright is a woman? What expectations, defenses, and barriers are raised with the specificity of the term ‘woman playwright’ or ‘women’s theatre’ even if we delete the more ‘political’ word ‘feminist’ ” (139)—her insistence on the importance of reviewing in legitimizing women’s theatre and its place in the historical record leads her to raise a number of questions about reviewing practices that will be debated in this study. For example, in terms of critical terminology, Saddlemeyer suggests that we need to question the use of conventional, generic terms and the connotations they carry; we must also explore new terminology to engage with innovative forms of theatre and performance—here Saddlemeyer cites as an example the aesthetic developed by playwright Jovette Marchessault and performer Pol Pelletier in Night Cows, first performed in French at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in 1979 (139). In short, we must adapt our language to the production, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, Saddlemeyer asks, how can male reviewers approach plays that are aimed towards women? To what degree is the playwright responsible for making her work accessible to the entire audience—to which I would add, what is “accessible” and who defines it? Writing about accessibility, Saddlemeyer adds, “Conversely, do not the critic and the historian have the same responsibility to recognize the present comparative invisibility of women in the theatre and identify its sources?” (140) To this I would add, how might this responsibility manifest itself, and what are its limitations? Saddlemeyer’s essay ends on an idealistic note, envisioning what theatre would be like if artists, critics and historians were to work together and “extend practice and language sufficiently that
comprehension becomes possible for all” (140), but over twenty years later the questions she asks remain largely unresolved and urgent.

While my study rests on the assumption that critical reception has had a significant and traceable influence on feminist theatre in Canada, it also recognizes the dynamic nature of this power relationship, something that more recent feminist scholarship on theatre criticism has underlined. Lara Shalson, in her examination of the Women’s One World Festival of the early 1980s (WOW), argues that criticism is not and should not be an act outside of community-based performance, but something that exists in a vital relationship with it:

Critics do not institute a dialogue with community-based performance. Rather, their engagement must be seen to extend the conversation started in the theatre, taking up the invitation to dialogue that is inherent in community-based (if not all) performance. Performance practice and performance criticism thus reveal themselves to be deeply intertwined. (234)

Implicit in Shalson’s argument that performance initiates and perpetuates dialogue is the notion of performance as a critical discourse in its own right, an idea echoed in Stefka Mihaylova’s study of the Guerilla Girls and Carolee Schneemann. According to Mihaylova, the critical potential of performance is clearly illustrated in the history of feminist theatre, wherein artists have worked to challenge the supremacy of the text and its status as a superior and masculine form of knowledge by creating alternative modes of (non-essentialist) embodied knowledge. Mihaylova argues that the text-performance and related mind-body dichotomy are connected to one another, rooted in “the western modernist project of objective knowledge, transcending the contingencies of embodied knowledge” (256). In addition to the dominant notion of “mind as text, performance as body” (256), Mihaylova argues that modernist epistemology bears other biases: “the perception that, as an embodied form, performance, compared to text, is a lesser medium of knowledge” and the subsequent marking of text as a masculine medium and
performance as a feminine one. These intertwined dichotomies function within two realms: in theatre criticism’s historic privileging of the (masculinized) dramatic text over (feminized) performance, and in the practice of theatre criticism itself, which has predominantly been text-based and dominated by men—Mihaylova shows how women have had limited access to this medium until the late twentieth century.

Mihalylova goes on to offer several examples throughout the history of theatre and theatre criticism wherein women, excluded from dominant modes of knowledge production, have engaged in social, political, and aesthetic critical commentary through embodied modes such as “lectures, sermons, and unofficial public speaking in city streets and market places” (264) and through more “traditional” forms of performance. She draws from Gay Gibson Cima’s work, who, in *Early American Women Critics*, uses a range of case studies dating back to the eighteenth century to show how “women critics from various nations developed particular, localized performances that granted them access to public debates in the American colonies and the emerging nations” (10). Cima’s case studies break down the false dichotomies stemming from modernist epistemology. She asserts, “I take seriously the ways in which women’s live performances were intertwined with religious, political, and cultural rhetoric, and conversely, the ways in which their writing was performative or self-consciously theatrical. They did not perceive performance and writing as opposites, but rather as linked systems whose operations were inextricable” (3). This blurring of boundaries extends to the distinctions between practice and theory, and fiction and non-fiction (2). Using the more recent examples of Schneemann and the Guerilla Girls, Mihaylova similarly argues that these artists use performed criticism as a feminist strategy to challenge the gendered binaries of modernist epistemology:

A careful consideration of the history of reviewing […] reveals it as one of the practices through which the liberal categories of masculinity and femininity have
been performatively (re)produced. Implicitly, reviewing helped associate masculinity with intellectual impartiality and representativeness, and femininity with women’s presumed inability to overcome the constraints of embodied living. Schneemann and the Guerilla Girls’ major intervention in this history, I propose, is their assertion of the fleshy, gendered body not as a deterrent to critical thinking but as its enabling condition and of performance as a critical discourse in its own right. (256)

A comparable argument can be made about many of the productions featured in this study. My examination of *La nef des sorcières* in Chapter Two looks at the critical discourse enabled by the centrality of the body in this work.

A common criticism of the view of artists as critics in their own right is the question of how much change is created by their work, especially when the artists in question exist on the margins of the theatre community and their audiences are assumed to be composed of like-minded individuals. To what extent can Schneemann or the Guerilla Girls intervene in the history of reviewing if members of the dominant group are not present to engage with their critique? In other words, what is the value of this kind of criticism, and how does it impact the mainstream ideology it challenges? Jill Dolan poses an even larger but related question at the end of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* when she asks, “How does social change really happen through cultural production?” and what is the feminist critic’s responsibility in this process (120)? These are questions I will explore in more depth through my case studies, but it is worth noting Shalson’s response to this critique here. She first of all dispels the myth of “preaching to the converted” that is often imposed on community-based and politically-driven theatre, pointing out that the audiences of this kind of theatre are not homogenous and do not necessarily share the same beliefs and values. Moreover, she notes that “conversion,” like community, is not a static state, but one that must be actively sustained. She quotes Tim Miller and David Román, who write, “the converted’ needs to be understood as a dynamic assembly that both individually and
Shalson concludes her article by noting that “community-based art and criticism affect the mainstream: not by reaching out to appeal to its standards, but by questioning those standards and offering alternatives as rich and diverse as the community itself” (237). To illustrate this point, one need look no further than the WOW Festival at the centre of Shalson’s article. Jill Dolan acknowledges the influence of this festival and subsequent WOW performances in New York City on her early theorizing of feminist theatre, which bore new critical perspectives within and outside of the academy. New critical perspectives develop out of counter-hegemonic work; without work that challenges the status quo, our critical perspectives and practices would remain the same.

Like the artists in Mihaylova’s study, Nightwood, the TEF, and Pol Pelletier have not been the passive recipients of criticism, but have initiated critical dialogue and also responded to the critical reception of their work through their artistic and paratheatrical activities. For this reason, my project aims to uncover the strategies employed by the companies and artists under study in order to create and extend a critical dialogue beyond the theatrical event and the publication of the review, and also to speak back to the critics—from artistic work itself, to other embodied means such as audience forums and consciousness-raising groups, to blogging. Studying criticism in this way, as “a site where cultural change in negotiated” by performers, spectators and critics rather than a “practice performed by certain qualified individuals” (Shalson 223), facilitates new insights into its dynamic and reciprocal relationship with theatre, and moves towards bridging the perceived great divide between them. This approach also resists viewing the companies and artists under study as helpless victims, as was the tendency of early feminist scholarship on the critic-performer relationship, and instead treats them as active agents in an
ongoing, collaborative dialogue with critics and spectators. Moreover, this approach acknowledges the inherent socio-political critique of feminist theatre and its inextricable link to artistic practices. As Lara Shalson writes,

We must rethink what criticism is, what work it is doing, and who produces it. To do so is to challenge certain received distinctions such as those between social/political criticism and theatre criticism; it is also to recognize and value the relationship between the kinds of critical work being done by artists and performers and that produced by those who write about theatre and performance. (223)

Understanding Criticism: Sociological Approaches

Outside of theatre and performance studies, a limited but vital body of scholarship on criticism can be found within the field of sociology. Sociological approaches to criticism are generally focused on understanding the function of reviews within larger socio-cultural structures and their impact on audiences, readers, and society as a whole. A central concern of the major studies I discuss here is how reviews create and sustain social hierarchies. Grant Blank’s Critics, Ratings, and Society (2007) declares itself to be “the first book [in the field of sociology] to address reviews as a general phenomenon” (3). According to Blank, most of the limited prior work has consisted of individual case studies or examinations of specific review genres. Blank considers a broad spectrum of reviews, from consumer reports on electronics to restaurant ratings, and draws on empirical evidence to examine three key areas: the institutional and organizational contexts within which reviews are produced, audience reception of reviews, and the impact of reviews on the larger social world. His insistence on the importance of studying reviews echoes Josette Féral’s reflection on their power, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Blank writes,

Prior studies of reviews emphasize their impact on sales; in fact, the impact of reviews is far wider. Reviewers’ evaluations create and highlight inequality. In contrast to scholarly articles by literary critics or film scholars, reviewers perform their task frequently, often on a weekly or monthly schedule. They reach millions of
readers interested in an extremely wide variety of cultural products. In some cases they create boundaries and distinctions where none existed; in all cases they hold up distinctions to public view. By publicizing them, discussing them, and describing their criteria, reviews generally make distinctions far, far more public and accessible. And they do this all by the force of their own persuasion. (15)

These distinctions are more complicated than good versus bad: they are connected to notions of high culture versus low culture and the concept of taste. Taste-based distinctions, as I will discuss shortly, have an impact not only within the realm of theatre, but in society more broadly. If our taste in art and culture helps determine our social positioning, then reviewers, as taste-makers or taste-influencers, have a significant impact on social hierarchies.

Wesley Shrum’s case study of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, *Fringe and Fortune*, also looks at the issue of status hierarchies, and his conclusions about how reviews are used in the context of theatre are supported by Blank’s more wide-ranging study. Shrum uses empirical evidence from the Fringe—interviews with artists, audiences and the public, and data collected from ticket sales and published reviews—to argue that the differences between high and popular art are a function of the discursive practices that mediate the relationship between art and the public. In other words, the cultural hierarchy that places high art (a category into which Shrum lumps all stage plays) at the top and popular art (cabaret shows, comedy, popular music performances) at the bottom is maintained by the ways in which artists, spectators, and critics—those constituting what he calls a “triangle of mediation”—interact with one another. In viewing these distinctions as constructs of discursive practices, Shrum deviates from the common assumptions within the field of sociology that the differences between high and popular art are intrinsic to the art itself and/or a result of the kinds of people who produce and consume cultural objects. Similarly, when Blank argues that reviews “create and highlight inequalities” and “create boundaries and distinctions where none existed”, he also suggests that social
stratification systems are not inherent or fixed. In this sense, while both authors are clearly influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s landmark work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, their findings complicate his argument.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu uses empirical research to show how one’s social class tends to dictate one’s tastes and how one’s tastes legitimate one’s social status. Taste, according to Bourdieu, sustains social hierarchies: “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (7). Social differences, according to Bourdieu, are not solely dependent on economics, but also social capital (who you know) and cultural capital (what you know). The choices we make, conscious or unconscious, are constrained by what Bourdieu calls our *habitus*, the class in which we are born and raised that serves as a kind of filter for our preferences and actions. The pursuit of distinction occurs within what Bourdieu calls *champs* or fields, social or cultural institutions or systems such as theatre, music, sports, etc. Music critic Carl Wilson explains the relationship between *habitus* and *champs* and its influence on taste in his admirably lucid discussion of Bourdieu’s theory: “Tastes are the result of the interaction of *habitus* and field—attempts, informed by our backgrounds, to advance our status by accumulating cultural and social capital in particular spheres—and, perhaps more importantly, to prevent ourselves from ever being mistaken for someone of a lower status” (90). While Bourdieu does not discount the pleasure of engaging with art, he argues that “the kinds of music and sports we choose, and how we talk about them, are socially shaped—that the cultural filters and concepts that guide my interests in and reactions to music, clothes, films or home decoration come out of my class and field” (C. Wilson 91).
Though Bourdieu focuses little attention on theatre in his complete body of work, his six-page example of Parisian theatre in *Distinction* is an important case study, especially for its consideration of criticism. Parisian theatre, according to Bourdieu, is organized around two binary opposite poles: the boulevard theatre or bourgeois pole (occupying a position of high economic capital but low cultural capital) and the experimental theatre or intellectual pole (low economic capital but high cultural capital). These poles each have corresponding theatre audiences, publications, critics, and readers, and operate both, in reality through the mechanisms which produce the oppositions between the playwrights or actors and their theatre, the critics and their newspapers, and in people’s minds, in the form of a system of categories shaping perception and appreciation which enable them to classify and evaluate playwrights, works, styles and subjects. (234)

Reviewers positioned on each side of the polarized field of cultural production in Bourdieu’s example “will assess plays in terms of the very same oppositions which engender the objective differences between them, but they will set the terms of these oppositions in opposite hierarchies” (234). Here Bourdieu’s argument resembles Susan Bennett’s discussion of audience horizon of expectations, as the critic’s social location influences his/her approach and interpretation. However, Bourdieu’s theory is less flexible, not only because of the absolute, determinant relationship between a reviewer’s class and his/her assessments, but because in his view, audience members/review readers only listen to a reviewer insofar as the reviewer is a member of their class: “In accordance with the law that one only preaches to the converted, a critic can only ‘influence’ his readers insofar as they grant him this power because they are structurally attuned to him in their view of the social world, their tastes and their whole habitus”

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26 Maria Shevtsova’s “Appropriating Pierre Bourdieu’s *Champ* and *Habitus* for a Sociology of Stage Productions” (*Contemporary Theatre Review* 12.3 (2002): 35-66) provides a useful model of how Bourdieu’s work can be applied to theatrical analysis.
(240). Whereas Bennett credits audiences with more autonomy and the possibility of being influenced by other elements, Bourdieu’s audiences are limited to the interpretive strategies offered to their particular class. This assumption of preaching to the converted, as I discussed in the previous section in relation to Lara Shalson’s work on feminist theatre, also neglects the heterogeneity of a group of readers: while a particular critic’s readership may share general characteristics related to social worldview, taste, and *habitus*, their identities and opinions may diverge in other ways that have bearing on their engagement with criticism and its ultimate influence on them.

Blank’s example of restaurant reviews and Shrum’s study of reviews of the Edinburgh Fringe challenge the rigidity of Bourdieu’s distinction-based culture by emphasizing that reviews democratize access to culture. For example, many of the recreational “foodies” interviewed by Blank were not raised on fine-dining nor do they all come from or currently occupy the highest socio-economic strata; rather, Blank’s foodies developed their knowledge of haute-cuisine and cultivated their taste through their engagement with restaurant reviews and food-writing. Blank concludes,

> Instead of a tightly restricted system where cultural differences align with differences between class fractions and stratification is based on users and nonusers of certain cultural objects, this vision suggests a more open, accessible, and contingent system. Using the criteria and information openly available in reviews, individuals can formulate social mobility strategies to acquire high-status cultural capital. Not the least interesting aspect of foodies is that they suggest that the class-based, self-reproducing culture is not as important as Bourdieu thinks.

(176)

Shrum’s concept of the “status bargain” is based on the same premise. In his study, reviews matter more at higher levels of the cultural hierarchies; at lower levels, what Shrum terms as “cultural mediation”—the “discursive intervention between art and its public, between object and consumer” (195)—is less significant and audiences tend to relate to art more directly. So,
according to Shrum, audiences are more likely to defer to reviews in their engagement with theatre productions at the Fringe than with cabaret or stand-up comedy acts. This is because involvement with high art forms can build up cultural capital and enhance one’s prestige: like Blank’s “foodies,” the audience members in Shrum’s study engage in a symbolic exchange, or “status bargain,” in which “[t]he spectator gives-up partial rights of control over her own judgment to cultural authorities in exchange for the higher status that competent talk about these artworks provides” (196). Shrum argues that to participate in the status bargain is not necessarily to agree with the opinions of cultural authorities (namely, critics), but to grant relevance to their discourse by taking it into account.

What are the implications of Blank’s and Shrum’s findings for a study of the relationship between theatre artists and critics? On the most basic level, their assertion that critics are not located outside of artistic processes, but integral participants “in the process that generates and reflects differences in types of culture” (Shrum 197) complements the work of theatre scholars like Robert Wallace and Ann Wilson discussed earlier. While Wallace and Wilson contend that reviews maintain distinctions between mainstream and marginal and dominant and subordinate within the realm of theatre, the sociological literature applies this idea to society more broadly, showing how our engagement with reviews can support socio-economic stratification. Essentially, the theatre scholars examined here are primarily concerned with power dynamics as they impact artists, while the sociologists are primarily concerned with power dynamics as they impact audiences—as patrons but, equally importantly, as members of society. The mainstream-marginal binary used by the former group and the high culture-low culture binary used by the latter do not equate with one another, and examining their relationship reveals one of the sociological theory’s limitations. High culture might include anything from opera to cutting-edge
performance art that is not easily accessed by the masses, either for financial reasons or due to its perceived incomprehensibility (many people might complain that they can’t “understand” opera or performance art), whereas low culture often includes art that is understood, appreciated, and/or afforded by the masses, from musical theatre to stand-up comedy. It is safe to say that low culture resides in the mainstream, where it is accessed by more people (hence, rather than a high-low binary, Shrum uses a high-popular one); however, it is difficult to flip the binary and characterize high culture as “marginal.” Fewer people have access to high culture—it is protected by its exclusivity—but it is generally not possible to argue that opera is a marginal art form in the way that Wallace uses the term. If the category of high culture includes both opera and performance art, as Shrum would argue, then there is great power variance and economic disparity within it. This may not have much bearing on sociological studies interested in how the public’s engagement with art sustains broader social stratification, but it does impact the model’s adaptability to a study that focuses more closely on the artistic sphere.

In spite of this limitation, the sociological literature can enrich a theatre studies approach in important ways. For example, it avoids setting up a critics-versus-artists dynamic by crediting audience members (of either theatre itself or simply reviews, as review-readers need not see the theatre they read about in order to fulfill their functions within these sociological models) with a role in the circulation and fortification of the ideology embedded in critical discourse. Shrum asserts, “Through the display of practiced knowledgeability, through recognition of quality distinctions, through the vocabulary of standards, we participate in the discourse of high culture” (208). If audience members use reviews as part of a status bargain, then they also bear responsibility in perpetuating the discourse of high culture and the ideology underlying it. For this reason they cannot be removed from the equation when studying theatre criticism and its
impact. This is something enforced by Bennett’s and Knowles’ models of theatrical analysis, which see audiences as integral contributors to the production-reception relationship. Bennett’s brief follow-up to her 1997 book, “Theatre Audiences, Redux,” calls for a closer collaboration between academe and the artistic community, stressing the usefulness of the information gathered by arts organizations and funding bodies in broadening our understanding of what constitutes theatre and who constitutes theatre audiences. Indeed, better collaboration between researchers, theatre companies, and newspapers might allow us to collect data on how many people read reviews and how this translates to theatre attendance. Bennett argues that the most significant recent development in this area has been produced by “the theatres themselves, cities and other places in which the theatres are located, as well as in cultural and other agencies that inform government and other arts policy makers” (226). The other development, I would argue, is produced by the Internet, which can provide researchers with a much more detailed picture of the complex identities of theatre audiences, their habits, and their opinions. I take this up in Chapter Five, where I look at what the blogosphere might offer feminist criticism, as well as in the conclusion of my study.

Online theatre reviewing also brings the concept of credibility into question, a central concern in the sociological literature. Credibility is an integral condition of the status bargain because readers must first believe in or trust the critic’s expertise before they surrender partial control of their judgment to him/her. If audiences use reviews to gain credible knowledge, then it is important to ask what constitutes credible knowledge and how it is constructed in the discourse of reviews. Blank dedicates a significant portion of his study to understanding the construction of credibility, as he sees it as central to how reviews operate in society. He argues that credibility is an inherently relational concept, its construction and reception social processes
in which both audiences and critics are engaged. Blank asks and answers a series of questions in his study that resonate in my own: “How do readers actually judge character and competence? What is the process? What evidence do they use? How do reviewers promote their own credibility? What arguments do they make? What evidence do they put forward?” (5). While Blank’s review-reader interviews and surveys are beyond the scope of my methodology, my discursive analysis interrogates how critics establish credibility, particularly through their self positioning and (frequent) reification of objectivity. Factors such as publication, word count, and even byline can also contribute to the construction and perception of credibility.

Blank’s questions gain added significance in the current context of reviewing, wherein knowledge production is no longer the exclusive domain of critics writing about theatre for the academic or popular press. The Internet has increased accessibility to reviews for both readers seeking information and writers desiring to join the dialogue about theatre, a fact that is only glossed in Blank’s study. In my examination of the blogosphere in Chapter Five I ask what constitutes credible or expert knowledge, and how the proliferation of theatre writing online might challenge this concept. If mainstream criticism is dominated by self-effacing, andro- and ethno-centric voices, then blogs, in their self-conscious and democratic forms, should be examined as potential alternative critical discourses produced in direct response to productions and also in response to mainstream criticism.

The sociological literature fills a void in the theatre studies scholarship by acutely addressing the question of criticism’s influence outside of the theatre. Indeed, its focus on contextualizing theatre within larger social structures aligns it with the materialist approach I adapt in this study from scholars like Susan Bennett and Ric Knowles. Maria Shevstova writes, “By pointing to its social character, Bourdieu calls into question the idea that art is in a realm of
its own separate from society and immune to social pressures” (36), a point which may seem somewhat commonplace in current theatre studies, but is not so simple. While society’s impact on theatre is often examined, I would argue that theatre’s impact on society is understudied outside of the fields of drama-in-education or applied theatre. Bennett and Knowles encourage this kind of analysis in their models—I discussed Knowles’ emphasis on “the social and cultural work done by the performance” (19) earlier in the chapter—but it is hard to measure and prove the ways in which theatre shapes social institutions and networks. In its focus on empirical evidence, the sociological research suggests possible methodological approaches to the examination of the relationship between theatre and society.

Again, however, the limitations to this particular body of work should be noted. I have shown how Shrum’s approach becomes problematic when looking at the rigidity of his definitions of high art and popular art, as do Bourdieu’s distinctions between high culture and low culture. A theatre studies approach might see these categories as more fluid, with performances or theatre companies moving between the two or displaying characteristics of both as they combine genres and address diverse audiences. People also move between these two categories, consuming both highbrow and lowbrow art—hence, the term “cultural omnivore” has been introduced to complicate Bourdieu’s work (Shrum 169, C. Wilson 96). Moreover, while it is useful to look at socio-economic stratification as a possible outcome of the triangle of mediation, there are other hierarchies that result from this relationship that the sociological literature overlooks, such as those relating to categories of gender, race, and sexuality. My discussion of Nightwood’s Cast Iron in Chapter Four, for example, examines how reviews reinforce social distinctions related to gender, race, and nationality.
Methodology

The current state of research on theatre criticism discussed in this chapter shows that criticism is an integral if under-studied aspect of the relationship between theatre performance, production, and reception; it influences artists’ work, theatre companies’ identities, audiences’ understanding of performance, and readers’ social positioning, among other outcomes. The research also suggests, I hope, that theatre criticism is not a parasitic art form, but one that has a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with theatre and the socio-political contexts in which it is embedded. I develop these arguments in this study by looking at feminist theatre specifically and examining how the power dynamics outlined above shape and are shaped by this category of theatre.

At the beginning of this chapter I outlined some key questions concerning the relationship between theatre and criticism: How does criticism impact theatre, and how can we measure and understand this impact? How does criticism create distinctions between mainstream and marginal? What is the impact of criticism outside of the theatre, and how can we measure and understand this impact? My review of the theatre studies and sociological literature has revealed different approaches to answering these questions, and shown my own to be heavily influenced by the materialist analysis of scholars including Susan Bennett, Jill Dolan, Ric Knowles, and Robert Wallace. The case studies that follow draw on archival research to reconstruct select performances and their critical reception; I read both the productions and the reviews closely, understanding critical discourse as an active dialogue in which artists, audiences, and journalists are engaged. While I do not pretend to be a linguist, I am particularly interested in the language used to describe feminist theatre, and model this aspect of my analysis after scholars and writers such as Lynda Burgoyne, Carole Corbeil, Barbara Hodgdon, and Marie-Christine Lesage. I bring history together with theory, drawing on some play analysis
along the way, and always considering broader social and political contexts. My primary focus is on uncovering the material and ideological implications of the relationship between feminist theatre and theatre criticism, but my case studies give me the opportunity to fill in some blanks in the histories of some of Canada’s most important theatre companies and artists (feminist or otherwise).

In the following the chapter I look at Nightwood Theatre’s and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes’ foundational productions, with a focus on how critics frame the relationship between text and spectacle in their responses to them. This first case study establishes my methodological approach for the rest of the dissertation, and uncovers some fundamental differences between theatre culture in Toronto and Montreal and between Nightwood, on the one hand, and the TEF and Pol Pelletier, on the other, that surface in the other three case studies as well. Here, as in the rest of the study, I examine critical discourse as initiated by theatre artists rather than critics, and explore how this dialogue might be continued after the reviews are published.
Chapter Two:

From Page to Stage and Back Again: Artists, Critics, and the Word

THE STATUE: I am the desert, grain after grain. I recite myself, bead after bead.

MARIE: I feel like a rain that cannot fall. Could I shed my skin? Could I find myself elsewhere?

MADELEINE: I’m marking time, going nowhere. Life makes me curdle.

(Boucher 341)

Denise Boucher’s *Les fées ont soif* opens with its three women characters, the virgin, the mother, and the whore, delivering their intersecting monologues from separate areas of the stage. The sense of confinement and stasis expressed in the text is echoed in the staging, as the women remain in their individual areas except at select moments when they approach the neutral space at centre stage to perform brief vignettes or sing songs. Only at the end do the women completely break free from the chains binding them—represented by a heavy rosary, apron, and sexy boots, respectively—and come together in an act of solidarity and rebellion.

Premiering on November 10, 1978 at Montreal’s Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (TNM), *Les fées ont soif* attracted audiences in record numbers, but it began to make a permanent mark on the theatrical landscape in Quebec long before it opened. While its message and themes were radical, they were not quite new: playwrights and artists belonging to the burgeoning *théâtre-femmes* movement had been exploring women’s experiences of oppression in patriarchal society since the late 1960s. What ultimately set this play apart was the controversy surrounding it, spawned by the Montreal Arts Council’s decision the previous May to revoke funding for the production after reviewing the script and judging it “unacceptable.”

In assessing the text of *Les fées ont soif*, the Montreal Arts Council invoked an obscure rule, established in May 1970 in reaction to two controversial plays presented at the TNM, Dario Fo’s
particular issue with the play’s “vulgar” language, leading its president, Judge Jacques Vadboncœur, to famously declare that he no longer wanted to see “merde” on the Montreal stage. An overwhelming public outcry followed the decision, with the Council accused of censorship and condemned in the press by prominent members of the local, national, and international artistic communities—by mid-June, even UNESCO had joined the protest. Despite the loss of funding, about $15,000 of the TNM’s $92,000 season subsidy from the Arts Council, Artistic Director Jean-Louis Roux determined to carry on with his plans to stage the play, incidentally the only Québécois work in his company’s season. Meanwhile, the Catholic archdiocese of Montreal denounced Les fées ont soif, encouraging congregants to picket the TNM and/or disrupt the actual performance by reciting the rosary from the audience. In the end, Les fées ont soif was an overwhelming success in terms of overall audience and critical response, though, as Louise Forsyth notes, most of the attention paid to the play has surrounded the censorship controversy and not its dramatic qualities, experimental aesthetics, or “powerful feminist messages” (“Introduction to The Fairies Are Thirsty” 334-35).

Faut jeter la vieille and the collectively created Gens de Noël, Tremblez, which dictates that the Council would only support works from the repertory. The Council later clarified that by “repertory,” it meant plays whose texts were published and known; new works were not eligible for funding unless the script could be provided and reviewed before granting decisions were made. The rule also gave the Council the right to refuse funding if they found the text to be too great of a financial risk or too commercial, or if they felt it could be better produced by another company. The Council invoked this rule only very rarely, but in response to public complaints about the TNM’s presentation of Jean-Frigon’s Ti-Jésus, bonjour in the 1977-78 season, it unsuccessfully attempted to revoke its funding after the play had already closed. This incident prompted the Council to declare it would review any new works presented at the TNM the following season; of the six planned, Les fées ont soif was the only one that fell under this category. For more information about the events surrounding the Council’s decision not to support Les fées and the subsequent fallout, see Yves Jubinville’s “Inventaire après liquidation: étude de la réception des fées ont soif de Denise Boucher” and Lawrence Sabbath’s “Censorship in Montreal”; the news clippings included with the second edition of the play also contain information about the controversy.
The production and reception of *Les fées ont soif* illustrate some key issues that run through this study. First, and most importantly, the play’s initial staging in Montreal and the controversy that surrounded it suggest that theatre criticism is not limited to reviews written and published about a play. Rather, the theatrical event encompasses several different critical acts, beginning with the play itself. The critical potential of performance was discussed in Chapter One in relation to Gay Gibson Cima’s study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women critics and Stefka Mihaylova’s and Lara Shalson’s work on women’s theatre in the late twentieth century; each uses her case studies to assert that performance practice and performance criticism are not separate entities, but are deeply intertwined. *Les fées ont soif* is a prime example of this: Boucher’s play highlights the limited roles available to women within the patriarchy, developing important and radical (for their time) critiques of key social and political institutions in Quebec such as the Church, the family, and the law. Moreover, within the play’s framing of women as active, speaking subjects lies an implicit critique of the institution of theatre itself. *Les fées ont soif* represents a shift in both form and content on the Quebec stage, wherein women artists insisted on telling their own stories in their own, feminine language, textual and visual. Though the label “théâtre-femmes” encompasses many different political and aesthetic concerns, what unites the various artists and works classified under this rubric is the challenge they pose to dominant (patriarchal) performance paradigms through their insistence on the centrality of women’s voices and bodies. *Les fées ont soif*, in its deconstruction and re-appropriation of iconic female figures, focus on women’s embodied experiences, and extensive use of monologue and lyrical language, functions not only as socio-political criticism, but also as theatre criticism. Yves Jubinville, in a recent article about the reception of *Les fées ont soif*, goes so far as to hypothesize
that Boucher actually incorporated allusions to the scandal surrounding it into the play itself upon revising the script for production.28

Moreover, the case of *Les fées ont soif* demonstrates how funding bodies enact a kind of theatre criticism of their own, a point which Robert Wallace makes in *Producing Marginality*. Wallace defines criticism as “any act of judgment that constitutes evaluation—whether by an artist, critic or member of a theatre board” (163), and throughout his book shows how granting organizations and their decisions shape Canadian theatre and create and sustain distinctions

28 See Jubinville, pages 73-74. Jubinville reads the trial scene that closes the play as evidence of his hypothesis, suggesting that Madeleine’s trajectory from plaintiff to accused parallels Boucher’s own experience in the court of public opinion. He points out that the script submitted to the Arts Council was only a draft, which Boucher revised through the collective rehearsal process throughout the fall as the controversy unfolded, giving her ample opportunity to incorporate her own critique of the public outcry surrounding her play. He concludes:

Dans ce cas, l’intérêt, pour nous, ne réside pas seulement dans le regard qu’elle porte sur l’opinion publique, mais aussi dans le fait même qu’elle incorpore, dans la trame de son texte, le théâtre de sa réception. C’est au moyen de ce procédé que l’œuvre confirme sa fonction manifestaire. Ce genre s’inscrit dans un rapport dialectique avec le Pouvoir ; il réagit de façon ponctuelle à une situation donnée ; enfin, il donne à voir, en l’exacerbant, la dynamique des luttes qui produit le monde social. Il y a toujours, dans le manifeste, une anticipation de ce qui l’attend. Dans le cas de Boucher, on peut dire que cet horizon d’attente est ce qui produit l’œuvre elle-même. (73)

[In this case, our interest lies not only in the perspective that [Boucher] provides on public opinion, but also in the fact that she incorporates, within the framework of her text, theatre and its reception. It is through this trial that the work’s function as manifesto is confirmed. Manifesto inscribes itself in a dialectical relationship with power; it reacts to a given situation in a timely manner; lastly, it shows, by exacerbating it, the dynamic of the conflicts underlying the social world. There is always, in the manifesto, the anticipation of what is to come. In Boucher’s case, we could say that this horizon of expectation is what produces the work itself.]
between mainstream and marginal.\textsuperscript{29} While the Montreal Arts Council’s decision to withhold funding from the TNM did not ultimately prevent the theatre company from staging \textit{Les fées ont soif}, it did mark an attempt to impose its ideological position on the fate of the play, stifle the counter-discourse contained within it, and distinguish between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” art and criticism. Indeed, the Council’s policy of vetting all new works—one rarely invoked, but used to justify its decision about \textit{Les fées}—had the potential to significantly influence the nature of Québécois theatre, a point which Vadboncœur did not attempt to hide in his public statements about the play. Making the connection between censorship and nationalism, Jubinville places the Council’s reaction within the broader context of the conflict between traditionalism and modernism occurring during and immediately following the Quiet Revolution. Within the realm of the artistic world, this translated to tensions between “traditional,” European-influenced conceptions of theatre, on the one hand, and avant-garde approaches advocating a distinctly Québécois sensibility (though definitions of this differed), on the other (68).

However, as Denise Boucher pointed out in her remarks during a press conference in June 1978, this act of censorship, part of a long history of such acts in Quebec applied to theatre and other artistic works, actually had the opposite effect than what the Council intended:

\textsuperscript{29} Wallace explains,  

It is all the more important […] to understand that what is at stake in any process of arts adjudication is power; and to recognize that relations of power are rooted in and sustained by social networks. Power is less a matter of confrontation than a process of control. In terms applicable to the arts, power attends the ability of one person or group to assert an ideological position […] and then to establish this position as one of authority. Such positions, once accepted and approved by the social, critical and artistic networks in which they operate, are used by individuals and groups to decide the merit of work by other individuals or groups. They are used to construct, in other words, the criteria that govern acts of evaluation and thereby to determine the means and manner in which other people create their work. (130-31)
Getting to know official censorship in this way is an extraordinary opportunity. It allows the debate to be taken onto the public square. I know so many men and so many women for whom censorship has meant silence for their works. Censorship more oppressive and more deadly than any words. To all of them I say: “Speak out, denounce, it is better, a hundred times better, to be paranoid than masochistic.” (qtd. in Forsyth, “Introduction to *The Fairies Are Thirsty*” 337).

Though the “debate” to which Boucher refers suggests, in the first instance, the public discussion surrounding censorship itself, the Council’s decision also brought significant attention to the issues at the centre of the play. In other words, the heated debate occurring in Montreal was as much about gender roles, patriarchy, and women’s rights as it was about censorship. If criticism is indeed a conversation that starts within the theatre, as Shalson asserts, then both Boucher’s play and the Arts Council’s funding decision should be considered as critical acts in their own right. While in this chapter I focus on the critical reception of the TEF’s and Nightwood’s foundational productions, I begin by looking at the productions themselves and how they acted as alternative modes of feminist criticism in a time when women’s access to mainstream critical discourse was more limited than it is today. This kind of analysis is an integral part of a model that looks at criticism as an active dialogue occurring between artists, critics, and also audiences, rather than just a response to a theatrical event—or, as Lara Shalson puts it, “as a site where cultural change is negotiated, and most importantly as a site that performers, spectators, and critics navigate together” (223).

The case of *Les fées ont soif* points to one last issue that will be explored in this chapter and throughout this study: the discrepancy between audience and critical reception. The sheer number of people who flocked to the TNM to see Boucher’s play—nearly 30,000 in its first run—challenged the Arts Council’s judgment and is one of innumerable examples from theatre
history reflecting the simple but significant fact that critics are not representative of audiences. Applied to a study of feminist theatre, this opens up several questions. (And again, conceiving of arts councils as critical bodies, these questions can be applied to their decision-making processes as much as they can to reviewers’ evaluations.) First, how can critics assess work that is not necessarily intended for them? Should they take potential or actual audience response into account if it differs significantly from their own? How should critics evaluate work that prioritizes political goals over aesthetic ones? This last question is particularly relevant to non-professional and/or community-based feminist work. Moreover, should feminist companies aim to please mainstream critics in order to reap the benefits of good reviews, namely attract a wider audience? Finally, how do artists and theatre companies respond to criticism and underscore the importance of their work so that it is not forgotten in the historical record? In the introduction to this study I cited some of the more extreme ways that artists have talked back to critics; this chapter looks at more typical examples, focusing on how artists use their own work as well as publication to extend the critical dialogue. For Boucher and Roux, their response started with the press conference they held after the Arts Council announced its decision. Their protests, as well as those of countless others, are published in the second edition of the play, acting as both an alternative critical discourse and a crucial paratext to subsequent readings of it. In total, over sixty pages of photos, testimonies, and press clippings accompany Boucher’s script, literally

30 The TNM’s 1978-79 season report contains attendance numbers for Les fées ont soif: 27,401 for the first run (32 performances), plus 12,793 for the remount (26 performances) and 38,601 for the tour (50 performances) (Foundation du Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, “XVIIIe SAISON”).

31 While the answer to this question might seem obvious, Nightwood Theatre’s movement closer to the mainstream of the Toronto and Canadian theatre scene in the last three decades suggests that this is a complicated issue. By producing less radical work, Nightwood has broadened its appeal but also changed its relationship to and definition of feminism. I return to this issue briefly in the conclusion to my study.
framing the play text, and lending support to Forsyth’s point that *Les fées ont soif*’s history of controversy and censorship inevitably dominates readings of the play.

This chapter examines the issues outlined above by way of two primary case studies. My case study from Montreal theatre dates back before the landmark opening of *Les fées ont soif* to 1976, with the production of another controversial play at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, *La nef des sorcières*. Though it is often eclipsed in the historical record by *Les fées*, *La nef des sorcières* provides a strong example for studying both how feminist work enacts a kind of theatre criticism of its own and how the counter-discourse it produces is interpreted by mainstream print critics. As the first play from the théâtre-femmes movement produced at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, *La nef* involved artists who would go on to work with the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes and shape women’s theatre in Quebec. Nightwood Theatre’s first production, *The True Story of Ida Johnson* (1979), an experimental adaptation of a feminist novel, provides an equally useful case study, though it inevitably differs from *La nef* in significant ways. Not only are the plays themselves quite different in form and content, but their contexts of production and reception are also distinct from one another. Both works, however, position themselves as “game changers,” challenging and aiming to radically transform traditional conceptions of Québécois and Canadian theatre, as well as traditional conceptions of gender. I argue that the critical dialogue surrounding the TEF’s and Nightwood’s early work is shaped by the companies’ and critics’ complex relationship to the written word. Toronto mainstream critics’ rejection of Nightwood’s imagistic and experimental aesthetics at the centre of *Ida Johnson* and some of its other early works reveals a logocentrism that has problematic implications for feminist work; conversely, Montreal critics’ general privileging of spectacle over text lead them to question *La nef*’s status as theatre despite its political significance. In both cases, critics’ reading of gender
and feminism in these plays is mediated by how they conceive the relationship between text and spectacle, and the cultural and ideological values that inform these conceptions. After discussing how these works function as theatre criticism in their own right, I will examine their critical reception, focusing on how reviewers conceive of the text-performance relationship and the implications of this for their treatment of feminism and gender. I will conclude by briefly considering the “after-life” of these productions and their different connections to the printed word. While I use La nef and Ida Johnson as my primary case studies, in order to develop my argument I look at the reception of some of Nightwood’s other productions during the same period to compensate for its comparatively lesser press coverage in its early years.

**Critical / Performative Acts**

*La nef des sorcières*

Louise Forsyth has described the dominant mode of women’s theatre in Quebec between the 1960s and 1980s as performative, in that artists anticipated the genre of performance art and also aimed to “produce change in theatre practice, dominant discourse, and sociocultural realities” (“Introduction: Québec Women Playwrights” xii). For her, the term “performative” effectively sums up three key strategies employed by women playwrights “for discursive creativity and innovative theatrical practice” during the period: collective creation, monologue, and autobiography (xii). Anglophone artists in other parts of Canada employed similar strategies during the period. Susan Bennett outlines the categories of women’s performance in English-speaking Canada in her article “Diversity and Voice: A Celebration of Canadian Women Writing for Performance,” though her discussion encompasses a much greater variety of work and regional contexts than Forsyth’s. She identifies plays and playwrights, performance art, and collective creation as the three main frames for her brief chronicle of the emergent history of women’s performance in Canada, and highlights the breadth of materials and styles within each.
Despite the overlap, scholars have been careful not to group Francophone and Anglophone women’s theatre together, citing the distinct nature of the former and the sheer diversity of the latter as reasons for examining them separately. For example, Bennett states that the “different shape and expression” of the work of Québécois women “makes its inclusion in [her] discussion both too complicated and, indeed, inappropriate” (93).

While Bennett does not go into detail about what distinguishes Québécois women’s theatre other than the decisive influence of “French feminisms and European avant-garde performance styles” (93), I would suggest that, in the case of the TEF and its founding artists at least, a key difference lies in the concept of performativity. Returning to Forsyth’s definition, the drive for producing “change in theatre practice, dominant discourse, and sociocultural realities” (xii) can be said to be a goal of any or most feminist theatres, but the way that this is articulated in their work differs. As my case study that follows will illustrate, Québécois artists’ use of performance art strategies, and particularly the form’s bridging of on stage and off stage realities, led them to enact the critique they were making with their work in their work itself. Put slightly differently, the goal of creating change was woven into their distinct performance style. This self-referential or self-conscious critique was not present in Nightwood’s early work, which, despite its experimental aesthetics, maintained more traditional distance between performers and audience, fictional world of the stage and social world outside the theatre. Nightwood’s drive for change was expressed implicitly, through its production choices, and explicitly, through its paratheatrical materials. For each company, the ways in which—and the degree to which—it engaged with performativity had an impact on the critical dialogue it initiated.

Forsyth’s use of the term “performativity” is closely tied to the relationship between performance and criticism, an issue that scholars writing about feminist theatre and performance
have highlighted, as noted in Chapter One. While all performance holds the potential to engage in acts of social and political criticism, this was a distinct focus of early feminist theatre of the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist theatre at this time was often organized on a grassroots level; it aimed to create community amongst women, raise awareness about political issues, and incite action. Erin Hurley has written about the critical function of Quebec’s théâtre-femmes of the 1970s and 1980s, wherein feminist artists, including those involved in the TEF, created “new theatrical languages, forms, and mythologies” (172) that critiqued traditional representations of women on the Quebec stage. Hurley, in the concluding chapter of her recent book National Performance. Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion, distinguishes these artists by their “differential relation to the word, specifically the printed word,” pointing out that, “For many, performance was the preferred mode of making public in both senses of the phrase: publishing and making available publicly one’s views” (185). In terms of the first sense of the phrase, these artists drew on women’s rich history of using embodied forms of critique as an alternative to the printed word, which I discussed briefly in the last chapter. Relatedly, in terms of the second sense of the phrase, this is what leads Forsyth to connect Quebec’s théâtre-femmes to the genre of performance art, as both play between the boundaries of art and documentary and position women as speaking subjects (“Introduction: Québec Women Playwrights” xii). Gay Gibson Cima’s examination of performance as criticism also relates to these defining features of performance art, though the historical period and location that she examines differs. She writes: “To understand early American women’s cultural criticism, we must recognize it on its own terms, blurring distinctions between practice and critical theory, fiction and non fiction” (2).

La nef des sorcières is a prime example of performativity in its double sense, and a fitting place to begin this discussion. The play was Quebec’s first feminist theatre “hit” (Hurley 172),
attracting over 25,000 people—close to the attendance of Les fées—and also the first in a series of feminist works produced at the TNM during Jean-Louis Roux’s tenure as artistic director that would continue for five consecutive years, with one play of this type produced each season (Forsyth, “Introduction to A Clash of Symbols” 282). The series of plays, the third of which was Les fées ont soif, broadened the audience for the burgeoning théâtre-femmes and helped to lay the groundwork for the founding of the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes.

La nef des sorcières is structured and performed as six monologues treating different aspects of women’s oppression, including class, sexuality, and the body. It is the product of a year-long collective creation process facilitated by Luce Guilbeault and Nicole Brossard in which the various writers and actors involved workshopped the script in rehearsals that simultaneously functioned as consciousness-raising sessions (Forsyth “About the Collective” 284). Similar to the mise en scène in Les fées ont soif, the actors remained on stage throughout the play, each in her own corner and lit only when it was her turn to speak. (This staging technique was also employed in the premiere of Tremblay’s Les belles-sœurs in 1968; I will expand on the connection between the two plays later in the chapter.) Also like the later play, while this staging choice underscored the women’s sense of isolation, the production paradoxically highlighted the shared nature of their oppression and harnessed the power of collectively speaking together, as Louise Forsyth points out in her introduction to the English translation of the play (as A Clash of Symbols) (279). Forsyth explains:

The leitmotif of ‘Je parle’ (‘I speak’ or ‘I’m speaking’) which recurs through all the monologues and is the last line of the play underscores the importance of women’s words being heard on the public stage: women speaking or writing their own words so as to perceive the reality of their own experiences. As long as they

remain silent, even they themselves remain unsure about the legitimacy and meaning of their own perceptions. They are without the necessary tools to share their perceptions with others and to awaken their imagination for the purpose of creatively concocting alternative ways of seeing and being. (279)

Just as the monologue form and the closeness of the material to the actors’ lives (though the play did not claim to be autobiographical) showed elements of performance art, a genre from which collective member Pol Pelletier would draw and adapt into her unique style throughout her career, the leitmotif “Je parle” bridged the theatrical and the performative. While each character’s repetition of the phrase affirmed her right to speak about her particular (fictional) experience, it also represented the fulfillment of a real action: women were speaking their own words on the Quebec stage. The play’s rootedness in real life is reflected in its publicity materials. For example, after summing up the creation process, the press release describes the collective as follows: “Elles découvriront / se découvriront / se dévoileront” [“They will discover / discover themselves / reveal themselves”], a statement that could be applied equally to the characters and the creative team. Indeed, the use of future tense suggests a repeated act of discovery in each performance: this is an ongoing process, not a static action.

The self-conscious awareness of speaking-out is connected to the theatre and women’s performance in the first monologue, “A Mad Actress,” written and performed by Guilbeault. Here the title character, playing the role of Agnès in Molière’s École des femmes, suffers from a complete memory loss shortly after her entrance onstage. Unable to recall her lines, she shuffles through past roles, including Pierrette Guérin, Angéline, Marie-Lou, and Carmen—famous heroines from Michel Tremblay’s work and, significantly, roles that Guilbeault originated as an actress. The Mad Actress’s efforts, however, are in vain. She cannot retrieve Agnès:

   My name is Désirée. Desire.
   I am an actress.
   I rehearsed all day.
I knew my part by heart. I could play it in my sleep.
By heart, sweetheart.
I’m heartsick. I believe what I say because I say it by heart.
Bang, bang, bang. The words were hammered into my head with a big penis hammer. (290)

As Agnès unravels, the Actress gradually recuperates her own self, primarily through her reclamation of her body. She rips off her wig and constrictive period costume, squats as if to urinate onstage, and describes using a mirror to look at her own sex. This gesture of casting off or revolt is carried through each monologue, as the characters step out of the roles imposed upon them by patriarchal institutions such as marriage, capitalism, heterosexual love, and in this case, the theatre.

Through these gestures of revolt and the affirmations of the right to speak that accompany them, the collective of La nef des sorcières enacts not only a powerful socio-political critique, but also an artistic one. The play’s function as theatre criticism is established in the first scene as the Mad Actress rejects the roles imposed upon her by the classic and Québécois dramatic canons. Erin Hurley provides a detailed analysis of this scene’s critique in National Performance. She writes:

Guilbeault / the Mad Actress thereby invokes and refuses the roles assigned her in the ‘seminal’ Québécois plays, plays that would fecundate an expressly ‘Québécois’ theatre. In so doing she breaks two mimetic ties that restrict actresses to passive reflections of male imaginaries: ‘the woman / mimesis of man (Agnès) and the actress / mimesis of text’ (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 1984, 264). (174)

As Hurley points out later in her discussion, though some of the roles that the Mad Actress rejects can actually be seen as progressive ones for women—Pierrette in Les belles-sœurs (1968) and Carmen in À toi pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou (1971)—they are still products of the “male

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33 Hurley draws on Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed’s article “La Sorcière dans le texte (québécois) au féminin,” which looks at the witch figure in Quebecois women’s writing, including La Nef des sorcières and Les fées ont soif. See The French Review 58.2 (1984): 260-68.
imagination” and not of her own creation. Hurley writes, “The roles may be ‘positive’ depictions of women, but they remain metaphor for women’s ‘desired desire’ and, as such, cannot predicate an agential future for women” (175). The agential future to which the play points is rooted in women’s return to their bodies, as demonstrated through the Mad Actress’s examination of her sex and through the juxtaposition between the actress’s body, on display and objectified on stage, and her own, to which she controls access:

No, it’s a body in disguise. Corseted, curved, stretched or bent for the part.
My body carries on, it changes and it ages, thank you just the same.
I like the body that I show myself in the mirror in my room, all alone. (291-92)

The actress’s critique here illustrates the subject-object power dynamic identified by feminist film and theatre criticism emerging at this time, wherein actresses are made to be objects within the apparatus, valued for their “to-be-looked-at-ness,” as Laura Mulvey terms it. The Mad Actress’s attempt to avert the male gaze that Mulvey and her contemporaries saw operating in cultural production reflects a performative critique paralleling the scholarly criticism of the time.

The return to the body demanded by the Mad Actress holds the promise of a new kind of writing and performance, one that is very much aligned with the practice of l’écriture féminine envisioned by French feminists writing during the same period including Hélène Cixous. Indeed, Nicole Brossard’s Writer’s monologue, originally performed by Michèle Magny, seems to anticipate Cixous’s vision of the theatre outlined in “Aller à la mer,” her influential essay published in 1977. Cixous’s description of her stage as a “body in labour” (547) is illustrated in the monologue concluding La nef, as The Writer describes her process of writing like a birth: “Little contractions. Release. Little contractions. My tongue is dry. It’s hot. I am damp. It starts to flow. Push. Push. Breathe deeply. Relax. It’s hot. Again. Enjoy it. Enjoy it. Push. Push. It’s a
This demonstration of women’s reclamation of the creative process stands in contrast to the “penis hammer” hitting The Actress in the first monologue, and is integral to the play’s critique and to its performativity. Indeed, the former is dependent on the latter: it is through its performativity, in both senses of the term, that *La nef des sorcières* functions as a powerful piece of theatre criticism. The play does not end at problematizing and rejecting patriarchal representations of women on stage, but offers radical alternatives. Hurley analyzes this birthing:

> Those body parts that have been the means of reproduction will henceforth be the source of her fellow witches’ pleasure and writing. To counter the Father’s fecundating word, they will write the body; as symbolic and actual culture-bearers and biological reproducers, they know well it too produces the new. (178)

Hurley’s argument is, significantly, connected to the play’s relationship to nationalism; it also highlights the women’s transition from reproducers to producers. Their bodies are no longer used to birth children or regurgitate patriarchal texts; instead, they yield pleasure and a new, feminine language. The Writer affirms, “Tonight I shall step into history without opening my legs. I step into history opening my mouth not my legs. I arrive with words and with solidarity” (326).

Returning to the dual definition of performativity, the play illustrates both elements of Forsyth’s use of the term. First, as discussed earlier, it breaches the boundaries between art and documentary and in so doing, privileges performativity over theatricality—another significant parallel with Cixous’s work. A key element of its play with performativity and connection to

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34 Hurley also connects the play to the theory and practice of *l’écriture féminine*. See pages 178-79 of *National Performance*.

35 Cixous writes,

> If this stage is woman, it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. She will want to be a body-presence. It will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for ‘staginess,’ going beyond the confines of the stage,
performance art is its breaking of the fourth wall, which the collective acknowledges in its preface to the published version of the play: “No spectator is safe: the drama plays itself out between the house and six women. […] From the stage itself they disrupt the scandalous spectacle of the sexist status quo in the house, this being nothing more than one possible representation of society’s grand listening public” (qtd. in Forsyth, “Introduction to A Clash of Symbols” 279). Yet, while the play worked to shock the audience out of their complacency, the fictional stories and the frame of the theatre itself also provided a shield of protection—though it may have favoured performativity, theatricality still played an important role. Forsyth describes the original production: “[O]ne had the clear impression that the dramatic monologue gave them permission to connect with their own bodies and to say things aloud that the authors, actors, characters, and spectators had been thinking but not daring to express openly, not even to themselves” (“A Clash of Symbols” 29). In essence, their characters acted as “host bodies,” a term Gay Gibson Cima uses to structure her study of early women critics. Cima writes,

A host body is a spectral body, a generic body in movement, an abstraction which nonetheless serves as a life-like bodily shield. A host body may be donned in print through a set of rhetorical moves, or in person through a set of gestural and oral patterns. Because of its non-material status, the host body provides the woman critic with a certain safety. It acts as a prophylactic against censorship or censure. (4)

Cima’s host body, like the collective of La néf, straddles fiction and reality, taking advantage of the theatrical in order to achieve the performative. However, Cima’s definition demands further investigation into the question of safety. For example, how much safety can the host body provide? Certainly, in the case of Les fées ont soif, the host bodies of The Statue, Marie, and Madeleine did not function as prophylactics, as those involved with the production were subject

lessening our dependence on the visual and stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them. (547)
to public scrutiny as well as personal attacks—in addition to being thrust into the middle of a media storm and facing picketers outside the theatre, actors were also physically threatened (Bernatchez, “Au cœur de la tourmente” 12).

The second manner in which *La nef* fulfills Forsyth’s definition of performativity is that it literally performs its vision of the theatre. Here, performance offers a more effective mode of critique than the written word, exposing the limitations of traditional print criticism. Put in a slightly different way, the power of women speaking is producing change—in discursive, socio-political, and artistic realms—as the words are being uttered. This aspect of its performativity is connected to the first, as the play’s straddling of theatricality and performativity provides a degree of safety for the collective to articulate pointed criticisms of key social and artistic institutions while making their critiques transparent and directly implicating the audience. At the end of The Writer’s monologue, she repeats the gesture of stepping out of character that opened the play, saying, “I am not playing a role. I am not playing a role. I am succumbing. That’s all. […] The shepherdesses are throwing off their sheep’s clothing” (329). While Magny the actor was not playing a role, she also was: though Brossard’s words may have articulated her own experience as an artist, they were Brossard’s, not her own, and the character of The Writer was not her. Like the leitmotif “Je parle,” here The Writer’s speech functions on two levels—within the play and outside of it, as a performative action. Reading *La nef des sorcières* today, it is impossible to ignore the double meaning of its words: the “shepherdesses” are not just the characters in the play, but the collective of women who were forging their own paths and creating a feminist counter-canon of dramatic and literary works.

*The True Story of Ida Johnson*

The connection between theatre criticism and performativity differs in *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, Nightwood Theatre’s first main stage production. The play’s eponymous character
is a wife, mother of two, and a waitress in a small-town Alberta diner, telling her “true” story to a customer, Luke. Luke is actually her childhood friend Lucy in disguise, and through the use of flashback the audience learns more about her mysterious past on a Native reserve and her connection to Ida. The audience learns more about Ida’s life too, namely the fact that she has killed her husband and children and set her house on fire to destroy the evidence. While the play’s style is very much experimental, drawing on influences from film, music, dance, and poetry, it does not overlap with the genre of performance art in the way that La nef and other works from the œuvre of Quebec’s théâtre-femmes do. Whereas La nef features vignettes of women’s oppression presented as monologues and addressed to the audience, The True Story of Ida Johnson is structured around a more traditional narrative with characters interacting with one another and, for the most part, maintaining the fourth wall. The latter play does, however, fulfill the second element of Forsyth’s use of the term performativity: it aims to produce aesthetic and socio-political change. While its critique is present, it is enacted or performed differently, and this has implications for how it is taken up in mainstream discourse.

The True Story of Ida Johnson is responsible for Nightwood’s genesis as a theatre company. In 1976, Cynthia Grant participated in an editing group at the Women’s Press to publish a novel by Sharon Riis; sensing its dramatic potential, she co-organized an hour-long reading for the book’s launch in March 1977. By the following spring Grant and one of her co-collaborators, Christa Van Daele, decided to adapt Riis’s novel, The True Story of Ida Johnson, for the stage, and were joined by actors Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe, and Maureen White (the

36 The audience’s knowledge of Luke’s/Lucy’s identity was a key difference between Riis’s novel and its stage adaptation. The collective recounts, “The aura of mystery surrounding the relationship between these two [Ida and Luke] in the book remains in the final pages; on stage, though, the same actor is inevitably recognized as Luke and Lucy and therefore makes obvious the single identity of the two characters” (“The True Story of Ida Johnson” 40).
three of whom, along with Grant, would come to be considered as the founders of Nightwood) to begin the collective workshop process in the fall of 1978. Though the company struggled with securing funding and a venue for their production, the play eventually opened at the NDWT Side-Door Theatre in September 1979, and extended its run at the Adelaide Court Theatre from October 18th to November 11th, 1979.37

While in its publicity materials and grant applications, Nightwood positions Ida as an exemplary piece of avant-garde theatre rather than feminist theatre, its feminist critique, rooted in the second wave’s rallying cry “the personal is political,” is embedded throughout the text. The play’s focus on marriage, motherhood, and gendered violence, as well as its positioning of relationships between women as an alternative to the oppression of compulsory heterosexuality, all represent primary concerns of the second wave and facilitate a radical feminist critique of dominant social institutions. In defining the three major categories of feminist theatre in Nightwood Theatre. A Woman’s Work is Always Done, Shelley Scott describes radical or cultural feminist theatre in this way: “Radical feminist theatre seeks to bring women’s biological and sexual experiences to the stage, allying this biology with spiritual states that are believed to bring women closer to nature than men” (209).38 Though Ida does not make an explicit connection

37 For more information on the process of production, see the collectively-authored article “Nightwood Theatre Tells the True Story of The True Story of Ida Johnson” and Shelley Scott’s Nightwood Theatre, particularly pages 55 and 225.

38 Scott, like many others, uses the terms “cultural feminism” and “radical feminism” interchangeably. Jill Dolan distinguishes between them in this way in The Feminist Spectator as Critic, though she also substitutes them for one another at times:

Cultural feminism is sometimes called radical feminism. At the start of the second wave of American feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical feminism was based in a theoretical struggle to abolish gender as a defining category between men and women. Cultural feminism, on the contrary, bases its analysis in a reification of sexual difference based on absolute gender categories. (5)
between women and nature—and I would argue that this is not always a key feature of radical feminist theatre—the powerful bond between Ida and Lucy suggests the special nature of female friendship and sets the two characters apart from the male characters in the play. Moreover, its focus on realistically depicting women’s gendered experiences of the world, often under-represented in the theatre at the time, aligns the play with a radical feminist approach. For example, Ida’s husband Derek’s abusive behaviour is neither sensationalized nor downplayed, but presented in such a way that arouses discomfort. Ida recalls their wedding night: “… I just got the light on and Derek grabbed my neck and said suck me off so I did with my going-away suit on and everything but he couldn’t come and my jaw hurt so I had to cry some but he just shoved it in further and finally he came though with somewhat of a whimper if I do say so myself” (43). While this incident can be clearly read as abuse to a modern-day audience, in 1979, three years before Canadian law would make major changes to the Criminal Code regarding sexual violence, including recognizing rape as a crime that could occur between a husband and wife, the play’s exposure of domestic violence would have shed important light on this “private” issue. Indeed, as I will discuss shortly, this politicization of the personal was met with some resistance by critics.

Meanwhile, the play’s nuanced look at the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality and its insistence on depicting women as neither victims nor heroes offers a materialist critique that anticipates a third wave sensibility. Scott draws on Sue-Ellen Case’s definition of materialist feminism, describing it as, “a system of analysis that places an emphasis on the material conditions of women’s lives, examining how factors such as race and class intersect

Her preferred category is “cultural feminism,” and her explanation of the term best describes what I mean by “radical feminism.” See Chapter One of The Feminist Spectator as Critic.
with gender to determine the position of different women in different historical periods” 
(<em>Nightwood Theatre</em> 211). For example, while we hear Ida’s account of being forced to perform oral sex on her wedding night, she also describes her own acts of violence in a detached way that does not evoke pity for her, but for her husband and children:

I killed him first. Quick… Not a sound. A clear clean perfect slice down through the throat past the throat not quite through.

Clean. And his blood so red and thick I didn’t know. I kissed him… Blood thick in my mouth and my nose, in my hair. Thick and red and good.

The babies. Clean quick slice like a butcher. I’m a butcher.

Everything red and clear as a bell… I turned the gas on… I had a shower and set my hair. I did a manicure under the dryer. Clean nightgown. (48)

Ida’s monologue here is layered with a documentary voice-over describing the monotony of her day leading up to her actions: her domestic chores, the dinner she made for Derek and the kids, and smoking and making love to Derek before bed. The resulting depiction of Ida is a complex one, which while highlighting the intersecting elements of her oppression and her limited agency, also refuses to excuse her actions or paint her as a martyr. I would argue that this aspect of the play, in its layered approach to characterization and avoidance of essentialism, is rooted in more of a materialist approach to dramaturgy. Riis takes a similar approach in her novel, as reflected in her treatment of Ida and Lucy, and this is part of what appealed to Nightwood in choosing to adapt it. The collective writes that Riis’s book, “has as its focus the lives of two women Ida and Lucy who live out two very different life experiences while Riis makes us continually aware of the societies in which the two live” (“The True Story” 36). Nightwood also recognized the challenge positioning Ida in this way posed to dominant feminist perspectives at the time. The collective continues, “Because Ida and Lucy stand as powerful individuals who neither suffer as representative victims nor are the ideal models for us all, the novel has been
criticized by those who call for prescriptive formulas—the ‘Zhdanovism’ of feminist criticism” (37). In the multiple feminist perspectives employed in The True Story of Ida Johnson, Nightwood shows here an early sign of its embrace of pluralism and ability to anticipate and respond to developments in feminist theory and practice—a central aspect of Shelley Scott’s argument in her history of the company.39

A key feature of The True Story of Ida Johnson is its use of monologue to allow both Ida and Lucy to tell their stories. This is employed as a strategy of adaptation, as many of Ida’s monologues were taken directly from Riis’s novel, while Lucy’s monologues were written by the collective to fill-out her character, as the descriptive passages about her in the book did not translate to the stage as easily (“The True Story” 43, 45). Moreover, the company saw this technique as an opportunity to create a relationship between the characters and the spectators. Reflecting on Lucy’s monologues, the collective writes, “This enabled Lucy to speak directly to the audience, thereby removing some of the distance and humanizing her bizarre life experiences” (45). This functions similarly to the use of monologue in La nef des sorcières in that it engages the audience and makes the personal political by giving voice to women’s experiences. However, monologues in Ida do not contain performative utterances in the way that they do in La nef through the leitmotif “Je parle.” As discussed earlier, by repeating “Je parle,” the women of La nef affirm the significance of voicing their experiences of oppression on the public stage and enact the cry for change underlying their monologues through their speech—

39 Scott writes,

There is no clear linear progression in the three types of feminism Case outlines, nor can they be equated with particular time periods in Nightwood’s history. Elements of all three might be present within a single Nightwood production. Because there are many people active within Nightwood at any given time, the women who make up Nightwood could easily encompass different attitudes and beliefs and never articulate that they are, in certain respects, in conflict. (212).
change is occurring as it is being demanded. The women of *La nef* play between character and actor, imploring the audience in each capacity. While *The True Story of Ida Johnson* also positions women as speaking subjects, it focuses on theatricality over performativity. It presents an alternative critical discourse, but this is only created through establishing a relationship between characters and audience, rather than performers and audience.

Another key difference between the plays’ approaches to criticism is how they articulate their desire to produce change in theatre practice—their means of voicing an artistic critique. This can again be traced to each piece’s play with performativity. *La nef*’s self-consciousness as theatre makes its effort to transform the theatre and women’s artistic practices clear to the audience in performance: it is one of the central messages. The Mad Actress’s gesture of ripping off her wig and The Writer’s performative acts of writing and speaking, for example, create a new kind of theatre as they criticize the old. With *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, Nightwood was equally committed to transforming theatre practice, but this was not articulated in the play itself. It is only through an examination of some of the production’s paratheatrical materials that Nightwood’s critique and call for change become evident. In their introduction to the scenes from the play in *Fireweed*, for example, the collective positions the play as original and distinct from other work in Toronto and Canada, not only in its treatment of the women characters—Ida

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40 Nightwood’s later work would show a stronger influence of performance art. A prime example of this is Djanet Sears’ 1990 solo show, *Afrika Solo*. Scott’s description of this piece reveals some significant similarities to the *La nef* collective’s performance style:

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 autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works dealing with the creation of personal identity, performed by the author. […] *Afrika Solo* is not strictly autobiographical, yet it is very much about Sears’s struggle to define herself, and to represent this struggle and self onstage. (214)
and Lucy, they assert, “are understood and defined not in terms of their relationship to men, but rather their relationship to the world” (“The True Story” 36)—but in its unique style. They write,

Precedents for our style of staging were not known to us in Toronto. […] We wished to weave elements and, though none of the elements would themselves be new, hoped that the overall effect would be an original theatrical experience where the image might resonate, the musical themes would recur, and the total composition of the piece would work rhythmically. (37)

The production’s introduction of a new style of theatre to Toronto audiences is alluded to in the brief program as well, which, after the thank-you section, states, “Our respects to Jo-Anne Akalaitis of Mabou Mines and to Ping Chong…” By aligning itself with these avant-garde artists, Nightwood again self-identifies as an internationally versed company aiming to educate other Toronto theatre artists and bring much-needed change to the theatre scene. This message is reinforced throughout Nightwood’s publicity efforts, as Cynthia Grant in particular often spoke of her time working with Mabou Mines in New York and the renewed perspective and drive it gave her.

Nightwood’s self-identification as a company at the forefront of Canadian theatre is also a central message of their grant applications at the time. In an application to the Ontario Arts Council for funding to extend the play’s run, Nightwood includes the following goals and objectives: “[t]o give a wider exposure to Avant-garde Theatre,” “[t]o re-vitalize ‘Alternate’ Theatre,” and “[t]o gain credibility for the new generation” (2). In its application to the Canada Council the following year, Nightwood develops its critique of Canadian theatre by positioning 

Ida as filling a gap:

Ida responded to two deeply rooted concerns about what didn’t seem to be happening in Canadian theatre at the time. Firstly, that the theatre in Canada had not evolved beyond a literary one, that is a theatre whose only developed language of communication is the spoken word and secondly that Canadian themes being developed by the collective companies were limited almost entirely to material from primary sources: e.g. a mining strike in Newfoundland or a situation which
existed in small town Ontario or the story of some interesting character from northern British Columbia. While all extremely valid in developing our own mythology, Ida was an attempt to go further. Sharon Riis’s novel is rooted in the Canadian prairie but its structure demanded a radical departure from realistic drama. It was a story told from several different perspectives simultaneously, a story with strong existential undercurrents and a story with a difficult supernatural element. Yet, it was still very Canadian.

Returning to Robert Wallace’s inclusion of granting agencies in his definition of theatre criticism as an evaluative act, by using the discourse of nationalism in building their case for funding, Nightwood’s application here legitimizes the power of these provincial and federal bodies in shaping Canadian theatre. Indeed, in identifying themselves as at the forefront of Canadian theatre they engage in their own evaluative acts, distinguishing between “good” and “bad,” “highbrow” and “lowlbrow” theatre and mapping-out a future for the art form in Canada. As a final example, in her letter to the Ontario Arts Council, Grant writes, “Having just returned from working in New York (financed through Theatre Ontario), I feel that I have the distance and perspective to say that people here in Toronto have a low-risk, somewhat provincial mentality.” These evaluative statements, embedded throughout Nightwood’s paratheatrical materials and grant applications, may not reach the same audience as newspaper reviews or performance, but are still a key part of the critical discourse surrounding the company’s work. They also constitute important evidence of Nightwood’s self-identity as a “game changer”—of its intention to transform the theatre and the sociocultural realities that surround it—and should be considered in examining the critical reception of its work. Finally, they signal an early desire to move into the mainstream, which becomes more apparent throughout Nightwood’s history. While Grant may be using the company’s marginal status to push the boundaries of Canadian theatre, she also expresses a need to be included within it.
Unfortunately for Nightwood, the mainstream critical reception of The True Story of Ida Johnson and the majority of their other works from the period just confirmed its critique of Canadian theatre—to repeat Grant’s words, “that the theatre in Canada had not evolved beyond a literary one, that is a theatre whose only developed language of communication is the spoken word.” In the next section I will look at the critical reception of this piece and others, and examine the implications of Toronto critics’ logocentrism. It is my contention that mainstream reviewers’ attachment to a literary conception of theatre shaped their interpretation of gender and feminism in these productions. In other words, because Nightwood’s interest in spectacle over text was rooted in their feminist approach to creation, mainstream reviewers’ dismissal of their resulting aesthetic bore political implications.

**Critical Reception and the Word**

**Nightwood’s Foundational Productions**

As previously discussed, while Nightwood was concerned with exploring gender issues and creating a feminist critique through its work, it identified itself primarily as an avant-garde and experimental company in its publicity materials and grant applications. Nightwood maintained this focus in its interactions with the press. In a 1982 interview with Jon Kaplan in NOW Magazine aptly titled “Cynthia Grant builds images,” Grant describes Nightwood’s inaugural production: “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” (13). Nowhere in the article does Kaplan or Grant mention Nightwood’s politics or its status as a company composed exclusively of women; rather, Kaplan characterizes Grant as “present[ing]...

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41 Writing about its early years, Shelley Scott asserts that Nightwood “grew into its name”: “Although it was a company run by women and named for a feminist novel by Djuna Barnes, Nightwood at first defined itself as a producer of imagistic, experimental work, while the explicitly feminist mandate evolved a little more slowly” (Nightwood Theatre 54).
works that rely only in part on the spoken word to make their impact” (13), emphasizing the company’s interest in blending different art forms to create a distinct theatrical aesthetic.

Critics including Kaplan generally responded to Nightwood’s way of framing its work, evaluating its success or failure at fulfilling its experimental mandate and often glossing over potentially feminist or gendered readings of its productions. (The one exception to this is the feminist press, which I consider outside of the mainstream and whose response I will discuss at the end of this section.) As a result, Nightwood came to be identified as an alternative to the alternative theatres, not because of its politics, but because of its aesthetics. For example, Gordon Vogt, reviewing the third Rhubarb! Festival for CBC Stereo Morning in May 1980, describes Cynthia Grant’s piece, *Psycho Nuclear Breakdown*, as “really the only one which fit comfortably into the category of the experimental” (3), and Nightwood and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Rhubarb!’s co-producers, in this way:

> These little companies are interesting simply because they spring up in response to artistic ambitions which presumably are not being fulfilled by Toronto’s established alternate theatres. For so long alternates have been responsible for so much of the interesting new work in Toronto that it’s hard to recall that less than a decade ago they were fighting for press coverage, and even when they got it they were tagged as fringe theatre. (“Rhubarb #3” 1)

In the complete, four-page transcript of Vogt’s review, there is no mention of the politics of either company—like Nightwood, Buddies in Bad Times was founded as an experimental theatre company in 1979; it was not until the mid-1980s that it began to explicitly identify as a gay and lesbian theatre company (Wallace, “Theorizing a Queer Theatre” 143). Vogt only hints at Nightwood’s and Buddies’ special constituencies near the end of his review, saying, “What’s really interesting is that these pieces come from specific people playing for specific albeit small audiences” (3). He never indicates who the “specific audiences” are, instead qualifying his statement by placing the theatres’ relationship to their audiences in a wider context: “That’s the
basis of ALL theatre and whether the groups involved build on this experience will depend on how fruitful the interaction between audience and artists is” (3-4). Moreover, in setting up a comparison between the companies and their predecessors earlier in his article, Vogt implicitly suggests that there is at least a risk that they might follow the same paths and lose some of their edge.

Despite Nightwood’s promotion of its aesthetic interests and association with other marginal or alternative theatre companies working out of the Theatre Centre, its home base until 1986, Nightwood’s work anticipated its eventual feminist identity in several ways. Scott notes literary adaptation, non-narrative and imagistic aesthetics, multi-cultural and anti-racist work, collective creation, and collaboration with outside companies as Nightwood’s key concerns during its early years (Nightwood Theatre 58). She writes, “While some of Nightwood’s productions dealt with non-feminist themes […], the very first show [Ida Johnson] dealt with issues of gender, sexuality, and race, was created collectively, and used experimental staging techniques—all attributes that situated Nightwood within the concerns of feminist theatre” (58). By drawing on similar approaches to creation, even productions that did not deal with feminist themes reflected elements of feminist theatre. I want to suggest that while critics may have consciously responded to Nightwood’s outward identification as an experimental theatre company and evaluated its works primarily on those terms, their reviews also reveal a response to the feminist impulses underlying the work, which influenced their reading of both form and content.

42 Scott briefly describes the founding of the Theatre Centre by its five core companies—Buddies in Bad Times, AKA Performance Interfaces, Autumn Leaf, Necessary Angel, and Nightwood—in her discussion of Nightwood’s beginnings (Nightwood Theatre 58).
My purpose here is not to evaluate whether these reviews are accurate or fair, an impossible task given the ephemeral and subjective nature of the theatrical event; rather, I want to look at them as evidence of how mainstream critics’ focus on text works in contradistinction to some of the key characteristics of early feminist theatre in English Canada. In particular, I am interested in how critics’ underlying “logocentric” bias manifested in their engagement with two key characteristics of Nightwood’s early work: their creative process, based mainly on collective creation and collaboration, and their related interest in experimental and avant-garde aesthetics. While these features are not exclusive to feminist theatre, collective creation and experimentation with form offer women alternatives to traditional (patriarchal) modes of making theatre. Writing about Nightwood’s preference for collective creation, Scott argues,

Collective creation offers at least the possibility for equality and a balance of power in an organization; since these are feminist goals for society at large, it seems only right that they should be put into practice in a feminist company. […] The benefits are also aesthetic and social, as the company proves that art, and the practice of theatre, can arise not just from the mind of the stereotypical lone (usually male) genius, but from sharing, equality, and cooperation—a hopeful model for all human interaction. (Nightwood Theatre 30)

Collective creation as a process also yields a product that is appealing to feminists by displacing the text, historically gendered as male, from the centre of performance. D.A. Hadfield, in her book Re: Producing Women’s Dramatic History, discusses the suitability of collective creations to feminist performance, highlighting “the way they dismantle logocentric authority” (54) as their most notable appeal. This aligns with Ann Wilson’s definition of feminist theatre outlined in her article “The Politics of the Script.” Published in the 1985 special issue of Canadian Theatre Review on feminist theatre, Wilson’s article offers an historical perspective and emphasizes the significance of displacing the text:

43 See Chapter One for a discussion of the historic gendering of the text/performance binary, specifically my discussion of Stefka Mihaylova’s article, “Whose Performance Is It Anyway?”
Power, as it is constituted by logocentrism, refuses to reveal the terms of its authority and, instead, establishes itself as absolute and beyond interrogation. Given that this has effected the exclusion of women, the project of feminism should be to question, subvert, and disrupt the authority of the signifier, the word. [...] Thus, feminists who work in the theatre should fragment the authority of the script. This is not to suggest that feminist theatre should do without scripts; rather it is to suggest that the primacy of the script should be called into question. (175)

By challenging a model of theatre based on the single-authored script, collective creation facilitates experimentation with form and shifts the focus from text to other elements of performance. This kind of creation process is thus connected to the aesthetic features of Nightwood’s early work, namely its interest in combining different art forms. For example, the mix of imagery, poetry, filmic elements, and dance in The True Story of Ida Johnson is the product of the collective members’ different artistic backgrounds and interests. As a second example, Nightwood’s collaboration with Open Experience Theatre and the political music group Campeñeros meant that Flashbacks of Tomorrow (1981) drew on different theatre traditions, with music figuring prominently in the production itself and its paratextual materials. (As evidence to the fact, one quarter of its program was dedicated to music.) What emerges from the following survey of the critical reception of Nightwood’s work during its first three years is a text-based conception of theatre that is antithetical to the company’s focus on collectivity and collaboration and the non-literary aesthetic it sought.

The True Story of Ida Johnson was reviewed more widely compared to Nightwood’s other productions in its first three years. While it enjoyed popular success, with its initial week-long run at the NDWT Side-Door Theatre extended for nearly a month at a new venue, the

44 See “Notes from the Front Line,” particularly Cynthia Grant’s and Mary Vingoe’s contributions. Vingoe writes, “Back in ’78 and ’79 the glue that held us together was the common desire to adapt from other media—literary, visual and musical. We each held strengths in different areas and it seemed auspicious to bring these talents together. We all believed there to be a wider realm from which to draw theatrical inspiration” (48).
Adelaide Court Theatre, mainstream reviewers generally criticized the production, citing its “gathering of every avant-garde theatre technique,” to quote The Globe and Mail’s Ray Conlogue’s review (16), as one of its key faults. Bob Crew at the Toronto Star labels Ida “a good little play struggling to be born” in his lead, and after providing some brief background on its development process, argues that “the play has yet to emerge as a cohesive, coherent whole” (C07). Crew pulls apart and evaluates the various elements of the “multi-media mish-mash,” pointing to the layering of voice-over and stage action as distracting from the story, and a dance by two masked figures as examples of failed experimentation. He concludes, “Yet despite its claims of being avant-garde, of exploring other techniques, there’s nothing very new or experimental about it. It’s merely confusing. What is needed is a lighter touch from director Cynthia Grant. The play simply takes itself too seriously” (C07). The Varsity’s Richard Edwards is much more generous in his review of the production, but also finds its mix of styles somewhat distracting: “Excerpts from the novel and a dissertation of the earth’s crust appear on slides; a transparent screen transforms actors into shadow-figures. These interruptions are sometimes effective, but often force too abrupt a break in the action” (n.pag.).

Cohesion and coherence, measures of “good” theatre frequently applied in mainstream dramatic criticism, are central to Crew’s assessment and are evidently at issue in his colleagues’ reviews of The True Story of Ida Johnson as well. These criteria are rooted in a literary model of theatre that privileges unity, logical progression, and narrative closure, a model that Alan Filewod, in his theorization of collective creation in Collective Encounters, finds incompatible to the form. He writes, “The fact of collective creation is itself a critique of the traditional role of the dramatic author, and in most of these plays authorship must be seen as a group process. In

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45 Bob Crew also signed his reviews as Robert Crew. In this dissertation I refer to whichever name appears as the byline of the particular review under discussion.
that sense, these plays make traditional dramatic criticism, with its textual orientation, difficult” (x). The dominant model of criticism also then conflicts with feminist theatre’s predominant aim—at the time at least—of displacing the text, as outlined above. Whether or not Nightwood’s exploration of different styles was successful in performance is difficult to determine and beyond the point: critics’ focus on this aspect reflects a logocentric bias that runs against Nightwood’s subversion of traditional forms of representation. Mainstream reviewers’ logocentrism continued to work in contradistinction to Nightwood’s experimentation with form in reviews of its following five major productions: *Self-Accusation*, co-produced with the Theatre Centre in April 1980; *Glazed Tempera* in September 1980; *Flashbacks of Tomorrow*, co-produced with Open Experience Theatre in May 1981; *The Yellow Wallpaper* in October 1981; and *Mass/Age* in August 1982. Of these productions, the first two were reviewed positively in the little press coverage they received.46

Ray Conlogue, who found fault with the “clashing styles” of *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, appreciated the simplicity of *Self-Accusation*, a short play consisting of actors Cynthia Grant and Richard Shoichet sitting onstage reciting German dramatist Peter Handke’s “speech-piece” of sentences all beginning with “I” (“I spat on the floor”; “I ate the Host with my teeth”; I failed to hand over pamphlets dropped by enemy planes”) (Gilday n.pag.). Conlogue writes, “Much avant-garde theatre is obscure but Handke’s charm is utter directness” (E9). Conlogue’s only major issue with the production is its theatricality: “At one point, they broke the text by stepping behind a scrim. There they sat in beach chairs facing the back wall, where a sea view was projected. It looked nice and was theatrical, but undid itself by implying that Handke’s text

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46 *Glazed Tempera*, a collective creation inspired by the works of Alex Colville, was reviewed only in *The Globe and Mail*, not by lead critic Ray Conlogue, but by Debra Sharp, who gave it a very positive assessment. *Self-Accusation* was reviewed in the *Toronto Star* as well as *The Globe* (see Conlogue, “Handke play has depth and humour” and Gilday).
was too long to be done from one position, and by not linking itself thematically with the lines being spoken” (E9). Conlogue’s valorization of the text here is symptomatic of his overall preferences as a critic, documented by Robert Nunn in his chapter on Conlogue’s career at The Globe and Mail in Establishing Our Boundaries. Nunn’s analysis of twenty years of Conlogue’s reviews reveal that the critic devotes the most space to discussing script/story and acting, with significantly less space dedicated to other elements of production (390-92). Despite his focus on text, Conlogue’s review of Mass/Age, a show described in Nightwood’s publicity materials as “an exciting multi-media spectacle” about “life in the nuclear age” (Mass/Age), is positive overall. Conlogue sees the piece as redemptive for the company—in this production, according to him, Nightwood is finally getting its collage of style and technique right. He opens his review stating, “Mass/Age […] vindicates Nightwood Theatre’s dramatic sense. It is inventive and stylish and always entertaining” (11).

What is important to note about Conlogue, and what Nunn points out in his profile, is that beyond his tendency toward logocentrism, his body of reviews also reveal a preference for art that speaks to a “universal” human experience. This assumption is a key tenet of a liberal humanist approach to criticism, but begins to break down when confronted with art created by and for marginal communities, whose identities and experiences do not always fit the dominant mold. Nunn describes Conlogue’s critical perspective: “Seeking to found itself on universal standards of art and criticism, it collides with new forms of theatre that subvert the very notion of a universal human nature to which such standards could refer” (386). Conlogue notoriously rejected much feminist and queer theatre, particularly when the experiences represented on stage were not immediately familiar to him. This is illustrated in the distinction between Conlogue’s
review of *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, on the one hand, and *Self-Accusation* and *Mass/Age* on the other.

Though Conlogue’s main problem with *Ida* appears to be its stylistic hybridity, which he sees reflected not only in Grant’s *mise-en-scène* but also in actors Maureen White’s and Kim Renders’ “clash of acting styles” (16), Conlogue also implicitly challenges the play’s feminist politics and representation of gender. This is first apparent in his plot summary:

Johnson gets pregnant and married at age 14, and is degraded by a husband who means her no harm but merely expresses the brutality of dirt-poor Prairie life. She expresses it back by cutting his throat after some ‘not bad’ love making and setting their trailer on fire. Nobody suspects. She goes to Vancouver, waitresses, whores and returns home to Longview.

Meanwhile Lucy, who says she suffocated God at the age of five by sitting on His face, further ridicules white man’s civilization by becoming a Brechtian waitress Jenny and B-movie actress, before disguising herself as a man and seeking out Ida again. (16)

Embedded in Conlogue’s plot summary are several gendered assumptions: first, that Derek’s abuse is excused by socio-economic circumstances; and second, that Ida’s retaliation is completely unprompted. Conlogue’s choice of the word “whoring” instead of “prostituting” also treats sex work in pejorative terms. (His diction is not unique: McKenzie Porter, reviewing *Ida* for the *Toronto Sun*, writes that the titular character “engages in every activity practiced by a slut and trollop” (101).) Moreover, it is not clear what to make of his assessment that Lucy “ridicules white man’s civilization”: is this Lucy’s intention, implicit or explicit in the play, or is it Conlogue’s value judgment of her behaviour?

Conlogue’s sparse positive assessments of the production are also gendered: noting its “striking images,” he writes, “The best include Lucy gyrating on a wing or dancing in red light behind a silhouetting scrim […]” (16). Here he takes on the critical position of “sanctioned voyeur,” as discussed by Carole Corbeil in her article “Peeping Tomcats” (33), summarized in
Chapter One. In this position, the reviewer reduces the female performer to her body, creating a subject-object dynamic through his/her voyeurism. Corbeil sees this focus on appearance as a double standard: in her survey of Toronto theatre reviews in the 1980s, male bodies are not subject to the same scrutiny as female bodies. Indeed, Porter’s review also presents White’s appearance in an evaluative way, describing her as “a plain but sexy waitress in a greasy spoon” (101). Josette Féral’s conception of the theatre critic as translator, as discussed in Chapter One, provides a useful starting point for analyzing the ways in which reviewers discursively construct the female body on stage: if the critic translates the live event into words, then these (gendered) acts of translation must be seen as performative in their own right. Though the critic’s act of “writing the live”—making an ephemeral event permanent by “capturing” it in language—might seem to imply a distinction between activity and passivity, here Conlogue’s and Porter’s language does something: their words are performative because they turn the active female body into an object, and in doing so, divert from the production’s feminist message.

While it cannot be assumed that Conlogue gives a poor review to *Ida* solely based on its representation of gender and feminism, it is worthwhile to note that the play’s focus on these issues sets it apart from Nightwood’s next shows, *Self-Accusation* and *Mass/Age*, which Conlogue reviewed positively. His negative reception of *Ida*’s subject matter and gendered perspective is also accounted for in Nunn’s analysis of his critical values. Summarizing Conlogue’s treatment of feminist and queer theatre, Nunn asserts, “As long as the community celebrating itself in the theatre can be read as a metonymy of the universal human community, all is well. […] But if the community in question cannot be universalized so readily, Conlogue is likely to decide not only that he has not seen a good piece of theatre, but that he has not seen a piece of theatre at all” (397). Hence, Conlogue’s analysis of *Self-Accusation* focuses on
unearthing its universal themes. He writes, “At a closer inspection it is a clever portrayal first of a baby learning the world, then of socialization, and finally of rebellion” (E9). Later on he writes, “The egotistic ‘I’ is so often repeated that it ironically disappears, as we all disappear in social convention” (E9), including himself and all of his readers in some universal, undefined mass. *Mass/Age*, meanwhile, escapes being too narrowly focused because it is “a parable about technology” (Conlogue, “Triviality mars Mass/Age” 11). While Conlogue’s well-documented logocentrism mars his approach to collectively created theatre, it has its most negative implications when dealing with work that does not meet his ideologically informed critical values. In other words, Conlogue can overlook “flaws” in form when he identifies with the content in a direct and immediate way; his feelings of alienation associated with feminist theatre lead him to be tough on both content and form.

*Flashbacks of Tomorrow*, produced in 1981, was generally panned by critics, whose problems with the production are also rooted in an underlying logocentric bias. Described as “[a]n original theatre production, presented in a mosaic of dance, ritual, personal experience and music, based on legends, documents, and the art of Latin America” (qtd. in Scott, *Nightwood Theatre* 227), *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* was performed in English and Spanish, and directed by Grant with members of both producing companies acting in it. Two of the three critics who reviewed it conceded that the production, with Grant’s and Nightwood’s now-signature aesthetically hybrid style, was hard to follow and confusing. S.G. writes: “Flashbacks of Tomorrow is a terrible experience, but not because of the history of Latin America. It is a theatrically juvenile, politically facile and emotionally careless pageant that does disservice to everything it touches on, including the genre of political drama” (n. pag.). Meanwhile, Gina Mallet at the *Toronto Star* describes the production as “an awkwardly bilingual collective, part
Caravan, part agit-prop” (n. pag.). Both S.G. and Mallet find fault with the coherence of the different scenes (Mallet: “too general, their impact diffused”); the characters (S.G.: “Because there are no characters and no specific emotions, there is virtually no acting”); and Grant’s direction (S.G.: “Grant’s direction comes across as derivative and dehumanized, with some senseless shifts in tone and pace that make the evening seem very long”). The only redeeming elements of the production for each reviewer are the Spanish parts, which they suggest are more authentic: “Only when the mostly hispanic cast speak Spanish do they really begin to connect. Suddenly, their faces drop the sad stiff masks assumed for speaking English and become taut and angry and urgent” (Mallet).

S.G.’s and Mallet’s reviews reflect the same critical values underlying the reception of *Ida, Self-Accusation*, and *Mass/Age* in the mainstream press. Their questioning here of style, genre, and direction connect to the qualities of coherence, closure, and unity derived from a text-oriented dramatic model, while S.G.’s assumption that the absence of characters detracts from the play’s theatrical merits is rooted in a related, Aristotelian model of drama.47 Also significant is the connection between authenticity and culture assumed by both reviewers, which undermines the collaborative nature of Nightwood’s work. These two reviews are directly contested by Martin Stone’s brief assessment of *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* in his round-up of the week’s productions in Toronto for the communist newspaper *Canadian Tribune*. He praises the show, giving equal attention to its various elements, and concludes, “I haven’t been so rewarded and thrilled by a show in quite some time. What a shame that some Toronto reviewers

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47 Robert Nunn also makes a connection between Ray Conlogue’s critical values and an Aristotelian model of drama. He writes, “Indeed, Conlogue’s dismissal of the term ‘postmodern’ is an index of his tenacious hold on a number of critical axioms dating back to Aristotle: unity, coherence, closure, universality” (397). Character can be added to this list as well given its relative importance in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. 
denounced it! The show should not be allowed to lapse. It ought to receive public grants to send it on tour across Canada” (n. pag.).

Critics’ privileging of the text also permeates their engagement with the experimental nature of Nightwood’s work. The term experimental is used as a “catch-all” to describe the company’s non-narrative and image-based aesthetics at the time; however, a second meaning is equally important to their work and its reception: the process of trial and error in which Nightwood engaged, their literal experimenting with different creative techniques and art forms in an ongoing process of development and self-definition. Writing about the problematics of criticism for theatre practitioners and theatre historians in her 1987 article “On the Necessity of Criticizing Criticism,” Ann Saddlemyer asks, “Is there anything specifically required of the critic by the women dramatists? Is there anything different in the way women write for theatre that requires additional critical sensibilities?” (138). Though she warns that it is difficult to generalize (and, as a more contemporary feminist perspective would caution, risking essentialism by assuming a shared approach to writing amongst all women), her definition is reflective of the dual meaning of “experimental”:

For much theatre written and/or produced by women during the past decade or so is still in the process of becoming, breaking new ground, trampling on established forms and generic conventions, challenging images of women (and men) as determined by men, sometimes mocking, sometimes parodying, frequently contradicting conservative audience expectations, introducing laughter where tradition demands tears, unashamedly exaggerated when decorum dictates restraint or silence, symbolism when we expect statement, attack when we are trained to acceptance. [...] (138)

Saddlemyer continues, discussing how women’s theatre subverts traditional notions of setting, time, character, and plot. What interests me in her definition is her emphasis on the “process of becoming,” as this is a fitting way to encapsulate Nightwood’s self-image at the time and also has implications for the ways that critics approached its work. Jon Kaplan’s 1982 profile of
Grant, cited earlier, touches on both meanings of “experimental.” Describing *Mass/Age* in the conclusion of his article, Kaplan underlines the production’s connection to Mabou Mines’ aesthetics and Grant’s relationship to the New York-based company. He then goes on to write, “Grant thinks that this sort of collective, ongoing process of a group like Nightwood is important to the growth of theatre” and shortly thereafter quotes Grant, who asserts, “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. The result is not only damaging to the box office, but to the art form itself” (n.p).

Nightwood’s emphasis on research and development, however, was not always taken into account by reviewers. The critical expectation of a polished product is related to logocentrism and its emphasis on the script as the centre of a theatrical production. As discussed earlier, the predominant feminist approach to theatre creation at the time challenged the primacy of the script and resisted its permanency, instead seeing theatre as being in a continual state of flux based on its creators. Underlying Stone’s anomalous enthusiastic response, then, is an understanding that through funding and support, *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* might continue to develop. Vogt’s radio review of *Mass/Age* reflects a similar assumption:

But ‘MASS/AGE’ needs a chance to be remounted. Just now in Toronto it seems as if there is no space for a show like this to be transferred and worked on. The message of ‘MASS/AGE’ is in Marshall McLuhan’s statement that ‘There is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.’ One of the inevitabilities that I would like to see questioned is that a show like ‘MASS/AGE’ must die on the vine after five performances. (2-3)

Of course, extending runs is a challenge for any company, but especially those existing on the margins like Nightwood, which had a limited budget and little grant support in its early years. Stone’s and Vogt’s emphasis on the importance of extending and remounting productions, however, suggests an understanding of theatre as process. Indeed, at the beginning of his review
Vogt draws a comparison to Mabou Mines’ production *Dead End Kids*, which played in Toronto the year before; his preference for Nightwood’s show is rooted in the distinction between process and product:

But unlike Mabou Mines’s show […] “MASS/AGE” has an open-ended feel that I like very much. “Dead End Kids” was so slick, so hard-edged, so sure of its finally-simple statement that it closed off its Toronto audience, at least. But “MASS/AGE” encourages a dialogue between audience and performers, a feeling that you as audience might have to complete the performance. (1)

Not only does Vogt praise the show’s “open-ended feel,” bearing an anti-Aristotelian approach to criticism, but his focus on dialogue and the audience’s active role therein also parallels a feminist conception of criticism as dialogic rather than reactive, as beginning in the theatre rather than outside of it. Vogt and Stone are notable for their effort to look beyond the text at other elements of production, focusing less on plot summary and more on a description of how elements such as music, spectacle, costume, and set come together in what Vogt calls “Nightwood’s style, or perhaps I should say its styles” (1). Bob Crew’s review of *Ida*, cited earlier, also frames Nightwood’s focus on process by describing its approach to creation and couching his evaluation in language connected to development (again, “a good little play struggling to be born”; “the play has yet to emerge as a cohesive, coherent whole” (C07)). While Crew may value cohesion and coherence, his review also demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between process and product.

Given feminist theatre’s focus on (collective) process and its displacement of the text as the centre of production, a feminist approach to criticism follows a similar model, putting process on par with product and examining various aspects of production. This underlies Ann Saddlemyer’s recommendations in “On the Necessity of Criticising Criticism,” which I briefly
discussed in Chapter One. After describing the diversity of women’s theatre in the early 1980s, Saddlemeyer urges,

> It requires not only a new language with which to deal with the form critically, but an awareness that performers must also forge a new method with which to express it on stage. Above all, it demands to be treated on its own terms, expressing the multiplicity of a woman’s view of the world, acknowledging the practicalities of theatre while remaining aware of the just as practical problems women experience in operating within a male-centered world and a rigidly hierarchical institution. (139)

Saddlemeyer’s call for a radically different form of criticism, entailing both a reappropriation of existing critical terminology and the creation of new terminology to respond to the unique features of women’s theatre, was part of a larger dialogue among feminist artists, critics, and scholars in the 1980s. As noted in the last chapter, in this unprecedented period of productivity for women and feminist theatre artists, issues of critical reception began to move to the fore: women became interested in exposing the disjunction between mainstream reviewing practices and feminist theatre, and developing their own critical vocabulary.

This was a focus of discussion at the Next Stage: Women Transforming the Theatre conference at Montreal’s Theatre Festival of the Americas in 1985. Amanda Hale’s report for *Broadside* on the conference, which attracted participants from Canada, the US, Latin America, and the Caribbean, identified the issue of applying critical (patriarchal) standards of excellence to women’s experimental work as a recurring problem. Referring to comments made by Martha Boesing, founder of the American feminist theatre company At the Foot of the Mountain, Hale writes that traditional theatre criticism “perpetuate[s] the myth of Athena’s birth through the head of Zeus” (10). Hale continues, “Aesthetic criticism is based on a history and language which is not ours, Boesing said. We have a crate of oranges and everybody is still talking about apples. We need to develop a new form of criticism which transcends race, class and nationality,
and by which the transformative nature of women’s theatre is understood.” (10). The new form of criticism envisioned by Boesing and her colleagues at the conference also entailed fuller participation by critics in dramaturgical processes, a key suggestion being that critics attend developmental workshops rather than seeing only the final product—here, again, shifting emphasis to process. This idea that the boundaries between critics and artists might be more permeable, that critics need not be, in Josette Féral’s words, “outside the undertaking, without trying to understand the various stages which led to this point” (“‘The Artwork Judges Them’” 308), has historical precedent. Irving Wardle, in his book *Theatre Criticism*, asserts that the practice of critics sitting in on rehearsals became widespread in the 1970s, coinciding with the development of “director’s theatre” (9) and discusses its potential benefits (see pages 9-10, 110-13). A prime example is perhaps Kenneth Tynan, who played an integral part in the development of British drama through both his work as a prominent theatre critic and as literary manager of the National Theatre.

According to scholar Lara Shalson, the new critical paradigms demanded by artists in the 1980s emerged through the community they themselves created. Using Nancy Fraser’s definition of subaltern counterpublics as “those discursive arenas that run parallel to the dominant public arena, wherein subordinated groups are able to develop counter-discourses” and “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser qtd. in Shalson 230), she argues that artists existing in the counterpublic sphere, outside of the constraints of dominant critical perspectives, are afforded the space to create innovative work that challenges “dominant performance paradigms at the level of content and form” (Shalson 230). Critics engaging in this community—as active participants rather than passive voyeurs—are then able to develop a new understanding and approach to feminist work, questioning existing standards and the ideology
upon which they are based.\textsuperscript{48} However, in Shalson’s case study of the Women’s One World Festival (WOW) in New York in 1980 and 1981, critics were required to immerse themselves in the work, a position that was likely only taken up by women critics, many of whom identified as feminist. Mainstream critics are still afforded the option to refuse the invitation to dialogue extended by feminist theatre.

While Nightwood’s work was supported by the local feminist press—namely \textit{Broadside}, a feminist newspaper published between 1979 and 1989, and \textit{Fireweed}, a quarterly women’s literary and cultural journal published between 1979 and 2002—it was reviewed irregularly. This can be attributed not only to the limited space in each publication, but also to the subject matter of Nightwood’s early work, which, as in the cases of \textit{Glazed Tempera}, \textit{Mass/Age}, and \textit{Self-Accusation}, for example, was not always centrally concerned with gender or women’s issues. \textit{The True Story of Ida Johnson}, as Nightwood’s inaugural production and a piece emerging from a collective at the Women’s Press, received the most attention of the company’s work from this period in the feminist press. \textit{Fireweed} published scenes from the play in 1980, along with a piece by the Nightwood collective about their creative process, and \textit{Broadside} reviewed the production.

Kari Reynolds’ review for \textit{Broadside} is effusive, but reflects some of the characteristics of feminist criticism suggested by Saddlemeyer and Shalson and demanded by artists at the time.\textsuperscript{48} Shalson argues,

\begin{quote}
“The [WOW] festivals are revealed to have created conditions wherein criticism was an integral part of the performance space; critics had to approach their job from within the community, engaging in the critical dialogue already occurring within the performance space rather than viewing their criticism as something imposed from outside. In this way, the WOW festivals generated important discussion and self-consciousness on the part of critics about their role in relation to feminist community-based performance, and can thus be seen to have participated in a crucial moment in the development of feminist performance criticism” (225).
\end{quote}
First, Reynolds emphasizes process, providing contextual information about the show’s development in her second paragraph: “Nightwood Theatre’s adaptation of this marvelous novel by Sharon Riis was developed collectively by the troupe over the past year. Those who have read the book can imagine what a hard job it must have been, but the creativity and talent involved have produced a tremendous result” (16). This short paragraph accomplishes two things: first, it reveals the collective, experimental, and developmental nature of Nightwood’s process, factors which, as discussed earlier, shape the production and reception of feminist work; second, it assumes that at least some of the review readers—and by extension, the show’s potential audience—have read the novel as well, which suggests that the intended audience of the piece might be part of the larger feminist community to which Broadside also addresses itself. These implied conditions of reception shape Reynolds’ and the readers’/audience’s approach to Ida and stand in contradistinction to those underlying the mainstream reviews examined earlier, whose logocentricity and expectation of a polished product work against some of feminist theatre’s central aims. The idea of community also challenges a traditional model of criticism, which sees the reviewer as an objective observer who approaches the work from the outside, a position firmly upheld in Ray Conlogue’s criticism, for example. Reynolds’ review focuses mostly on description and analysis of Ida and Lucy’s relationship. There is no mention of the abuse or murder, though Reynolds does provide a reading of the play’s gendered relations, emphasizing Ida and Lucy’s bond and suggesting, “Men are incapable of understanding [Ida]. One man makes her into a fantasy, another calls her a ‘real person’” (16). Reynolds concludes her analysis: “The play is undoubtedly feminist. This is apparent in the conclusions that must be drawn by any thinking person. Women can identify with—and admire—the female characters. The care with which the play is put together and the techniques used to draw us into various times and spaces
are extremely effective. The acting is superb” (16). Reynolds’ piece is unique among reviews of *Ida* in its effort to evaluate the play on its own terms and frame it as a feminist production, a reading that is of course influenced by the publication for which she is writing.

Moreover, while it is tempting to account for Reynolds’ enthusiasm by virtue of the alignment of her politics with those attributed to the play and its producers, it is important to note that feminist criticism does not nor should not seek to be unconditionally positive. As Shalson asserts, the assumption that feminist criticism must be unwaveringly supportive is a false one, playing “right into the ‘preaching to the converted’ dismissive of community-based art’” (235). She continues, “For the suggestion is, simply, that feminist art gets away with being ‘bad’ because the women who enjoy it lack any critical perspective. Thus, enthusiastic support for women’s work becomes associated with a kind of naïveté—or ‘blind faith,’ to extend the metaphor of conversion” (235). Shalson challenges the assumption that feminist criticism, while fit to comment on the social and political implications of a work, cannot comment on its aesthetic features, using counter-examples to support her conclusion that, “if criticism and feminist performance are to enter a productive relationship, it cannot just be a matter of holding feminist work to ‘more rigorous’ critical standards, but must involve challenging those critical standards and developing new kinds of criticism” (236). Indeed, Jill Dolan’s underlying argument in her germinal book, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*—which took its inspiration partly from the WOW festivals and subsequent performances—parallels Shalson’s. In her afterword Dolan outlines the material reasons why feminists might be tempted to turn a blind eye to a production’s problems in order to produce “favourable documentation” (120). However, she ultimately endorses a frank, though radically different, approach to criticism that would support
progress in feminist theatre and “institute a dialogue that resonates beyond the confines of an insular feminist community” (120).

*The Globe and Mail*’s Carole Corbeil stands out as this kind of feminist critic in the reception of Nightwood’s early productions. For example, her review of 1981’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, while historicizing the adaptation’s focus on women and madness and briefly identifying its feminist themes, is unabashedly tough on the production, questioning the story’s dramatic potential and concluding, “Unfortunately, it’s very difficult to see any reason why The Yellow Wallpaper had to be adapted for the stage. It is even more difficult to imagine what audience Nightwood hopes to address” (22). Corbeil’s questioning of the choice of material for adaptation, specifically its lack of potential theatricality, is shared by her colleagues writing for other publications, but her attempt to historicize the production’s politics and her openness to its hybrid style sets her review apart, somewhat at least.

I now turn to the critical reception of *La nef des sorcières*. Reviewers’ response to *La nef* also focuses on the text/spectacle relationship, but in a very different way. While both companies’ work can be seen to attempt to overthrow the power of the (read: patriarchal) word—to challenge dramatic logocentricity—their differing approaches to this impacted how critics interpreted their work. While Nightwood emphasized theatricality, the *La nef* collective, reflecting a model of French feminist theatre, undermined it. This strategy ran counter to the Québécois theatrical and critical climate’s favouring of spectacle, leading critics to question the play’s status as theatre.

*La nef des sorcières*

Unlike Nightwood’s early productions, which, as noted above, were reviewed sparsely in the mainstream press, *La nef des sorcières* received a vast amount of coverage when it premiered in March 1976. This can be partially credited to the hype surrounding the production: in the
months leading up to its premiere, newspapers and the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde itself featured several preview pieces about La nef, leading one reviewer to admit his initial hesitation towards the upcoming production due to “le climat général de ‘marketing’ culturel qui a précédé ce spectacle” (“the general climate of cultural marketing that preceded this show”) (Brousseau, “Virilité” D16). The buzz was rooted in the cultural significance of La nef, as the first of five consecutive, annual works from the burgeoning théâtre-femmes movement programmed at the TNM. While this movement did not begin with La nef, its production at one of Quebec’s institutional theatres marked its growing popularity. This new form of theatre and the political and artistic critiques driving it were slowly infiltrating the mainstream, a force to be reckoned with.

Preview pieces positioned the play as an outgrowth of the feminist movement and foregrounded its performative qualities: this play would create the change it demanded. The March 1976 edition of the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde publication L’Envers du décor reinforces a connection between the thirteen members of the collective and the women represented in the play. The six-page feature on La nef, taking up most of the issue, begins with interviews with each of the monologue authors, noting the interviewer’s deliberate focus on the social issues underlying the text rather than on the production itself (2). The authors share their thoughts on the feminist movement and the questions posed by the play, affirming a correlation between the “fictionalized” material and their lived experiences. Moreover, the authors discuss how the process of creating the play was transformational for them. Luce Guilbeault, for example, notes that like the Mad Actress she portrays at the opening of La nef, she had become conflated with

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49 Erin Hurley identifies the TNM as Montreal’s “institutional theatre” (172), drawing on Josette Féral’s categorization of theatres in Quebec that “are the oldest and most financed by the State” (qtd. in Hurley 207) and Gilbert David’s assertion that institutional theatres “benefit from the greatest critical legitimacy” (207).
the roles she played as an actor and had lost a sense of herself. She tells the interviewer how the play enabled her to recuperate herself:

-Mais vous, arrivez-vous à vous retrouver?

-Pendant des années j’ai oublié la femme que j’étais. Être actrice, c’est être en état de censure vis-à-vis de soi. Mais depuis que j’écris, je me suis retrouvée.

-Il y a un moment très important dans la pièce que j’appellerai le moment-prétexte. Ce moment important suggère-t-il la solitude de l’actrice?

-Non, c’est à ce moment que je sors de mes personnages pour parler de moi. Je voulais le pouvoir de pouvoir parler. C’est nécessaire de parler de soi. C’est une psychanalyse. Un retour en moi. À partir de cette pièce je me remets en question. (2)

(-Have you found yourself again?

-For years, I forgot the woman I was. Being an actress is being in a state of self-censorship. But since I’ve started writing, I’ve rediscovered myself.

-There is a very important moment in the play that I’ll call the pretext. Does this important moment suggest the actress’s solitude?

-No, it’s at this moment that I rid myself of my characters to talk about myself. I wanted the power to speak. It’s necessary to speak of oneself. It’s psychoanalysis. A return to myself. Starting from this play, I call myself into question.)

Guilbeault’s reflection on her role highlights the play’s performative nature. Not only does it breach the boundaries between actor and character, aligning itself with performance art in this sense, but it also instigates real change through its creation, rehearsal, and performance.

Guilbeault’s description of her personal transformation through the process of writing is also aligned with French feminist theory and specifically, Hélène Cixous’s concept of l’écriture féminine, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Cixous begins her influential 1975 essay “The Laugh of Medusa”:

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write for her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by
the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (875)

Cixous’s performative concept of writing anticipates Guilbeault’s creative process, which hinges on reclaiming her subjectivity through the writing of her own (embodied) story in her monologue. In other words, in stripping away the characters she has played and talking about herself, Guilbeault is, in Cixous’s words, “putt[ing] herself into the text—as into the world and history.” It is fitting that the issue of *L’Envers du décor* also includes highlighted quotes from Cixous’s collaborator Catherine Clément and fellow French feminist Xavière Gauthier (3). Both quotes intimate the significance of the play’s title, positioning the witch as a symbol of the threat women pose to the patriarchal order. The Clément quote in particular suggests the importance of using theatre as a tool to deconstruct feminine stereotypes:

> Passer à l’acte, passer aux actes, passer à l’inscription du symbolique dans le réel, et donc produire des réelles transformations de structure, c’est là le seul signe possible de la sortie de la sorcellerie et de l’hystérie. (qtd. in *L’Envers* 3)

(Taking action, taking actions, proceeding to the inscription of the symbolic in the real, and so producing real structural transformations, it’s the only possible sign of escape from witchcraft and hysteria.)

The inclusion of this quote not only plays on the performance’s title, but also its structure, through the word “acte.” “Passer à l’acte” translates to “taking action,” but “acte” is also an act, a unit of a play. The theatre facilitates the inscription of the symbolic in the real, providing a space for real change to occur.

The language used to describe *La nef* in preview articles in the mainstream press highlights its inextricable connection to women’s lived experiences and the act of revolt (or revolution, perhaps) embedded within it: the term “témoignage,” which refers to acts of witnessing and giving testimonials, and the term “prendre la parole,” meaning the action of speaking out (which, as discussed earlier, is woven throughout the play text in the leitmotif “Je parle”) are frequently
employed. A preview piece published in *Le Jour* in February 1976, for example, sets the production up as unprecedented in Quebec,\(^{50}\) and describes it as, “Six auteurs-femmes et six comédiennes y livreront les témoignages de six femmes ordinaires qui disent simplement mais sans ménagement la violence quotidienne qui leur est faite” (“Prochaînement” 21) (“Six female authors and six actors deliver the testimony of six ordinary women who simply but unceremoniously tell of the daily violence committed against them”). Raymond Bernatchez, in “Les sorcières mals-aimées,” published in *Montréal-matin* in February 1976, also focuses on this dual action of witnessing/speaking. Describing the play as “[s]ix témoignages écrits par sept femmes” (“six testimonials written by seven women”) and “[une] prise de parole collective” (“collective speech” or “collective taking of the floor”) (4), Bernatchez’s article moves from a description of what the women are *saying*, to an assertion of the importance of what they are *doing*. His opening paragraph reads,

> Sept femmes d’ici se sont levées, sept femmes d’ici ont pris la parole pour dire leur asphyxie, leur domestication, leur désolation, leur solitude, leur découragement, leur vérité, leurs possibilités, leur révolte et leur espoir. (4)

(Seven women from here have risen up, seven women from here have taken the floor to tell of their asphyxiation, their domestication, their despair, their solitude, their discouragement, their truth, their possibilities, their revolt, their hope.)

Later on, Bernatchez asserts the power of this collective speech act:

> On ne pourra plus, après les avoir lus, ou après les avoir entendus au théâtre par l’entremise de Françoise Berd, Michèle Craig, Louissette Dussault, Michèle Magny, Luce Guilbeault et Pol Pelletier, considérer la femme, ou la déconsidérer comme auparavant. C’est de la femme capable de regénérer le monde qu’il s’agit, et qu’on limite à un cadre étroit. (4)

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\(^{50}\) “Cas sans doute inédit au Québec à tout le moins, treize femmes travaillent étroitement depuis un an au canevas de ‘6-Une femme la nef des sorcières’” (“Prochaînement” 21).

(“Undoubtedly an unprecedented occurrence in Quebec at least, thirteen women worked closely together for a year on ‘6-Une femme la nef des sorcières.’”)

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(We can no longer, after reading their work, or after hearing them in the theatre through the mediation of Françoise Berd, Michèle Craig, Louisette Dussault, Michèle Magny, Luce Guilbeault and Pol Pelletier, consider women, or ignore them, like we did before. It is about how woman is capable of regenerating the world, and how we limit her in tight constraints.)

Bernatchez locates La nef at a turning point in the Quebec women’s movement. While his article recognizes that the movement is a process of change and has not finished its work, he credits the collective as a central force propelling it forward, acknowledging the performativity of their words.

The collective assumes a similar position in Germaine Beaulieu’s article “Des femmes prennent la parole,” published on February 28th, 1976 in Perspectives La Presse. The article begins by describing the growing feminist movement in Quebec, asserting, “Les femmes sortent d’un long silence ; elles ont en gros sur le cœur” (16) (“Women are emerging from a long period of silence; their hearts are heavy”). Beaulieu proceeds to profile particular groups that are at the forefront of the movement in Montreal, including the La nef collective. Here she highlights the play’s role in breaking women’s silence and stresses the significance of the characters it features as women who are rarely heard in society but who are speaking out for the first time (16, 18).51 Through interviews with the play’s co-creators, Beaulieu also underlines the significance of the act of “prendre la parole” in the theatre. She quotes Nicole Brossard, who states,

Par le monologue, l’interaction se fait entre la salle et chacune de ces femmes. Les femmes parlent directement au public. Leur parole ne passe pas par le truchement d’un drame de convention. Le drame, c'est justement ce qui joue entre la salle et ces six femmes. (Beaulieu 18)

51 Beaulieu also uses the language of witnessing and speaking out throughout her profile. She writes, “Nicole Brossard […] fait remarquer au sujet du choix des personnages que les femmes qui prennent la parole dans ce spectacle ne sont jamais écoutées, soit parce que la société ne veut pas les entendre, soit parce qu’arbitrairement elle croit tout connaître d’elles à l’avance” (16, 18) (“On the subject of character choices, Nicole Brossard […] remarked that women who are speaking out in this play are never heard, either because society doesn’t want to listen to them, or because, arbitrarily, society believes it already knows everything about them.”).
(Through the monologue, the interaction occurs between the audience and each of the women. Their words are not mediated by conventional drama. The drama is precisely what happens between the audience and these six women.)

Brossard emphasizes the performative nature of the play, which is illuminated throughout Beaulieu’s article. In addition to its role in creating artistic and socio-political change, the play is framed as breaching the traditional boundaries between art and documentary, performers and spectators. Luce Guilbeault’s discussion of La nef cited earlier also draws out its performativity. She explains that she chose the multi-monologue form because it puts the focus on women’s words, previously silenced, and presents them directly to the audience (without the mediation of the fourth wall), who are invited to react.

Indeed, preview pieces are careful to distinguish La nef des sorcières from traditional theatre. The article from Le Jour cited earlier concludes,

Bien qu’il ne s’agisse en aucun cas des jongleries intellectuelles, cette pièce oblige le public à une réflexion sur la condition féminine. En ce sens, il faut parler d’une rencontre plutôt que d’un spectacle, une rencontre qui ne laissera personne indifférent. (“Prochaînement” 21)

(Although it does not in any case constitute feats of intellectual juggling, this piece obliges the audience to reflect on the feminine condition. In this sense, we must talk about an encounter rather than a performance, an encounter that won’t leave anyone indifferent.)

Here again, La nef is established as something beyond theatre due to its performative nature. It is a pivotal event in the women’s movement; an encounter between performers and audience, between previously silenced women and the society that has muzzled them; an act of performed criticism that will fundamentally change its performers and audience and their attitudes towards women’s rights.

Despite—or perhaps because of—efforts to frame the play in this way, reviews of La nef des sorcières continued to fixate on its status as theatre. While the play’s performative goals of
creating change in the theatre and society were understood, the form of this critique was
nevertheless questioned. Underlying many of these reviews was the question: was theatre the
appropriate venue to air women’s socio-political grievances? In a profile of collective member
Odette Gagnon for the Quebec newspaper *Le Soleil* in April 1976, Martine Corrivault sums up the play’s reception:

>[L]es réactions des gens ont été diamétralement opposées : des féministes en
colère ont reproché à la production d’être ‘théâtrale,’ et de charrier de clichés
déjà trop rabâchés. D’autres spectateurs ont dit aux gens du TNM que ‘ca n’était
pas du théâtre,’ alors que plusieurs avouaient avoir été profondément touchés par
certains des textes. (C1)

(The public response was divided: some angry feminists reproached the production for being “theatrical” and for taking over-used stereotypes too far. Other spectators told the TNM that this “wasn’t theatre,” while several others swore they were profoundly touched by certain parts of the text.)

Upon closer examination of the critical response to *La nef*, however, the oppositions that Corrivault describes are not so neatly divided. As I will discuss shortly, many questioned the play’s status as theatre, though this was not always seen as negative: in some cases, for example, those moved by the production suggested that it was “more than” (versus “less than”) theatre due to its truth and transformative power.

Regardless of their stance on the production’s theatricality, reviews of *La nef* generally picked-up on the language of witnessing and speaking out used in the preview pieces discussed above. Referring to the menopausal woman’s monologue (“The Change of Life”) as “témoignage” in her review, Corrivault writes, “Les auteurs parlent d’un même être, la femme, mais chacun dans son langage” (“La crosière” C7) (“The authors speak of the same being, the woman, but each in her own language”), underlining the importance of not only speaking out, but doing so in a new, feminine language. Meanwhile, Agathe Martin, a professor of Quebec literature at Concordia whose review was published in *Le Jour* writes, “Écouter des paroles
dures, des paroles qui n’ont jamais été prononcées sur une scène québécoise, des mots qui tranchent dans le vif. [...] Pour la première fois le corps des femmes se parle, est mis en scène”

(25) (“Listening to harsh words, words which have never been uttered on the Quebec stage, words that slice through the thick of it. [...] For the first time, the female body speaks, is put on stage”), again linking the body to the acts of writing, speaking, and emancipation. In Martin’s review, language in the play is active, slicing open women’s experiences for all to see. This sense of performativity, inherent in the text and its production and enforced in marketing and preview materials, is often connected to a discussion of witnessing and speaking out in reviews of *La nef*. For example, Michelle Talbot, in her review “Une nef qui a du nerf” (“A ship that has nerve”) writes,

> Mais, à en croire la réaction du public du TNM, l’ovation qu’on fait à ces six comédiennes, on se dit que *La Nef* des sorcières' devait arriver... comme l'accouchement de trop d'années de mûrisse. C'est comme si on avait tout à coup senti que tout le monde, jeunes et moins jeunes, femmes et hommes, intellectuels et travailleurs, bref que les gens de notre temps voulaient que la femme parle, réinvente une qualité de vie, donne ses solutions...!

(But, judging from the public reaction at the TNM, the standing ovation given to those six actors, people are saying that 'La Nef des sorcières' should have arrived… like a birth/delivery after too many years of silence. It’s like we all of a sudden realized that everyone, young and less young, women and men, intellectuals and labourers, in short that the people of our time wanted woman to speak, to reinvent our quality of life, provide her solutions…!)

Talbot, like many of her colleagues in the mainstream press, focuses on how the play is finally changing women’s socio-political status in Quebec.

In reality, however, the play was more the product of a long labour and delivery than an immaculate conception and virgin birth. As Louise Forsyth outlines in the introduction to the first volume of her *Anthology of Québec Women’s Plays in English Translation*, women in Quebec have a long history of writing plays for the stage that dates back to the nineteenth
century. Forsyth marks the emergence of a women’s theatre in Quebec as happening in the late 1960s, when, influenced by the feminist movement, artists began “positioning themselves explicitly as women,” “seeking a community of women with whom they could collaborate,” and “looking for publics that would receive with understanding and appreciation the dramatization of women’s issues” (v). Citing Lucie Robert’s history of the théâtre féminin in Quebec, Forsyth suggests that it was Françoise Loranger’s 1967 Encore cinq minutes, the first play in Quebec written in an explicitly feminine language, which signaled a turning point for women’s theatre. Critics’ framing of La nef, which debuted nine years later, as a turning-point or game-changer might be accounted for by the play’s venue, the publicity surrounding its debut, and its radical form of seven separate monologues brought together. Indeed, in terms of the final point, while its mise en scène is compared to Les belles-sœurs, its structure is different: the women of La nef are connected thematically but do not engage with one another, whereas Tremblay’s women are connected by a more conventional plot and speak directly to one another. La nef’s explicit focus on the word—on feminine language—enabled by the monologic form, should not be overlooked as a distinguishing factor.

Given its “game-changer” status, it follows that a significant portion of the critical discourse surrounding La nef also ties in to issues of nationhood. Gail Scott, in her glowing review for The Gazette, describes the show as “a courageous and touching triumph that should go down in Quebec stage history” (20). Pierre Vallières’ review in Le Jour elaborates Scott’s point. Significantly titled, “‘La Nef des sorcières’ met un point final à l’ère braillarde des ‘belles-sœurs,’” (“‘La Nef des sorcières’ puts an end to the brawling era of ‘belles-sœurs’”) Vallières’ article positions the play as a defining moment in Quebec theatre:

Jamais dans le théâtre québécois, les femmes n’ont avec autant de force que dans ‘La Nef des sorcières’ exprimé sans détours leur volonté de passer aux actes de leur
libération. Bien sûr, toutes les Québécoises (comme d’ailleurs les Québécois) ne sont pas parvenues au niveau de conscience et de franchise qui s’affirme crûment ces jours-ci sur la scène du TNM. Mais—la réaction du public le montre éloquemment—la révolte des sorcières ne laisse personne indifférent. Loin de là.

(Never before in Quebec theatre have women directly expressed their desire to take action with such force. Certainly, all women in Quebec (in addition to all men) have not been reached by the level of consciousness and honesty that is bluntly affirming itself these days on stage at the TNM. But—the public reaction shows this eloquently—the witches’ revolt leaves no one indifferent. Far from it.)

Vallières’ concluding line echoes the argument of his headline: “L’ère des ‘Belles-sœurs’ est définitivement terminée.” (24). André Dionne’s brief review for Lettres québécoises also makes a comparison to Tremblay’s canonical play: “À la suite de l’année de la femme, le TNM nous présente un show de femmes, ‘rien que des femmes’, mais qui s’occupent à autre chose que de coller des timbres pinky” (15) (“Following the year of the woman, the TNM presents a women’s show, ‘only women,’ but which deals with things other than gluing stamps”). The comparisons to Les belles-sœurs are, of course, invited by the play itself in Luce Guilbeault’s opening monologue and by the actor’s history of working with Michel Tremblay, as discussed earlier. But more broadly, in the critical discourse, Tremblay’s sisters-in-law and the collective’s witches are pitted against one another and held up as symbols of the old versus new, with the former depicted as passive and constrained by patriarchal language and the latter as active and freed by the creation of their own language. This opposition is significant not only for the stage, but for Quebec society in general, as Vallières suggests when he argues that “the witches’ revolt leaves no one indifferent.”

Erin Hurley uses the binary terms origin/future and reproducers/producers to frame her study, and they are useful to illuminate the reception of La nef here as well. Hurley underlines the gendered nature of these terms, wherein the former are normally associated with females and
the feminine and the latter, with males and the masculine; she also points to their connection to one another: “origins are traced to reproductive activity and futures enabled by production” (186). Hurley then suggests that feminist performance in Quebec has challenged and exploded these binaries, on both the literal and symbolic levels:

In their attempts to alter the representational contracts stuck under the terms of a facile national mimesis between performance, nation, and woman, they strive toward liberation from national ‘service’ – as representational and emotional labourers – to become actors in their own right and creators of their own futures. They remind us, once again, that when reading national female figures, so porteuses de sens (meaningful, literally bearing meaning), it would be well to be mindful of what and whom else they are carrying. (186-87)

In the théâtre-femmes, women become producers of their own futures on stage and off, as creators, performers, and audiences participate in a process of consciousness-raising through their engagement with the material and one another. It is no coincidence that the critical discourse surrounding La nef uses language of production and reproduction. Raymond Bernatchez’s preview piece, quoted earlier, frames women as capable of “regenerating” the world; after using a metaphor of childbirth in her review, Michèle Talbot credits women with the potential to “reinvent a quality of life.” In the positive reviews of La nef, there is a sense that women will not only produce new possibilities for themselves, but also produce the world anew—or more specifically, produce Quebec society anew. Beyond the reproduction-production binary, perhaps the word “recreate” is more fitting then. In splitting apart the stereotypes of women previously seen on the Quebec stage, the witches challenge conceptions of both identity and nationhood based on male models.

The language of performativity is also tied to the debate about whether or not La nef constitutes a piece of theatre. Jean-Paul Brousseau of La Presse, whose hesitance due to the excess of marketing materials was cited earlier, positions the play as a hybrid between
testimonial and theatre: “Mais je ne crois plus qu’à ce que j’ai vu hier en scène un spectacle-témoignage d’une sobre économie et d’une dignité, ma foi, d’une virilité qui fera trembler bien des hommes” (Brousseau, D16) (“All I now know is that what I saw on stage yesterday was a dignified and understated performance-testimony, the virile power of which, I swear, will make many men tremble.”) Others conceded with Brousseau, calling the play “more than theatre” in a positive sense:

‘La nef des sorcières' est un spectacle à voir absolument. Non, ce n'est pas un spectacle. C'est plus que ça. Des femmes qui parlent, non seulement faut-il les entendre, mais bien les écouter, car leurs paroles ne sont-elles pas les nôtres? (“Au Théâtre” 19)

(‘La nef des sorcières’ is a performance not to be missed. No, it’s not a performance. It’s more than that. Not only must we listen to these women who speak, but we must listen closely, as their words, are they not ours?)

While Gruslin calls the night “une soirée de théâtre plus ou moins théâtral” (“Treize femmes” 12) (“an evening of theatre more or less theatrical”), the significance of the words take precedence over the form for the reviewer: “ […] La parole seule compte. Si elle n’était pas si importante ni si vraie, on aurait pu n’y voir qu’un discours mal théâtralisé” (Gruslin, “Treize femmes” 12) (“Only the words count. If they weren’t so important or so true, we would have just seen a poorly staged speech”).

Other reviews take greater issue with the play’s lack of theatricality. Pierre Francœur, who is critical of some of the monologues in his review for La Tribune, states,

J'hésite d'ailleurs à qualifier cette production de pièce de théâtre puisque ces personnages venant à tour de rôle se raconter n'interagissaient pas, faisaisent chacun leur numéro, seuls à part. C'était donc plus une suite de monologues qui nous était présentée qu'une pièce. (17)

(I hesitate to qualify this production as a play because these characters, each taking their turn to speak, each doing their part alone, did not engage me. What was presented to us was more so a suite of monologues than a play.)
Francœur’s distinction between a play and a suite of monologues here suggests a definition of theatre wherein conflict and rising action are integral components. This conception, underlying other reviews of *La nef* as well, is not unlike that held by the Toronto critics examined earlier in this chapter. For André Dionne, cited earlier for comparing *La nef* to *Les belles-sœurs*, the play’s intentional text-focus and simple *mise en scène* ultimately trump its novelty and potential for socio-political change:

Comme travail de groupe, c’est nouveau, mais chancelant. La structure de l’œuvre faiblit par manque de mise en scène. Dommage qu’on n’ait pas exploité plus adéquatement le très beau décor de Madeleine Ferron.

Quant aux comédiennes, leur jeu est souvent intéressant, mais le poids cérébral et politique du texte les empêche souvent de passer la rampe. Les sermons n’avaient pas lieu au théâtre si je me rappelle bien. Mais l’éducation, ça marque. (15)

(As a collective work, it’s new, but shaky. The ensemble’s structure is weakened by an absent *mise en scène*. It’s unfortunate that they didn’t better exploit Madeleine Ferron’s beautiful set.

As for the actors, their performances are often interesting, but the cerebral and political heaviness of the text often prevents them from reaching beyond the footlights. Sermons didn’t used to take place in the theatre, if I recall correctly. But education leaves a mark.)

In a review of *Les fées ont soif* two-years later, *La nef*’s text-focus is brought up as a point of comparison between the two plays, supporting the reviewer’s assessment that the later play is ultimately superior. Commending *La nef*’s diverse representation of feminist voices, the reviewer concludes that it was too tightly bound to its text:

*La Nef* restait essentiellement un collage de textes et d’interprétations parallèles entre lesquels nul échange ne semblait permis. Au caractère horizontal et glacé de *La Nef* répond la verticalité généreuse des *Fées*. (Andrès 154).

(*La Nef* was essentially a collage of texts and parallel interpretations between which no exchange whatsoever seemed permissible. *Les Fées*’s generous verticality to *La Nef*’s horizontal and frozen character.)
Indeed, the hesitance of both positive and negative reviews at calling *La nef* theatre can be connected to the historic privileging of spectacle over text in Quebec theatre and criticism.

The importance attributed to spectacle finds its roots in the complex relationship between language and national identity underlying the history of Quebec theatre. While it is beyond the scope or goal of this chapter to unpack this history in its entirety, I will briefly highlight the Quiet Revolution as a pivotal point in this relationship. During this period, young writers and artists called for a new theatre that would break from the French colonial models held so dearly in the province as well as the influence of touring productions from the US and instead reflect the realities of the Québécois people. Founding their own periodical *Parti pris* in 1963, these artists would become critics themselves as they vociferously attacked the critical establishment in the pages of their paper for being pro-French, bourgeois, and colonial (Larrue 331). As Jean-Marc Larrue documents in his article “Theatre Criticism in Quebec 1945 to 1985,” the *Parti pris* demanded an overhaul in the theatre in both content and form, advocating that the classic French repertoire dominating the stages be replaced by Québécois work depicting “the sordid aspects of day to day life” (331)—the quintessential example being Tremblay’s *Les belles-sœurs*—and that the high, literary language of traditional drama be replaced by *joual*. Responding to the mainstream press’s disdain for the latter, the *Parti pris*’s André Brochu declared that the vernacular must be used “for an essentially critical function, for the purpose of revealing a state of disintegration of language analogous to the disintegration of society” (qtd. in Larrue 331-32).

Hence, though language was central to Quebec theatre, because *joual* was primarily a spoken language, the aural/oral took precedence over the written. The resulting post-Quiet Revolution drama was not a literary drama (the predominant form of theatre in English Canada at the time) but one that relied on performance to fully communicate its message. This legacy
would shape the nature of Quebec theatre even after the political impulses of the Quiet Revolution receded. Robert Wallace elaborates on the resulting distinction between theatre in English and French Canada in his chapter “Understanding Difference: Theatre Practice in Quebec and Canada.” Wallace resists describing Quebec theatre as “anti-literary,” but affirms the different role of the word within the theatrical event: “words signify speech, not literature: they are meant to be heard, not read, and they are meant to be heard within the context of other signifying practices of the theatre” (189). He goes on to distinguish Quebec theatre in this way:

[I]t is the practice of French in Québécois theatre that distinguishes it from English-Canadian theatre, not French itself. Quite simply, but for a complex variety of reasons, Québécois theatre has rejected the authority of literature to create instead a body of work in which performance is the governing impulse. […] Words are of extreme importance in this work; but it is their spoken significance that is of primary interest, not their existence as written text. (191)

Moreover, Wallace points to methods of creation in which the playwright collaborates with director, designers, and performers, rather than remaining outside of the process and delivering a finished script to a production team, as another key reason for the historic non-literary focus in Quebec theatre. Though theatre in Quebec has developed and diversified since the publication of Producing Marginality in 1989, Wallace’s description remains relevant in historicizing the reception of La nef and other theatre productions in the 1970s and 1980s.

Post-Quiet Revolution theatre criticism supported the prevailing theatrical model at the time: once their war with the Parti pris was over, the old guard of critics relented and acknowledged the significance of the new Quebec theatre. Martin Dassylva, whose initial review of Les belles-sœurs attacked the play for its vulgar language, retracted his opinion in 1973, writing, “When Michel Tremblay’s Belles-Sœurs was first produced in 1968, I spoke out strongly against joual… Having been brought up in an environment where the emphasis was on French classics, I was unable to conceive, either physically or intellectually, that we would go
this far!” (qtd. in Larrue 333). Unlike criticism in English Canada, then, the Quebec model would not be characterized by logocentricity. The collaborative creative process and relatively equal weight given to text and performance would necessitate criticism that prioritized spectacle over text, or at least gave them equal consideration.

Critics writing about La nef, eight years after Les belles-sœurs and under five years after the theatrical tide had shifted, questioned its monologic structure and more broadly, its lack of “theatricality.” Though artists from the théâtre-femmes experimented with aesthetics to a much greater degree, the focus here on documenting women’s oppression and creating a feminine language amounted to a play that was essentially logocentric—logocentric, but not phallogocentric.52 Privileging performative goals over theatrical ones in this case, the La nef collective saw theatre as a venue in which women’s words could reach wide audiences.53 Many critics, on the other hand, did not fully comprehend the choice of theatre as a space for this expression. While theatre and politics were deeply intertwined in Quebec, here there is a notable disjunction that has gendered implications. Essentially, mainstream critics’ privileging of a holistic model of spectacle worked in contradistinction to a prototypic French feminist theatre, which upheld the word above all else—on the surface, the reverse dynamic of that highlighted in my English Canada case study.

52 Jeannette Savona, in her article “French Feminism and Theatre: An Introduction,” credits Derrida with coining this term. Phallogocentrism, she explains, “asserts the complicity between logocentrism and phallocentrism” (544).

53 Savona explicates the appeal of theatre as a medium in her article “French Feminism and Theatre: An Introduction,” originally published in Modern Drama in 1984 to document the “historical breakthrough” at the time of “women’s recent awareness of theatre as an essential means of communication” (541). She suggests that, originally experimenting with feminine writing in poetry, novels, and essays, these artists in France and Quebec began writing for the theatre once they recognized the potential collective power of the audience.
Having the Last Word: The Importance of Publication

A final point of comparison between Nightwood’s foundational productions and *La nef des sorcières* that has emerged through this chapter is the amount of historical remainders left by each work. The differing theatrical, critical, and socio-political contexts of Toronto and Montreal in the late 1970s and early 1980s help to explain why the latter production and other work from the *théâtre-femmes* received more attention in the press and was perhaps taken more seriously as well. The abundance of preview pieces and reviews published about both *Les fées ont soif* and *La nef des sorcières* reflect a recognition of the power of this new movement in Quebec theatre, regardless of whether it was ultimately accepted or rejected by critics. Apart from the volume and quality of criticism written in response to their work, both Nightwood and the artists associated with *La nef des sorcières* generated their own materials in the conversation surrounding their œuvre, initiating a critical dialogue first through their artistic work, and adding to it through paratheatrical materials such as grant applications, programs, preview pieces, and interviews with the press. The *La nef* collective, however, took the extra step of publishing a first edition of the play concurrently with its premiere, ensuring that their message would exist beyond the run of the production.

If the critical dialogue surrounding feminist work in Toronto and Montreal is shaped by companies’ and critics’ complex relationships to the written word, as I have argued in this chapter, then script publication, too, plays a determining role in this dynamic. Problematizing the implications of publication for feminist theatre in the conclusion of her article “The Politics of the Script,” Ann Wilson argues, “The publication of a script suggests that it is finished; it accords the script a kind of authority because it appears to be in its final form. Now the script can enter capitalist economy as a commodity, a product which can be bought” (176). This troubles Wilson because the play’s “specific conditions of production” (177) can be effaced, its radical politics
co-opted by those choosing to produce it in the future. According to her, it is also antithetical to
the notion of feminist theatre as always in process and never complete, and indeed, she points to
Nightwood’s This Is For You, Anna, a collective creation about gendered violence which began
development in 1983, as an example of feminist theatre in its “refusal to speak in a language that
is fixed and highly referential, to invoke closure, to finish the project” (178)—also, in its
creators’ initial hesitance to publish a completed script. I would argue, however, that the
authority that Wilson sees as belonging to script publication can also be harnessed by feminist
artists, as was the case with La nef des sorcières. By publishing the script, the collective not only
added a significant artifact to the historical remainders surrounding the production, but
promulgated the critical discourse around the play by encouraging its wider dissemination.
Moreover, by encouraging audiences and readers to engage with the script more deeply and
extensively, the collective also attempted to keep La nef at the centre of critical discourse, rather
than allowing it to be usurped by reviews.

Advertising the publication of La nef by Les Editions Quinze along with a coupon for
mail order, the TNM’s L’Envers du décor enthuses:

La nef des sorcières est un texte qui a été conçu pour être présenté au public, afin
de faire revivre sur scène des situations de tous les jours. Certaines d’entre elles
nous font rire aux larmes, d’autres nous émeuvent, quelques-unes peuvent même
nous choquer, mais aucune ne nous laisse indifférents. Voilà donc un texte sur
lequel on aimera revenir, pour l’approfondir et le méditer. […]

Coupon de retour :

Vous voulez prolonger votre soirée et recevoir le livre, la nef des sorcières. Alors
postez ce coupon aujourd’hui. (“La nef chez les Quinze” 6)

(La nef des sorcières is a text that was conceived for public presentation, in order
to represent everyday situations on stage. Some of these scenes make us laugh
until we cry, others move us, some even shock us, but none leave us indifferent.
So here is a text to which we would like to come back, to meditate on and think
about more deeply. […]

131
Coupon:

You would like to prolong your evening at the theatre and receive this book, *La nef des sorcières*. So mail in this coupon today.

Here, as in the other paratheatrical materials, the authors emphasize the play’s performativity as a piece of theatre that is “reviv[ing] everyday situations” and leaving no one “indifferent.” The publication (and sale!) of the script ensures that *La nef*’s performativity, its power to create change, will continue long after the final curtain. The book will “prolong [the] evening at the theatre.”

Nightwood, on the other hand, chose not to publish its early scripts. As Wilson suggests, this can be partly attributed to their heavy emphasis on process in their early years, both as a feminist and an experimental collective. Resisting publication meant that productions could continue to evolve through rehearsal, workshops, remounts, and touring, an intention that Nightwood indicated in its early grant applications. For example, in a letter to the Ontario Arts Council to request funding to remount *The True Story of Ida Johnson* at the Adelaide Court Theatre, the company lists “[t]o affect upgrading immediately” and “[t]o stabilize the production for the purpose of touring” as two of its key reasons for extending the show’s run. Further, Nightwood’s avant-garde-influenced style at the time would have also been difficult to capture in a traditional script. Shows like *Mass/Age* and *Flashbacks of Tomorrow*, with their integration of elements such as multi-media, music, and dance, are more likely to be flattened when transcribed to the printed word than theatre that originates in a completed written script. Publishing excerpts of their work in periodicals can be seen as a compromise for Nightwood at the time, as was the case with *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, published in *Fireweed* in 1980, and *This Is For You, Anna*, published in *Canadian Theatre Review* in 1985. Both publications are accompanied by
detailed notes from the creative team reflecting on the developmental process as well as several production photos, giving readers a taste of the play without compromising its status as experimental and collectively-created work.

Dorothy Hadfield uses the CTR publication of *This Is For You, Anna* as a case study in *Re: Producing Women’s Dramatic History*, seeing it as a successful attempt to ensure the longevity of an important feminist production while preserving the integrity of its ongoing developmental process. Sponsored by Nightwood and co-created by some of the artists affiliated with the company, the play was officially presented by a collective called The Anna Project. *This Is For You, Anna* was in continual development as it toured to traditional theatres as well as to non-traditional venues like women’s prisons and shelters, and as cast members and collaborators moved in and out over the years it was presented. As a result, the script changed frequently and featured several open spaces for improvisation. The CTR publication employs multiple strategies to preserve the nature of the play, including an extensive use of production stills from an earlier version of the script, creating an obvious “gap” between image and text that draws attention to *Anna’s* “non-reproducibility;” stage directions indicating improvised sections; and, as noted previously, an accompanying section entitled “Fragments” that includes contributions from several members of The Anna Project (224). Essentially, it avoids many of the pitfalls Ann Wilson finds in publishing feminist theatre. Hadfield argues:

Publishing the script of *This Is For You, Anna* gives it a place in theatre historiography beyond the mere fact of its occurrence, offering a starting point for readers and critics eager to investigate the nature of the theatrical exchange the play offers. Even as it begins to fill in the gap between production and the possibility of re-production, however, the format of the script constantly foregrounds points of non-reproducibility. (224)

Unfortunately, as Hadfield discusses in the conclusion of her case study, the republication of *This Is For You, Anna* in *The CTR Anthology* in 1993 effaced many of the strategies used in the
first publication and fixed the script as a final (and reproducible) product. This points to one of the drawbacks of publication for feminists and non-feminists alike: once a script is made publicly available in this way, its creators inevitably surrender some control over future iterations of it. (And even when Beckett-level precautionary measures are taken, performance always holds the potential to challenge a playwright’s or creative team’s original intentions.)

Clearly, there is no one right answer to the publication debate regarding feminist theatre. As La nef des sorcières and Les fées ont soif show, publication can disseminate a play’s critique to a wider audience and extend the critical dialogue initiated in the theatre—and it can allow feminist artists to have the “last word” in their exchange with reviewers. Montreal in the late 1970s, when audiences were talking about these plays before they even opened and the feminist movement was gaining powerful momentum even as it faced significant resistance, provided an ideal context for publication. However, as Nightwood’s early history warns, publication also risks undermining the experimental nature that characterized much feminist theatre during the same period. Refusing publication at this time—a choice that may have also been influenced by the company’s limited finances—allowed Nightwood to continue developing its repertoire and preserve its collaborative approach to creation and administration. Moreover, as demonstrated by the republication of This Is For You, Anna, once an artist or a company publishes their work, they give up some of their control over it and can see their original creative and ideological intentions appropriated and reinterpreted. This was a real risk for The Anna Project, as though the play was about violence, the collective was vehemently opposed to depicting graphic violence on stage and wanted to ensure that this was enforced in all future performances. As Hadfield points out, it is ironic that in order to protect their initial intentions, the collective had “to metadiegetically arrest the fluidity of the process and posit a fixed product, over which The
Anna Project can exert legal rights and authority, a strategy that curtails the freedom of the product, while protecting the ideological investment in the process” (228).

Over three decades later, publication remains a concern for feminist artists. As someone whose work is still very much fueled by the experimental spirit of the TEF, Pol Pelletier is notoriously protective of her scripts, having allowed only one of her solo shows created in the last twenty years, Joie, to be published. As if a symbol of her protectiveness, in many of Pelletier’s solo shows that I have attended in the last five years, she has held her script tightly throughout her performance though consulting it infrequently and ad-libbing at times. The flipside of Pelletier’s decision not to publish, however, is that her work has not received the wider dissemination and recognition that it deserves—something she often laments on stage. While publication is not the only contributing factor to an artist’s public recognition, the written word’s ability to reach a larger audience than live performance can increase access to his/her work.

In the next chapter I look at translation and its influence on the critical dialogue between artists and reviewers. Translation suggests one of the benefits of publishing for feminist artists: publication allows theatre to be shared across borders and between networks of women, reaching new audiences as it is made available in other languages. For example, as the first English translation of a Quebec feminist play, Linda Gaboriau’s *A Clash of Symbols* brought *La nef des sorcières* to Toronto audiences not long after its Montreal premiere. Produced by Alumnae Theatre in January 1979, *A Clash of Symbols* sold out its first run in the company’s studio space and was revived the following November on its mainstage to an equally enthusiastic response (Forsyth, “Passionate Performances” 204). My case studies in Chapter Three look at productions of Jovette Marchessault’s *La terre est trop courte*, *Violette Leduc* in Montreal and Toronto, and
examine the extra layer of complexity translation adds to artists’ and reviewers’ relationship to
the word. Paratheatrical materials, including publicity and marketing tools and, of course, reviews, become even more of a focus in this chapter as I look at their role in mediating audiences’ understanding of language in performance.
Chapter Three: Lost in Translation?

La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc in Montreal and Toronto

A look at the early histories of Nightwood Theatre and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes reveals some significant parallels between the two companies. Founded in the same year, 1979, both companies operated within collective structures and made experimentation with form a driving goal. As previously discussed, Nightwood was not originally founded as a women’s or feminist theatre company, though it did provide opportunities to women not readily available in the male-dominated theatre community. Pol Pelletier, Louise Laprade, and Nicole Lecavalier co-founded the TEF with the explicit intentions of addressing the gender disparity in their theatre community and creating feminist work. In her one-woman show Joie, about her early work in the theatre, Pelletier describes her separation from the men with whom she had founded the Théâtre expérimental de Montréal (TEM):

WE FIGHT AND WE FIGHT
I RANT AND I RAVE
THE BEHAVIOUR OF EVERYONE AROUND ME IS DISGUSTING
EVERYWHERE I LOOK WOMEN ARE TREATED WITH CONTEMPT
AND I SAY SO
I STAND UP IN THE MIDDLE OF PERFORMANCES
I DENOUNCE
I CONFRONT
I SAY IT LOUD
BACKSTAGE AND IN PUBLIC
“YOUR SHOWS ARE MISOGYNOUS!”

It’s time to take stock. After four years of living together with the Théâtre expérimental de Montréal and after fourteen productions, of which three were women’s shows, and now a special study by eight women analyzing the phenomenon of all-women productions (ah ha! this is serious business!), the group of co-directors organize a series of meetings to clarify our situation, “it’s over,” I said to the men, “I don’t want to work with you anymore, I have to

54 Rina Fraticelli’s 1982 report, “The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre,” commissioned by Status of Women Canada, outlines these conditions. Though it was not published in its entirety, excerpts appeared in arts and feminist journals. Kate Lushington draws on Fraticelli’s data in her article “Fear of Feminism,” published in Canadian Theatre Review 43 (1985).
tend to my own affairs, with other women, I feel humiliated when I work with you, I want to discover who I am, me, myself…” (137).

Pelletier’s heavy involvement with *La nef des sorcières* three years prior provided her with a taste of the women-centered creative environment that she envisioned as an alternative to the TEM. While she had collaborated with Laprade, Lecavalier, and other female company members on all-women shows for the TEM, she increasingly felt that separation from men was the only option for true liberation from the gendered dynamics that shaped the creative process and inhibited women from moving beyond stereotypical and socialized roles and tapping into their power as performers (Forsyth, “Passionate Performances” 207).

While their original intentions were different, Nightwood and the TEF eventually both became known as feminist theatre companies in their respective theatre centres, Toronto and Montreal. Given their similarities in structure and political and artistic goals, it is not surprising that Nightwood and the TEF would engage with one another through artistic and cultural exchange. One of the primary means for this kind of exchange was translation, and particularly the translation of French works into English for presentation by Nightwood in Toronto. As I will discuss in more detail later on in this chapter, while the cross-fertilization represented by this practice was undoubtedly mutually beneficial, translation only occurred in one direction; original works produced by Nightwood were not translated into French for production by the TEF in Montreal. These unidirectional translation practices can be partially accounted for by the TEF’s distinct and cutting-edge work, which attracted the interest of many other companies and artists, as noted by Susan Bennett, who describes the TEF as “an important model both within and outside that province—an inspiration for women working in theatre elsewhere in Canada and also across the world” (“Introduction” viii). Feminist theatre in Quebec was more radical, asserts Louise Forsyth, because it “developed out of a climate of ferment during the Quiet Revolution of
the 1960s” (“Feminist Theatre” 204). The one-way translation practices can also be accounted for within the larger context of translation practice in Canada, where French-to-English translations are much more common than the reverse direction. Though Nightwood’s work may not have been translated for production at the TEF, Anglophone artists were occasionally invited to give lectures, workshops, or performances there (Forsyth, “Passionate Performances” 211).

For example, New York’s Women’s Experimental Theatre (WET) presented their play Foodtalk, in English, at the TEF from June 11 to 13, 1982, and the following week co-founders Sondra Segal and Roberta Sklar gave a talk as part of “Lundis de l’histoire des femmes,” a monthly lecture series organized by the theatre. Forsyth also notes instances wherein Red Light Productions (distinct from Redlight Theatre, Toronto’s first feminist theatre company, pre-dating Nightwood) presented their work at the TEF—a 10-minute play, Bad Girls, in 1982, and a full-length multi-media production, Wild Gardens, in 1983.55

Shelley Scott’s chronology in her book Nightwood Theatre records many instances wherein the TEF or its members presented their work in Toronto in co-production with Nightwood in the 1980s. In 1986, Nightwood mounted their first independent production of a work originating from the TEF’s repertoire, Jovette Marchessault’s La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc, or, as it is called in Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood’s English translation, The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc. The reception of this translated production in Toronto and its source performance in Montreal provides the material for a fruitful comparison between the contexts and practices of theatre criticism in the two cities. They also facilitate a broader discussion of the politics of producing and reviewing translated works, an issue that remains relevant for Nightwood as it continues to mount French-to-English translations in its

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55 Shelley Scott briefly discusses the history of Redlight in Nightwood Theatre. A Woman’s Work is Always Done. See pages 53-56.
seasons, and also for Pelletier, who, though working primarily in French, has performed select solo shows from her œuvre in English translation throughout her career. What do translated works offer a feminist theatre company? How can the company frame the translation to influence and engage with critical discourse? How does the added layer of translation effect critical reception?

Using the TEF’s and Nightwood’s productions of *La terre est trop courte* as case studies, this chapter has two key goals: first, to identify and understand the differences in critical reception between the two productions and consider their broader material and ideological implications; and second, to examine what these differences reveal about the politics and practices of producing—and writing about—feminist work in translation. Through both discussions, I will develop the argument that these productions of *La terre est trop courte* demonstrate the extent to which our understanding of language in performance is mediated through our experience of the theatrical event in its entirety—often by what happens before we even hear a word of the text spoken. Specifically, the relationship between the Montreal and Toronto productions shows how publicity materials and reviews can exacerbate or mitigate some of the common challenges in translating French work into English. As I develop this argument, I hope that a parallel will emerge between this literal form of translation and the figurative act of translation in which feminist theatre companies like the TEF and Nightwood engage as they translate their vision into art—to borrow from Josette Féral—for a broader audience that does not necessarily share their marginalized identities or politics.

**Theatre and Translation**

**Theatre as Translation / Translation in Theatre**

Translation is an attractive metaphor for writing about theatre. In critical writing, the various contributors to a theatrical production are often imagined as translators: the playwright
translates his/her ideas into words, the director translates the playwright’s words into his/her mise en scène, the designer translates the director’s concept into scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound. The critic’s role as interpreter of the theatrical event can also be imagined in these terms—as Féral suggests in “‘The Artwork Judges Them,’” the critic translates his/her vision of art into words, “re-writ[ing] the artwork in his own way” (309-10).

Yet, these metaphors are not neat or completely straightforward: behind them lie the messy and complicated negotiations that constitute theatrical production and reception. Just as the process of translating a text from one language to another is influenced by a myriad of internal and external factors—from the nature of the source language to the needs and context of the translation’s target audience—the metaphoric process of translating in the theatre does not occur as a direct, one-to-one relationship, but, as Ric Knowles’ materialist semiotics illustrate, is shaped by various and varying conditions of performance, production, and reception. If, for example, the director translates the playwright’s vision, then his/her translation is impacted by everything from his/her training and education, to the production’s budget, to the actors cast in the show. Direction or mise en scène as translation is not a realization of the playwright’s vision in this sense, but rather a re-writing, as Féral is careful to qualify in her description of the critic’s work cited above. The metaphor of translation is also deceptive because it grants primacy to the first or “original” term of the analogous pairing. As I will show in my discussion of the critical reception of Nightwood’s The Edge of the Earth, this is perhaps most obvious when the metaphor is used to describe the director’s relationship to the playwright. When the director is seen as translator of the playwright’s vision, the written text is accorded supremacy and seen as the primary source of meaning. This carries significant implications for the critical interpretation
of performance in general, and also for the critical response to performances of translations more specifically.

Barbara Godard’s article “Between Performative and Performance: Translation and Theatre in the Canadian/Quebec Context” further problematizes our metaphoric ways of describing the text-performance relationship, pointing out how discourses of theatre and performance as translation, and translation as theatre or as performative, have also become entangled with the more literal concept of translation in theatre. The problems with these translation metaphors highlight one of the fundamental challenges of translation itself. The theatre and performance as translation metaphor has its roots in the text-performance binary, perpetuated by Western theatre’s historic privileging of the text (an issue which surfaced in the last chapter as well). Godard sees the alternative metaphor, of performance as fulfillment and its presumption that “performance alone achieves organic unity” (331), rooted in the rise of the discipline of Performance Studies, as merely reversing the dominant and subordinate terms of the dichotomy. Both metaphors separate text from performance, and neither sufficiently describes the complex interactions between the two that occur in the theatre. Echoing Knowles’ model discussed above, Godard affirms that meaning is not produced in a linear relationship between text and performance, but in their collision with one another and with their particular contexts. The text-performance relationship is significant to theatrical translation, Godard shows, as the

56 Godard discusses these metaphors in reference to Marvin Carlson’s article “Theatrical Performance: Illustration, Translation, Fulfillment, or Supplement?” (Theatre Journal 37.1 (1983): 5-11). She suggests the potential of Carlson’s alternative term “supplement” to more accurately describe the text-performance relationship. Quoting Carlson, Godard writes, “‘[S]upplement,’ however, would force an ‘adjustment of perception in both directions.’ Exposing a lack in the written text, performance reveals a ‘potentially infinite series’ of performances, each a supplementary mediation” (331).
relation between verbal and non-verbal sign systems remains one of its main theoretical problems (331). She writes,

Certainly, the task of the translator has been rendered more difficult, given current understandings of the complexity of sign systems (re)configuring the social. Within a field of multiple possible relations, translation orients itself towards neither source nor target language or performance style, but cuts back and forth across them in unpredictable combinations. Translation’s transitivity disembeds texts and behaviour strips from their habitual location: a subject is not simply put forward but is reworked by its enunciation and yet again by its re-enunciation. That the position of the verbal has decreased in the new emphasis on multidisciplinary and inter-cultural performances has done nothing to simplify the problem of the relation of verbal to non-verbal systems in translation. What is the impact of a particular word choice on the mise en scène? Does word choice depict or produce action? Responses to these questions are imbricated in another: What is the place of the verbal text within the different theatre institutions and cultural systems paired in a specific translation and theatre event? Or, for that matter, the place of the gestic text? (338)

The multiple possible combinations of theatrical sign systems, verbal and non-verbal, Godard argues, need to be understood in connection to translation “to account for the many potential aggregations of verbal and non-verbal reworkings of translation in performance” (340). As I will examine with Nightwood’s production of The Edge of the Earth, the target-language text is just the first step in the process of theatrical translation; this text is reworked in multiple and ambiguous ways in order to serve the sometimes conflicting needs of theatre producers, artists, and audiences. Godard’s examples of Quebec plays in English translation illustrate “a range of configurations in which word and body are dynamically interconnected” (340).

Indeed, the differences in theatre traditions and socio-political contexts between Quebec and English Canada, and the power differentials between the two regions, make French-to-English translations particularly fruitful case studies for the dynamic and infinite series of interactions between text and performance in translation. They also create distinct challenges for translators and theatre-makers, as Godard notes above. Not only must translators make difficult decisions regarding how to interpret and communicate a play’s verbal and non-verbal signs, but
they also must decide how to deal with cultural and political differences—should these kinds of markers be kept in translation, or should they be adapted or assimilated for the new audience and context? For example, translators must make choices regarding markers ranging from traditional Québécois names to allusions to the Catholic Church that might resonate differently with a non-Québécois audience. These decisions are constrained by the social and political contexts of the target audience for the translation, which are influenced by factors including language, literature, and discourse (Brisset 4). Annie Brisset stresses the importance of context in her study of Québécois theatre translations, writing,

Translation involves a number of choices. These are activated (and limited) as much by the reading or decoding of the original text as they are by what is available in the discourse of the target milieu—in other words, by what the target society permits the translator to write. Translation establishes its priorities between the given of the source text and the pragmatics of the target milieu, constraints from which it cannot escape. (5)

English-Canadian artists dealing with translated texts must make similar choices, and these decisions do not come without significant implications, both material, in terms of audience and critical reception and related ticket sales and funding, and ideological, in terms of the production’s potential to bridge or exacerbate cultural differences between English and French Canada and reify dominant power relations.

**Theatre and Translation in Canada**

Despite the challenges identified above, translations of Québécois plays continue to be popular in English Canada, and particularly in Toronto. Toronto audiences’ sustained interest in the work of Québécois playwrights such as Michel Tremblay, Michel Marc Bouchard, and Wajdi Mouawad dates back to the 1980s, when Quebec provided Toronto audiences with more
productions than any other region in Canada (Wallace 216). Jane Koustas, who has studied the critical reception of Quebec plays in Toronto extensively, credits this rise in interest to a shift in Québécois drama at the time, from its earlier focus on nationalist concerns and more politicized subject matter explored primarily through a realist aesthetic, to an interest in more “universal” themes explored through imagistic and experimental aesthetics. This rise in popularity occurred within the wider context of the development of Canadian theatre translation, which began to flourish in 1972 with the introduction of the Canada Council’s Grant Program for Literary Translation and continued to grow exponentially in the following decades as French and English Canada developed their respective national dramatic repertoires (Ladouceur 13). However, the interest in the other official language’s dramaturgy, as noted earlier, was markedly asymmetrical. In her study of theatre translation in Canada, Dramatic Licence, Louise Ladouceur sums up the statistics: “Without taking into consideration children’s theatre, summer theatre, or amateur theatre, a total of 146 works by francophone playwrights and sixty-nine works by their anglophone counterparts were produced or published in translation in the other official language from 1951 to 2000” (14). Ladouceur suggests that this difference can be explained by the distinct theatre traditions in English and French Canada, noting that before the 1990s, Quebec audiences were more likely to see translations of plays from the American or British canons than from the English Canadian repertoire, which was “as yet unsure of itself” (19). She quotes The Globe and Mail critic Ray Conlogue, who summed up the reason for Quebec’s early lack of interest in Anglophone Canadian drama bluntly as: “English-Canada’s love affair with a plodding American-style naturalism which bored Quebec to tears” (qtd. in Ladouceur 20). Ladouceur also

suggests that the Canadian political climate at the time may have been another contributing factor, as Québécois artists did not identify as Canadian and therefore did not feel any particular allegiance to theatre from elsewhere in the country (20).

While Toronto and English Canada played host to many more productions of translated plays, not all were met with critical acclaim. Both before and after the aesthetic and thematic shift in Québécois drama identified by Koustas, “universality” was a deciding factor in a Quebec play’s critical success in Toronto. Using reviews as evidence of the reception of these works, Koustas explains,

> With the introduction of joual, which posed more complex translation problems, and of the social and political issues associated with the “nouveau théâtre québécois,” which demanded a greater understanding of a radically different Quebec, critics were unsympathetic toward a play’s Quebecness or québécitude; indeed, this seemed to work against the play, rendering it too remote for the Toronto audience. Response to recent and more universal Quebec theater suggests a less defensive, more open attitude which is not centered on specific cultural questions and on the English/French Canada conflict. (82)

Yet, as Koustas shows in her analysis of the positive reception of Tremblay’s early (pre-1980s) work in Toronto, “universality” is not necessarily an inherent quality of a successful theatrical translation in Toronto, but one imposed on it by the public and critics at the expense of its québécitude. Perhaps the best example of this, Koustas argues, is the critical reception of Tremblay’s Hosanna, which opened at the Tarragon Theatre in the spring of 1974. Critics overlooked the play’s political message—Tremblay himself has explained the titular character’s longing to be someone else as allegorical of the Québécois people’s crisis of identity—and instead called it,

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58 While Koustas is careful to note that reviews are subjective and not necessarily representative of a collective response, she nonetheless stresses their relevance in a study of Quebec drama. She writes: “[A] study of the criticism, rather than of the translated text, situates the play in a particular social context, treating it as a form of social discourse which is clearly anchored in and greatly influenced by the target culture” (84).
an exploration of the ‘poetics of love,’ a ‘study of deception and humiliation and the loss of dreams,’ a ‘sensitive delineation of a homosexual relationship,’ or ‘a classic study of homosexual revenge’ by ‘the Canadian theatre’s most compassionate poet of individual (emphasis added) isolation. (Koustas 92)

When critics could not find sufficient universal qualities in the work of Tremblay and his contemporaries, they panned it. This was the case with the Toronto premieres of Tremblay’s *Montreal Smoked Meat*, *Bonjour là Bonjour*, and *Saint Carmen of the Main*, among others, as well as plays by Anne Hébert, Michel Garneau, Roch Carrier, and, notably, Jovette Marchessault, all of whose *québécitude*, Koustas claims, could not be adapted or understood in the “ethno-centric” Toronto theatre milieu. Koustas’s study reveals critics who were unwilling to acknowledge or explore a play’s origin, or take context into consideration in their evaluation.

The shift of Quebec drama in the 1980s away from politicized and nationalistic subject matter and towards more imagistic theatre espousing universalist or humanist values, led by artists such as Robert Lepage and Gilles Maheu of Carbone 14, was accompanied by a greater openness on the part of audiences and critics to works from Quebec. While critics still did not sufficiently engage with the implications of translation in the text-performance relationship (as the case study of *La terre est trop courte* will demonstrate), they did acknowledge the play’s and playwright’s Québécois origins and identities, and did not use these factors or any traces of cultural specificity in the play as grounds for its dismissal. (In the examples of artists like Lepage and Maheu, their work also made it easier to turn a blind eye to translation, as Lepage’s theatre is a multilingual one and Carbone 14 placed a heavy emphasis on images.) Not only did the nature of this new wave of Québécois theatre facilitate the critics’ willingness to “cross the cultural intersection” (Koustas 94), but a shift in attitudes in both communities also contributed to this change. International theatre festivals in Ontario and Quebec—the Festival des Amériques in
Montreal, the Quinzaine Internationale in Quebec, and the du Maurier and Quay Works festivals in Toronto—fostered a greater openness to a diverse array of theatre from Canada and around the world, and, in the case of Québécois theatre artists, a discovery of audiences outside of their region (95).

The problems with the notion of a text’s or performance’s presumed universality—whether embedded in the text or imposed on it by critics and audiences—have been discussed by translation theorists writing about the Quebec-English Canada context, most prolifically by Koustas. This scholarship is particularly focused on how Québécois literature has been stripped of its cultural and political specificities in its translation and reception, in effect colonized, to serve English Canada’s project of literary nationalism. As Renée Hulan puts it in her examination of the development of the translation of Tremblay’s Forever Yours, Marie-Lou, “the translation of Québec texts into English has been as much a process of claiming them and embedding them within a Canadian literary canon as it has been a way of introducing Québec theatre to Canadian audiences.”

Interestingly, however, Quebec translations of English Canadian work have been similarly used to contribute to the creation of a national literature—this has actually been studied more extensively than French-to-English translations, perhaps most notably by Annie Brisset. Indeed, theatre in Quebec features works in translation more frequently than any other genre (Brisset 8). Yet, while both English Canada and Quebec have used translation to support nationalist aims, Québécois translations of English work have not relied on universality, but have

59 See in particular Brisset’s Sociocritique de la traduction: Théâtre et altérité au Québec (1968-1988) (Longueuil: QC, Preambule, 1990) (the translated version of this text is included in my works cited), and Ladouceur’s Dramatic Licence. Godard also gives reading recommendations in the endnotes of her “Between Performative and Performance.” To add to Godard’s list, see also Jeu 133.4 (2009), a special issue on translation in Quebec theatre.
instead adapted texts to the particularities of Québécois culture—for example, through the use of joual in translation practices. Rather than claiming universal qualities inherent in the text, Quebec translators and theatre artists have used various strategies to mould the text to their own culture and politics, and in so doing, have contested the subordinate identity imposed upon them and subverted power relations with the source text and its country or culture of origin. In this sense, Québécois acts of theatrical translation also bring into question the idea of universality, exposing it as a construct of dominant ideology.

**Québéctude and Marginality**

Questions of universality and nationalism are further complicated in the case of plays written by and for marginalized peoples, sub-groups within the Québécois population. As Koustas notes, the Toronto theatre community’s interest in Quebec plays in translation in the 1980s was not limited to a fascination with the aesthetically innovative works emerging from Quebec and revivals of “classics” from playwrights like Tremblay, whose work came to be viewed in a more positive light and whose political message was acknowledged in reviews; rather, the increased number of Quebec plays staged in Toronto during this time also included many plays characterized by their diversity. Koustas states, “Feminist, gay, and lesbian companies, Buddies in Bad Times and Nightwood Theatre, responded quickly to the homosexual currents in Quebec theatre although their productions were not always critical successes” (99).

The uneven critical response to these works leads to questions regarding the relationship between feminist and/or queer politics, nationalism, and universality in the reception of Quebec plays in translation. How do critics reconcile a text’s nationalist and feminist or queer subject matter? If

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60 Brisset outlines these strategies in *Sociocritique de la traduction* and discusses how they function to express Quebec’s relation to “the Foreigner” or the Other. Ladouceur’s history of translation practices in Quebec and English Canada in the second chapter of her book also elucidates some of these strategies.
universality is a requirement for critical success in Toronto, then how do these qualities come to be read into or imposed on some feminist or queer texts but not others—in other words, when can a Quebec text’s extra layer of alterity, its extra-alterity (the alterity that is rooted in factors other than its regional identity, i.e. in this case, in its gender or sexual identity), be read as universal, as was the case with the original production of Tremblay’s *Hosanna*, discussed above? Moreover, what might the critical and popular responses to these plays—and the discrepancy between the two, in some cases—reveal about the appeal of translated texts for feminist and/or queer identified companies to begin with? A brief look at the reception of Jovette Marchessault’s first play to be staged in translation in Toronto, *The Saga of the Wet Hens* (*La saga des poules mouillées*), in comparison to more successful translations at the time, will shed some light on these questions.

*The Saga of the Wet Hens* is discussed by both Koustas and Godard, as its negative critical reception highlights some of the common issues of translating Quebec French-language plays into English and transporting them to Toronto. *La saga des poules mouillées* debuted at Montreal’s Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in the spring of 1981, part of the company’s series of feminist works produced under artistic director Jean-Louis Roux. It was translated into English by Linda Gaboriau, the leading translator of Quebec drama (Ladouceur 30), for its Toronto premiere in February 1982 at the Tarragon Theatre. The play stages an imagined encounter between Laure Conan, Anne Hébert, Germaine Guèvremont, and Gabrielle Roy in which they discuss their experiences as women writers in Quebec, highlighting their struggles but also the power of creativity and solidity between women. Placing her fictional characterizations of the authors alongside excerpts from their work, a style she would later use in *La terre est trop courte*, Marchessault effects a critique of gender and genre that Godard likens to the works of
“fiction-theory” produced around the same time by Quebec feminists, an innovative form of writing in which theory is inextricably woven into fictional texts. This element of fiction-theory, however, was minimized in Gaboriau’s translation, which retained historical details of Quebec customs but omitted details of literary history, particularly the censorship of Quebec women’s writing (Godard 353). While these cuts were uncharacteristic of Gaboriau’s practices (344), her translation did retain the relationship between textual and non-textual signs, creating a gestural text that aimed to reproduce the original production’s style. Godard writes,

The director […] certainly responded to such [gestural] indications in the dramatic script, staging an extraordinarily dynamic ritualized performance with exaggerated movement in which Marchessault’s lyric flights functioned as speech in action, creating effects of spectacle through their rhythm and duration as stylized ritual rather than through any oppositional conflict among psychologized style. (344)

The Tarragon production was directed by Michelle Rossignol, who previously directed the French-language premiere at Nouveau Monde and was thus able to draw “on her knowledge of Marchessault’s mythic prose writings, as well as on her own training in Quebec theatre conventions, to orchestrate a close correlation of verbal, kinesic, and proxemic systems” (344).

However, Gaboriau’s and Rossignol’s focus on maintaining the play’s cultural specificity in translation—both in its content and style—meant that it did not fulfill Toronto critics’ requirement of universality. In summarizing the reception of The Saga of the Wet Hens, Koustas points to cultural differences as the main reason for its failure, particularly “the numerous allusions to the authors depicted as well as to the Catholic Church as the key oppressor” (94). Godard echoes Koustas’s first point, showing how critics had difficulty following the dialogue.

61 Kathy Mezei gives a useful definition of “fiction-theory” in the article “Theorizing Fiction Theory”, co-authored with her fellow editors of the feminist journal Tessera, Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, and Gail Scott (3 (Spring / Printemps 1986): 6-12, http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/tessera/article/viewFile/23515/21715 ). Indeed, much of the work appearing in Tessera, which published the writings of English Canadian and Quebec feminists from 1984 to 2005, could be classified as fiction-theory.
and the relationship between the characters, the real women upon whom they are based, and the totemic animals Marchessault assigned each of them to represent their secret desires. Godard quotes Norma Harrs’s review for *The Globe and Mail* as evidence: “Harrs viewed the production as ‘a triumph of pyrotechnics over content’ in which spectators are allowed only ‘briefly into the psyche of each woman’ and are confused under the bombardment ‘with weighty symbolism and abstract images’” (qtd. in Godard 345). For example, Harrs found fault in the association of the “gentle, loving work” of Gabrielle Roy with her totemic animal, the crow, which aside from alluding to the native Trickster figure, can also be seen to represent La Corriveau, an outcast in Quebec society.\(^{62}\) This symbolism may not have been immediately obvious to Harrs. Moreover, her review reflects a sense of alienation from the play’s gestic text and other non-verbal signs that were inextricably connected to the verbal text.

While Toronto reviewers in the early 1980s would find symbolism and abstract images appealing in other Quebec artists’ works, in this case the meanings behind them were not wholly accessible without knowledge of Quebec culture. Though Gaboriau’s translation strategy has evolved since the 1980s, her approach with Marchessault’s play was to move English Canadian audiences towards the play, rather than move it towards them and adapt it to their needs. This might be contrasted—as Godard does—against the use of symbolism and abstract images in Robert Lepage’s work. Lepage presents a “universalization of culture” (350) by reproducing Western imaginings of other cultures, essentially adapting the subject matter to the needs and fantasies of the target audience. Moreover, *The Saga of the Wet Hens*’ québécitude cannot be ignored because its feminist message, about the patriarchal literary establishment and the importance and power of solidarity among women writers, is tightly bound to the Quebec

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\(^{62}\) See Godard for a discussion of the symbolism of the crow in the play (“Beyond Performative” 353).
authors represented in the play and their particular experiences. To return to the comparison with 
*Hosanna*, while both plays are set in Quebec, many of the signs central to Tremblay’s play point 
the audience outside of the province, making it easier to read “universal” meanings into the play 
and sever its *québécitude* from its queer themes or ignore it altogether: Claude Lemieux is 
dressed as his drag queen persona Hosanna, who is dressed as an American movie star, Elizabeth 
Taylor, dressed as the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. Marchessault’s play, on the other hand, keeps 
a tighter, more internal focus: again, Gabrielle Roy is signified by the crow, which alludes to La 
Corriveau, who is best understood in the context of Quebec mythology.

Despite the negative critical response, *The Saga of the Wet Hens* was a box office success, 
suggesting, as Koustas points out, that, “faced with the larger question of feminism, far more 
central to the play than nationalism, Torontonians were actually able to bridge the gap and accept 
the play’s alterity” (94). Indeed, while they may have posed a greater risk in terms of critical 
reception, translated plays provided a rich means of cultural exchange between feminist and 
queer theatre makers and audiences in Quebec and Ontario in the 1980s, as noted at the 
beginning of this chapter. Sherry Simon attributes the interest in feminist translations to the 
strong movement of French-language feminist experimental writing in Quebec in the 1970s and 
1980s. In the preface to her book *Gender in Translation*, Simon explains,

> As a new variation in the dialogue between Quebec and English Canada, feminist translation reactivated the political concerns of this cultural exchange. But it transformed them as well, stimulating innovative creative practices and opening up new territories of border writing. Translation became a vital site of cultural production. (vii-viii)

As Simon discusses later on in her book, translation between the two regions created new circuits of exchange, not only between individual writers, but also between literary traditions, resulting in the creation of new “writerly sensibilities in English” (109). She claims that this period was
distinguished by translation’s role as a “ferment for literary creation”, breaking with the tradition of the “parallel courses of the two national literatures” (109). One of the key venues of exchange was the periodical Tessera, which aimed to bring together the writings of English and French feminists under the rubric of feminist literary theory and language-centred writing focused on the feminine, transgressing genre boundaries and challenging traditional representations of women (Godard, Collaboration in the Feminine 15). Tessera regularly published articles about feminist theatre and performance; other periodicals, like Fireweed, published translated dramatic texts as excerpts or in their entirety. For example, the 1979-80 issue of Fireweed featured English translations of Marchessault’s Les vaches de nuit and excerpts from the germinal La nef des sorcières and Les fées ont soif (Forsyth, “Passionate Performances” 206). As Louise Forsyth points out, these translations gave Anglophone artists and academics access to Quebec feminist theatre—and Quebec feminist thought. University students whose professors taught the plays in their classes were also a new and enthusiastic audience (207).

Loyal audiences of queer and feminist theatre companies involved in producing translated works—audiences whose identities and values were not necessarily matched by mainstream critics, it should be noted—were also keen to be part of these processes of exchange and collaboration between English Canada and Quebec, hence their acceptance of these plays’ alterity noted by Koustas above. Describing the years between 1965 and 1985 as a hotbed for social activism as well as artistic creation, Forsyth writes,

The drives—psychic, erotic and intellectual—of those who created or got caught up in this ferment were so powerful that linguistic and cultural barriers between francophones and anglophones easily crumbled, thanks to individuals’ fresh commitments to their own cultures and identities, to new enthusiasms for bilingualism in anglophone Canada, and to personal initiatives and public programs supporting translation of original theatrical and literary works. People quite literally fell in love with plays, performances, songs, novels, poems, art, films and even comics from places they had not known before. They thrilled to the fresh artistic
beauty and felt it resonate in their own lives. They reveled in sharing with new friends and colleagues their love affair with innovative creative forms. (“Passionate Performances” 197)

Nightwood’s production of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near* in 1986 would be an important milestone for Ontario audiences, as Rosalind Kerr notes in her introduction to *Queer Theatre in Canada*, because of its innovative representation of queer characters and experimental, queer aesthetics (xv). While Nightwood had dealt with lesbian themes peripherally in *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, Shelley Scott asserts that *The Edge of the Earth* “could be viewed as the first occasion where its work was placed explicitly within a lesbian feminist literary context and marketed to the gay and lesbian community” (213). Like Marchessault’s earlier work *The Saga of the Wet Hens*, it would offer Toronto audiences a taste of this innovative playwright’s distinct style and material while its feminist and queer themes would “resonate in their own lives.”

*The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc and Feminist Translation Praxis*

*La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* dramatizes the life of the eponymous French author (1907-72), described by Marchessault in the preface to her play as,

ugly woman, bastard, sexually obsessed, voyeuse, sado-masochistic, paranoid, chronic weeper, thirsty for luxury, shoplifter, trafficker during the French Occupation, vestal of Parisian literary homosexuals, whore, matricide, pimp, informer, neither worker, nor bourgeois, nor intellectual, but beggar, humiliated, impassioned, obsessive. (qtd. in Forsyth, “Introduction to *The Edge of the Earth*” 422)

The play is divided into eleven tableaux depicting Leduc’s growing frustration and impending madness as her work continues to be denied the recognition it deserves by the patriarchal Parisian literary establishment—her novel about a lesbian love affair is censored by her publisher, and when her books aren’t selling well, extra copies are promptly turned to pulp. The play is not a one-dimensional portrait of Leduc as victim; as reflected in the above quote, it reveals her to be a complex personality who does not always elicit sympathy, particularly when it
comes to her treatment of her lover Hermine.

Weaving Leduc’s writing into her play text, Marchessault takes on the writer’s lyrical tone, making it difficult to distinguish her words from her subject’s in performance. (In published versions of the play, italics or quotation marks denote Leduc’s words, which comprise approximately one fifth of the text.) Marchessault describes her process of writing the play as being in a state of osmosis with Leduc, saying “The play wrote itself all alone” (F. Pelletier 6). Through this interweaving, Marchessault fulfills her self-imposed mandate as a playwright to unearth the history of women writers by reviving Leduc’s work for a new generation and situating it within a feminist literary tradition occupied by such luminaries as Simone de Beauvoir, Clara Marlaux, and Nathalie Sarraute, all dramatized within the play. As Louise Forsyth points out, this creates a sense of affinity “among three different, yet similar, writers: the Violette in the play, the historic Violette Leduc, and the playwright Jovette Marchessault. It also blurs the boundaries among fiction, theatre, biography and autobiography” (“Introduction to The Edge of the Earth” 422).

Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood’s translation of the play adds another voice to this creative triad: her own, as translator. De Lotbinière-Harwood translated La terre est trop courte in the early 1980s; it received its first dramatic reading by the Ubu Repertory Theater in New York in October 1984 before its Nightwood production in 1986. In her bilingual book Re-Belle et infidèle, about her feminist approach to translation, de Lotbinière-Harwood describes her work as a translator as a labour of love, writing, “I realize that it is precisely because I love what the Quebec feminists are writing that I want to bring it to a wider audience. And with English presently the ‘global’ language, this means potentially a huge readership” (90). In this sense, de Lotbinière-Harwood aligns herself with Marchessault, who aims to help others discover Leduc’s
Feminists translating feminists have placed an emphasis on their co-creator status which represents a refusal of the traditional view of the neutral and invisible servant-translator. In language as elsewhere, the male system obscures its true agenda by passing off its dominant version of reality as ‘natural,’ ‘normal’ or ‘right.’ The translating ‘I’ ’s subjective mediation is denied, sacrificed to the author [sic] and the original work whose ‘paternity’ is clear. (154-5)

As she asserts at the beginning of the quote, her approach is grounded in a tradition of feminist translating that challenges the discursively inferior position of both “woman” and “translator” (Simon 2). Feminist translators are not concerned with fidelity to the source text or the source or target audiences, but towards the work, a project in which they engage as co-creators with the writers (3). This collaborative approach, then, explicitly acknowledges translation’s “transitivity,” as Godard terms it. What unites writer and translator is their commitment to foregrounding female subjectivity in the meaning-making process: Simon writes, “Feminist writing and translation practice come together in framing all writing as re-writing, all writing as involving a rhetoricity in which subjectivity is at work” (28).

De Lotbinière-Harwood’s role as co-creator is evident in her translation of La terre est trop courte. In Re-Belle et infidèle, she recounts that she had to create her own translations of Leduc’s work into English, since she found Derek Coltman’s original translations to misrepresent Leduc’s feminist meanings and perpetuate “gender-biased erasures” (107). For example, Leduc’s lines from her 1964 autobiography La bâtard’ex read, “Je suis née brisée. Je suis le malheur d’une autre. Une bâtardex, quoi!” (qtd. in de Lotbinière-Harwood 107), implying that she is her mother’s bastard through the femininization of “une autre.” Coltman’s 1965 translation reads, “I was born broken. I am someone else’s misfortune. A bastard!” (qtd. in de Lotbinière-Harwood 107), erasing the mother-daughter bond that de Lotbinière-Harwood finds so central to
Leduc’s life and work (and in fact, which is central to *La terre est trop courte*). Seeing this as an instance wherein “woman-centered meaning becomes a casualty of the translator’s gendered linguistic conditioning” (107) and beyond this, symbolic of the threat the mother-daughter bond poses to the “heterosexist patriarchy” (107), de Lotbinière-Harwood sought permission from Leduc’s estate to translate the line as, “I was born broken. I am another woman’s sorrow, a bastard!” (108).

The voices of the real and fictional Leduc, Marchessault, and de Lotbinière-Harwood coming together in *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near* become what the translator has called a feminist intertext, “a communicating and resonating collective text scripted in the feminine by feminists rereading and rewriting what other feminists have written and spoken” (126). De Lotbinière-Harwood asserts that feminist intertextual knowledge, as a living and growing archive of shared words, meanings, and references, provides a vital resource for feminist translators like herself: “Our memory circulates through these already read texts, listening to voices and words, and offering the one(s) needed at the moment we are encoding. Feminist meaning is built through an active two-way process, moving from the text being translated through the intertext and back to the work-in-progress” (127). Not only does she return to the source text and the sources of its intertextual references, she also draws on other feminist translations in developing her own. De Lotbinière-Harwood cites many examples of this. In one such instance, she takes inspiration from Barbara Godard’s English translation of Nicole Brossard’s book *Amantes* (lesbian lovers) into *Lovhers* to distinguish the gender-specific relationship between women. Borrowing Godard’s strategy, she translates a passage from a text by Michèle Causse as “…instituting new addressees (men endowed with an ear, with an eye), new address(h)ers (women endowed with a language of their own)…” (130). The feminist intertext, in all of her examples,
serves as a rich resource for her translation processes; the resulting translated works then become a part of the ever-expanding archive and can then be used by others in their work.

De Lotbinière-Harwood’s feminist translation strategies have significant implications for how translated texts are received. How can authors and translators make the collaborative nature of their creation processes and the feminist intertext underlying the work obvious to readers and spectators? For written/published texts, there are several possibilities. In the case of the published versions of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near*, as aforementioned, Leduc’s words are denoted by italics or quotation marks. De Lotbinière-Harwood also suggests other possibilities: endnotes, footnotes, and prefaces that allow a translator to “address readers in her own voice, supply information about the author [sic], comment on the text and on her translation strategies, credit her sources and further reading” (157). This is crucial, de Lotbinière-Harwood argues, to maintaining the integrity of the feminist intertext, fostering its growth, and thereby supporting the development of a women’s culture (156).

In live theatre, where the written text is not available and the audience is faced with an apparently seamless performance, foregrounding the “polyvocal” (De Lotbinière-Harwood 157) nature of feminist translation is more challenging. What stands in for the textual strategies described by de Lotbinière-Harwood in performance? As the case study of *La terre est trop courte* will show, materials constituting what Susan Bennett calls the outer frame of the theatrical experience and what Ric Knowles categorizes as conditions of reception—programs, posters, pre- and post-show talks, and, of course, reviews—can play an integral role in highlighting the feminist intertext and presenting audiences with particular interpretive strategies.

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63 Sherry Simon outlines the three main strategies of feminist translation: supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and hijacking (15). See her first chapter of *Gender and Translation*, “Taking gendered positions in translation theory,” for more detail.
with which to approach the translation in production. The following section will examine the paratextual materials and activities used to frame the French and English productions of *La terre est trop courte*, Violette Leduc and foreground its underlying feminist intertext.

**Violette Leduc and its Paratexts**

*La terre est trop courte at the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes*

The Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes’ production of *La terre est trop courte* reinforced Marchessault’s affinity with the historic and fictional versions of Violette Leduc by asserting her importance as a feminist writer through paratextual materials and activities. While the TEF’s press release and program focused on introducing its audience to the little-known writer Violette Leduc, they did this mainly through the words of Marchessault, who would have been familiar to Montreal audiences due to the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde’s production of *La saga des poules mouillées* the previous spring, and as co-creator, with Pol Pelletier, of *Les vaches de nuit* at the TNM in 1979, a landmark production for Quebec feminist theatre. The text of the TEF’s press release is taken from Marchessault’s poetic introduction to her play (part of which is quoted above), as is the play’s tag line that appears at the top—“la passion de l’écriture et de l’impossible” (“passion for writing and for the impossible”)—which is itself an adaptation of Leduc’s own words from her autobiography, *La bataille*, “I came into the world, and I pledged myself a passion for the impossible” (qtd. in Marchessault 480). Marchessault’s introduction to her play is also prominently featured on the cover of the four-page program, its brief biography

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64 In her introduction to the play, Forsyth writes that Marchessault considers Leduc to be “one of the great, yet unknown writers of the twentieth century ” (421)—in the playwright’s words, “Violette Leduc is one of the great writers of the 20th century, but who knows it?” (qtd. in Forsyth, “Introduction” 424). Though critics with a background in literature and discerning audience members may have heard of Leduc, her œuvre and the details of her life would still have been largely unknown. For further discussion of the complexities of Leduc’s reputation as France’s greatest unknown writer, see Elizabeth Locey’s *The Pleasures of the Text: Violette Leduc and Reader Seduction* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).
of Leduc placed underneath a summary of the playwright’s own work as a painter, writer, and sculptor. The final page of the program reinforces the affinity between the two writers, this time quite literally, as it features an excerpt from Francine Pelletier’s preview piece from the Quebec feminist magazine *La vie en rose* recounting, among other things, the remarkable parallels between the two women’s lives. While some of these parallels may be coincidences, Pelletier admits, there is a mystical connection between the two writers: “[I]l y a, à travers ces points communs, un rapport semblable à l’univers. Surtout, l’écriture est chez elles un narcissisme essentiel, visceral : une façon de donner l’égo que les femmes n’ont généralement pas, de dire Jovette” (“There is, across these commonalities, a similar connection to the universe. Writing is for them an essential and visceral narcissism: a way of granting ego to women who are usually bereft of it, according to Jovette”).

Indeed, Francine Pelletier, a prominent and influential feminist journalist (and Pol Pelletier’s sister) focuses her article on the feminist intertext created by the interaction of Leduc, Marchessault, and Pol Pelletier as director, making the piece an integral paratext to the production. (While we cannot assume that spectators read the article in its entirety—more than the program excerpt—*La vie en rose* and the TEF would have had the same target audience.) Similar to the published version of *La terre est trop courte*, Pelletier’s article integrates text from the play and from Leduc’s books quoted within it, denoting Marchessault’s and Leduc’s words with italics and endnotes. Leduc’s words are interspersed between direct, lengthy quotes from Pol Pelletier and Jovette Marchessault speaking about Violette Leduc, the play, and its production. Together with Francine Pelletier’s own voice, the women create a collective text to frame the production that qualifies as a feminist intertext in its own right. Francine Pelletier concludes the preview piece stating, “De Violette Leduc à Jovette Marchessault, à Pol Pelletier, à
bien d'autres, une ligne fine comme du muguet se trace dans l'histoire: du désespoir à l'exploit, des grincements de dents aux applaudissements” (47) (“From Violette Leduc to Jovette Marchessault, to Pol Pelletier, to many others, a fine line like lilies of the valley traces itself across history, from despair to exploit, from grinding of the teeth to applause”).

The TEF’s activities at the time of production also reinforced both Marchessault’s and Leduc’s place in a community of women writers transcending time and borders. The 1981-82 season featured, for its second year running, a series of immensely popular monthly talks by women artists about women artists called “Les lundis de l’histoire des femmes” (“Women’s History Mondays”), an initiative conceived and organized by Pol Pelletier to fulfill her vision of making the TEF into more than a theatre, but a cultural centre stimulating the intellect as well as creativity (Pelletier, “Préface” 5). The 1981-82 theme was, appropriately, “Les femmes et l’art : Récréation ou création?” (“Women and Art: Recreation or Creation?”). The publication of the talks from the previous season’s series coincided with the run of La terre est trop courte; the collection, entitled Mon héroïne, is advertised in the program underneath the Pelletier excerpt. (And, interestingly, both Marchessault and Luce Guilbeault, the actor playing Violette, gave talks in the first series; Marchessault’s talk, on one of the first female filmmakers, Alice Guy, is included in the book.)

**The Edge of the Earth is Too Near at Nightwood Theatre**

With its 1986 premiere of The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc, Nightwood had the double task of first introducing Toronto audiences to Leduc and Marchessault and then establishing both writers’ relevance to the local women’s movement, the gay and lesbian community (as previously noted, this production was a landmark one due to its queer themes and

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65 The final chapter of the book is Nicole Brossard’s profile of Djuna Barnes, whose 1936 novel Nightwood is the source of Toronto’s Nightwood Theatre’s name.
aesthetics), and the Toronto theatre community. Nightwood’s publicity materials and program thus reflect an effort to “sell” the translation to all three groups, yielding a variety of interpretive strategies with which to approach the production. As was the case with the TEF, Nightwood’s press release, posters and program provide Violette Leduc’s biography and reinforce her work’s significance within a lesbian and feminist literary tradition. Specifically, all paratextual materials emphasize her work’s “lesbian eroticism” and its history of censorship, as well as her groundbreaking status as “the author of some of the first explicitly lesbian novels, novels that shook post war France” (The Edge of the Earth, letter). One poster, featuring a photo of Kim Renders as Violette and Martha Cronyn as her lover Hermine, declares that Leduc “was one of the first to write lesbian erotic prose” and follows the statement with a lengthy passage from La bâtarde describing a moment of passion between the lovers Thérèse and Isabelle. The paratextual materials also introduce Marchessault, who is noted for “celebrating a rich heritage of women writers in her work” (The Edge of the Earth, press release) and whose work is contextualized within the Montreal and Toronto theatre scenes. Marchessault would have been familiar to Toronto audiences: as the materials note (and as previously discussed), Nightwood’s production of The Edge of the Earth is preceded by the Tarragon’s 1982 production of The Saga of the Wet Hens and Theatre Passe Muraille’s 1983 production of Night Cows as part of the Building Women’s Culture festival. Indeed, the poster goes as far as summarizing ticket sales for the Tarragon’s The Saga of the Wet Hens, crediting the increase in sales after the first week to “a significant word-of-mouth lesbian network” (their italics). This poster also enthusiastically exclaims, “So this is a play about a writer’s life… and it’s written by a lesbian from Quebec!” and features translated quotes from Marchessault taken from Francine Pelletier’s La vie en rose piece which emphasize her project of unearthing women’s history and its importance in creating
solidarity among women. These quotes also appear in the article excerpt printed in the TEF program, reinforcing the significance of Marchessault’s project.

The paratextual material frames the production as coming from and speaking to particularized communities, offering a way to read the translation that does not deny its strong ties to lesbian feminist (and lesbian and feminist) politics and Québécois theatre. This aspect of the marketing was quite intentional given the production’s targeting of the gay and lesbian community, as noted earlier, and its sponsorship by the Gay Community Appeal. The feminist intertext created by the TEF’s paratextual materials and activities is carried on in Nightwood’s materials through the incorporation of quotes from Marchessault taken from Francine Pelletier’s preview piece (and perhaps via the TEF program). Nightwood’s program also includes a translated version of an article excerpt about Violette Leduc by Bernard Tanguay, originally published in French in Temps Fou in February 1981, which is quoted in the TEF program as well. The feminist intertext here connects the generations of women artists whose work is woven together in the play and its French and English productions, but also reinforces the connection between the TEF and Nightwood productions specifically. The sense of solidarity created by these feminist intertexts provides a rationale for the translation, as does the focus on Leduc’s and Marchessault’s significance as groundbreaking lesbian writers. The play, its author, and its subject matter are positioned as exciting and vital new material in a well-established cultural exchange between Anglophone and Francophone feminists, which is given credibility with reference to previous works and their box office success, and Nightwood’s production, through its ties to the TEF’s, is framed as authentic. Moreover, the paratextual materials also suggest an approach to reading the translation that would engage with the markers of difference in its textual and non-textual signs—this is significant because as de Lotbinière-Harwood’s translation
generally maintains the play’s cultural specificity in language and style, rather than adapting it to the target (Anglophone) culture, the paratextual materials act as a way to bridge the two cultures and allow the audience access to the particularities of the translation.

Furthermore, while the paratextual materials celebrate Marchessault’s status as a Québécois writer and the play’s importance to Québécois lesbian feminist theatre, they also stress the “universality” of its feminist politics. In other words, unlike The Saga of the Wet Hens, The Edge of the Earth’s feminist message is not inextricably linked to its québécitude: it is set in France, not Quebec, and more importantly, its playwright expresses a brand of feminism that surpasses time and borders. For example, after declaring her identity as a “lesbian writer from Québec!”, the poster includes the following quote from Marchessault: “I feel for women a solidarity which transcends love or friendship… I am making our mothers known to us—the women who bequeathed their revolt and their anger—so we may have guiding spirits, shaman-women.” These ideas of a matriarchal lineage and the return to the mother are rooted in French feminist theory, which, as discussed in Chapter Two, influenced Quebec feminist theory and theatre at the time, but also in second wave feminist politics more generally, which negated individual differences between women in order to achieve its greater goal of uniting them in universal sisterhood. Using Marchessault’s words to frame the production in this way—with an emphasis on its unifying qualities and the importance of its feminist politics—helps Nightwood to mitigate any cultural differences inherent in the text.

Nightwood’s paratextual material frames the production in a second, simultaneous way, and from this emerges a very different way to read and understand the work as translation. Allusions to the Parisian intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s abound in the materials surrounding the production. The image on one of the posters and on the program is of Renders as
Violette Leduc, sitting at a café table with a glass of wine, wearing a beret and a rather pensive facial expression. This image evokes the atmosphere of Paris’s Saint-Germain-des-Prés area, the implied backdrop of multiple scenes of the play. A quote from Simone de Beauvoir, who mentored Leduc and wrote the prefaces to her books, begins the press release: “A woman is descending into the most secret part of herself, telling us about all she finds with unflinching sincerity.” Quotes from de Beauvoir about Leduc appear in different versions of the poster—“Doomed to what is called abnormal love, Violette Leduc became its champion”—and, in a more text-heavy version, “When a transparent, secret-provoking, enthralling book appeared—Violette Leduc’s L’asphyxie—I was startled: a writer had emerged. Camus, Cocteau, Genet and Sartre shared my emotion. From the first, we expected much of Violette Leduc.” These references to de Beauvoir are not misplaced: not only does she figure prominently in the play, but Nightwood’s production is also dedicated to her, as the cover of the program notes, a timely decision given the feminist icon’s death just a month before the show’s opening.

As demonstrated particularly well by this last quote, the publicity material supports the play’s recuperation of Leduc’s work and asserts its place amongst that of other key figures from the Parisian literary establishment, such as Jean Genet and Maurice Sachs, who also appear as characters in La terre est trop courte. Moreover, I would argue that the framing of the production in this way aims to validate Leduc’s work—and also the work of the production—through their connection to more established writers and their canonical body of work. This aspect of the material appeals, at least in part, to the audience’s interest in the celebrity and authority of the (patriarchal) Parisian literary establishment. However, while the play makes the gender disparity in the literary establishment obvious, showing how Genet’s work, for example, is celebrated while Leduc’s is not, the paratextual materials, I argue, gloss over or even obscure
this fact. Not only does Simone de Beauvoir admire and endorse Leduc’s talents as a writer, the materials assert, but Camus, Cocteau, Genet and Sartre do too. The play is not just a play about women, but men too. The Marchessault quote selected for the press release emphasizes the play’s universal appeal: “A cosmopolitan and universal play about the creative spirit of women and of men too… it’s about the struggle of triumph against the negative feelings which block our understanding, and it’s about survival.” Moreover, while the poster emphasizes the play’s feminist and lesbian themes, it also features a translated quote from the La Presse review of the Montreal production that suggests its broader appeal and relevance:

*The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc* is a generous approach towards the knowledge of a colourful character, Violette Leduc. We already knew she was colourful; but here she’s brought forward into her real dimensions which are deeply human. Women’s theatre, Québec theatre— all theatre, in fact, has made a giant step forward with this play.

In both of these examples, the character of Violette Leduc stands in for all outsiders, all artists whose talents and innovation have been unrecognized, all people who have overcome adversity. The play’s extra-alterity is shown as a sign that points outside of itself so as not to alienate potential audience members who do not identify with its feminist and queer themes. As the critical reception of Nightwood’s production will demonstrate below, this focus of the publicity material on the play’s “universal appeal,” perhaps in an attempt to simultaneously reach out to the broader Toronto theatre community, offers an alternative way to read the translation, one that distances it from the original context of Marchessault’s play and diminishes the feminist intertext.

Given the integral role of paratextual material in the process of theatrical production and reception, these various factors can also be seen as influencing the transitivity of the translation. At the beginning of this chapter I discussed Godard’s assertion that “[t]ranslation’s transitivity
disembeds texts and behaviour strips from their habitual location: a subject is not simply put forward but is reworked by its enunciation and yet again by its re-enunciation” (338). Here I want to argue that paratextual material, just like the factors Godard focuses on such as *mise en scène* and word choice, contributes to a translation’s “unpredictable” movement between source and target language and performance style. If Nightwood’s publicity material, in its dual focus on the production’s ties to feminist and queer communities and on its universal appeal, offers multiple ways to read the translation, the meanings that emerge are both ambiguous and conflicting. While the first focus of the material on the feminist intertext promotes a more source-oriented approach to translation, the second focus on the universal can be characterized as one oriented towards the target community, or at least one that attempts to separate the translation from its original context. Indeed, even de Lotbinière-Harwood’s translation is fraught with ambiguity: in order to introduce the play to a wider audience and create a bridge between Québécois and Anglophone feminists, she made certain cuts to the text that erased some of its cultural specificity but also some of the important interactions between female characters, a move which runs counter to her emphasis on the bonds between women in her feminist translation practices (Ladouceur 97-98). An audience’s experience of the translation will thus be influenced by how they read the paratextual material, and how their expectations of the performance that emerge then collide with their actual experience of the performance, which itself is constituted by a number of reworkings of the play’s verbal and gestic texts. The critical reception of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near*, *Violette Leduc* reflects the force of the translation’s transitivity.
**Violette Leduc and its Critics**

**Montreal Reception, 1981**

The TEF’s production of *La terre est trop courte*, *Violette Leduc* was a widespread critical success in Montreal. Many of the reviews comment on the play’s rich, lyrical language, the inventiveness of Pol Pelletier’s direction, and the ensemble cast’s talented delivery of the material. To give some examples that also demonstrate the pervasiveness of the translation metaphor in critical writing, the reviewer at *Le Devoir* writes, “[Pol Pelletier] prend le texte en main, le transcrit, l’installe dans un espace théâtral donné et le fait vivre avec évidence et violence” (Larue-Langlois) (“[Pol Pelletier] takes hold of the script, translates it, puts it in the theatrical space, and brings it to life, clearly and violently”); and *La Presse*’s critic comments, “[Luce] Guilbeault traduit merveilleusement la passion de l’impossible qui a marquée Violette Leduc” (Dassylva) (“Luce Guilbeault marvelously translates the passion for the impossible that marked Violette Leduc”). Here the translation metaphors show actor and director as interpreters of the text, again assuming the primacy of the script but also crediting the necessary work of the other collaborators—without Pelletier as director, the script is lifeless.

Reviewers also responded to the paratextual material’s focus on the affinity between Marchessault and Leduc, foregrounding the feminist intertext. For example, the reviewer from *Le Soleil* writes, “Violette Leduc est un sujet en or et la Québécoise a été éblouie par sesreflets, ce qui donne un texte riche, très verbal, rempli d’émotions et de cris d’excès et de contradictions. Un texte qui ressemble finalement à une certaine Violette Leduc” (author unknown) (“Violette Leduc is a fine subject and the Quebecoise was awe-inspired by her, resulting in a rich text, very verbal, full of emotions and cries of excess and contradictions. A text that resembles, finally, a certain Violette Leduc”). Meanwhile, Martial Dassylva for *La Presse* writes, “Dans une certaine mesure, le personnage et le cas Violette Leduc servent de prétex te à Jovette Marchessault, un
prétexte pour dire ses angoisses de femme et d’écrivain” (“To some degree, the character and case of Violette Leduc serve as a pretext for Jovette Marchessault, as a pretext to express her angst as a woman and as a writer”). A sense of affinity and even collaboration between Marchessault and Leduc comes through in these reviews, creating an allusion to a feminist intertext.

At the same time, the reviewers celebrate Marchessault and her writing—though most note that the play, running over three hours, is too long—and credit her as author or creator. Larue-Langlois is most explicit in this, beginning his review by stating, “Le premier maillon de la chaîne théâtrale, c’est l’auteur” (“The first link in the theatrical chain is the author”) before going on to praise Marchessault’s dramaturgical skills. He then goes on to discuss Pelletier’s work as director, placing mise en scène as the second link in the theatrical chain and asking, “Comment ces mots passeront-ils la symbolique rampe ? Comment en atteindre le public ?” (“How will these words pass across the symbolic footlights? How will they reach the public?”).

Larue-Langlois’s underlying assumptions about the text-performance relationship suggest the dangers of the performance-as-translation metaphor discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and in fact he follows his questions about Pelletier’s role as director with the translation metaphor quoted above. However, Larue-Langlois avoids a completely logocentric perspective: while he sees the text as the first source of meaning, he does not claim it as the independent or singular one, nor does he undermine the role of performance. In asking how the words will pass across the symbolic footlights, he accounts for the possibility that the words may be changed, their meanings altered. The latter part of his review focuses on the play’s theatricality—in fact, this part of the article is given more word space than his discussion of the script. The other
reviews from the major dailies in Montreal reflect a similar attention to theatricality, though the play’s text-heavy quality demands a discussion of the script and language as well.

Interestingly, the only publication that panned *La terre est trop courte* was Montreal’s major English-language daily, *The Gazette*. Critic Maureen Peterson opens her review by calling the production “an exhausting three-hour marathon of questionable taste—a masturbatory, expiatory, hermetic, hysterical sea of words” (52). Though I want to avoid the temptation to generalize and use Peterson to stand in for all Anglophone critics, it is noteworthy that her reaction to the play’s language was shared by Toronto critics writing about the translation five years later. The distinct nature of Quebec theatre and its criticism is important to consider in the following examination of the vastly different reception of Nightwood’s production of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near*.

**Toronto Reception, 1986**

The reviews of the Toronto production in both the feminist and mainstream press were generally lukewarm with the exception of Amanda Hale’s glowing review in *Broadside*, which I will discuss shortly. Many reviewers acknowledged the play’s important role of introducing Leduc’s and/or Marchessault’s work to a new audience, with those from the former publications focusing on the play’s significance for its representation of feminist and lesbian themes, and the latter placing emphasis on Leduc’s role as an outsider in the Parisian literary establishment. In both cases, reviewers’ problems with the production were often rooted in issues arising from translation—whether they consciously acknowledged it or not—and particularly the disjunction between the cast’s English Canadian acting style and what *The Globe and Mail’s* Ray Conlogue terms the text’s “French lyrical verbosity” (D4). Anna Marie Smith’s review in *XTRA!*!, a monthly gay and lesbian periodical, is headlined by “Lost in translation / Flowery phrases fail to blossom” (6). Assessing Renders as having mastered the “demanding role” of Leduc, Smith pins
the actor’s occasional lapses into “insufficiently-controlled hyperactivity and unfelt delivery” to this disjunction: “The problem was particularly noticeable where a strong delivery was needed to convincingly carry over the French poetic imagery into English for the Toronto audience” (6). Similarly, in discussing what he sees as the failure of the scenes between Violette and her lover Hermine, Conlogue concludes, “Part of the problem is a French lyrical verbosity that does not work in English—at least, not in Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood’s overwrought translation” (D4). Even a preview piece, published in L’Express, a French-language weekly, by a critic who has presumably seen the TEF’s version, warns of the possible problems of Anglophone actors taking on a translated text. Referring to the success of the first production and particularly Luce Guilbault’s tour de force performance, the author states: “Ceux qui ont la chance de l’avoir vue auront peut-être du mal, s’ils assistent à la représentation anglaise de la pièce, la semaine prochaine, à l’oublier” (R.S.) (“Those who have had the chance to see it might have some trouble, if they see the English version of the play next week, forgetting it”). He/she goes on to quote de Lotbinière-Harwood about an earlier reading in New York City deemed unsuccessful, which the translator attributes to the actors’ unpreparedness and lack of interest. However, de Lotbinière-Harwood goes on to assure, the Toronto production will be different from the first reading due to the Canadian actors’ commitment to paying homage to Marchessault’s writing and to Leduc and her companions.

This disjunction between acting style and text is a common issue in the translation of French Canadian texts to English. Barbara Godard points out that a translation strategy which opts to “capture the distinctive theatrical voices of the [French Canadian] playwright” rather than adapt the text to the target audience, “must negotiate the considerable cultural differences separating Quebec and English Canadian theatre institutions, which have their roots,
respectively, in symbolism/surrealism and in realism, with their different evaluations of language” (“Between Performative and Performance” 341). Louise Ladouceur, in her case study of *La terre est trop courte*, sees these cultural differences as the root cause of the play’s distinct critical reception in Montreal and Toronto:

> Even though it disturbed Québécois theatre’s then current linguistic code and engendered certain reservations, it is a lyrical and hyperliterary style of writing that echoes a certain literary tradition. In that respect, it benefits from an acknowledgement that facilitates its reception within the original literary context. This hyperliterariness and this lyricism, which the English translation does not seek to temper and occasionally even highlights, does not seem rooted in any present or past norm that could facilitate its insertion within the drama repertoire of the target context. It upsets this system’s playwriting codes and creates an incompatibility between the dialogue and the actor’s style of acting. (100)

While I have characterized theatre criticism in English Canada as logocentric throughout my study, because this logocentrism is rooted in a realist theatre tradition, text-heavy plays with language characterized by “hyperliterariness” and “lyricism” often fail to meet Anglophone reviewers’ standards.

Though de Lotbinière-Harwood cut some markers of alterity in her English translation, as noted earlier, her decision to keep these qualities of the language suggests an overall approach of bringing the audience to the text rather than the text to the audience. This translation strategy can have “dismaying” effects as they are concretized in Anglophone performance, wherein English-Canadian directors and actors trained in psychological theatre are not as comfortable with the “flights of language, with poetry, or lyrical, rhetorical material” that have dominated Quebec theatre since the 1970s (Gaboriau qtd. in Godard, “Between Performative and Performance” 341)—again, this can create a noticeable incongruity between the performance on stage and the play text. The reviews quoted above, when examined more closely, reveal different perspectives on the issue of translation: for example, while Smith finds the actors responsible for the
production’s failure, Conlogue points to the “overwrought” translation itself, implying that an audience-oriented translation might be more appropriate. Robert Wallace, in *Producing Marginality*, very briefly discusses the critical response to *The Edge of the Earth*; he finds Conlogue’s reaction to be symptomatic of his logocentricity, which is demonstrated elsewhere in his work as a critic, as discussed in the last chapter in reference to his response to Nightwood’s early work.

Regardless of their stance on the translation’s objectives, these critics’ acknowledgement of the tension between performance and translated text stand in contrast to the approach taken by others, most notably the *Star*’s Henry Mietkiewicz, who collapses the source text and translation, never mentioning the translator or the potential challenges posed by the English-language script. Mietkiewicz writes,

> Presumably, examples of Leduc’s writing have been incorporated into the script. If so, they have not been properly showcased and sound a lot like shrill, relentless ranting. If not, Marchessault and Grant have done their subject an even greater disservice. Indeed, when it comes to use of language, it’s difficult to determine where Leduc leaves off and Marchessault begins. Whoever is responsible, we can do without the gratuitous scatology and the abundance of nonsensical images […] (B5)

Wallace, in his analysis of the production’s reception, takes Mietkiewicz to task, arguing that his attack on the text without acknowledging its status as a translation or determining “who’s responsible” results in an unfair criticism of Jovette Marchessault’s play and a devaluation of Violette Leduc’s work.

While the reviews of *The Edge of the Earth* suggest that something may be lost in translation in both the English text and director Cynthia Grant’s and her cast’s negotiation of it, they also reflect a partial failure on the critics’ parts in their task as translators of meaning. Wallace, like Féral, likens the critic’s role to that of the translator, suggesting that the critic
“ultimately shares the translator’s burden of rewriting the original” (218). He argues that a double standard exists when comparing the critic or spectator to those involved in inter-cultural production, especially the translator: while the translator is expected to have extensive knowledge of the context of the source text in order to “render [it] in as a full a manner as possible,” the critic is not (218). Wallace writes, “The more common position is that the text, if it is ‘good,’ can stand on its own, its ‘universal’ qualities permitting it to transcend the particularities—or ‘limitation’—of time and place so as to become meaningful to the reader regardless of his or her knowledge of its origins” (218-19). This position is clearly held by Mietkiewicz, who concludes his review remarking,

> Incredible as it may seem, some of Leduc’s fans might actually interpret *The Edge of the World* [sic] as a fitting tribute to their heroine. But outsiders, the ones at whom this production should be aimed, probably will continue to wonder why such a monumental fuss has been made over what seems like a third-rate hack with delusions of grandeur. (B5)

Hence, while paratextual material can supplement reviewers’ and audiences’ knowledge, the deeply embedded beliefs described by Wallace, rooted in a logocentric approach to theatre and criticism, may prevail.

Mietkiewicz’s response to Nightwood’s production, as compared to his colleagues in the Toronto press, bears some important lessons about critical responsibility when approaching theatre in translation, not the least of which is the need to acknowledge one’s location when interpreting any artistic work. Writing about the critic as translator, Féral asks, can one translate without betraying? “All criticism is a betrayal,” she answers, writing,

> In today’s world, critics cannot merely perceive the artwork in an innocent manner. In order to make sense out of it, they need to look at it in a larger global perspective—to refer to the artist’s overall processes, place the work within an aesthetic movement, convey the artist’s journey and contrast it with the prevailing artistic currents. (310)
While Nightwood’s publicity material and program provided the tools with which to do this and thereby develop a more nuanced understanding of the production’s use of language and its connection to performance style, which is at the root of Mietkiewicz’s issue with the play, it is clear that Mietkiewicz was more interested in the second focus of the paratextual material, on the play’s universal appeal. Conlogue’s review also responds to this focus, identifying the play’s theme in his lead as “the secret lives of those who do not and can not fit into society” and continuing,

The fact that French novelist Violette Leduc’s particular wrong dimension was lesbianism, and a clinical paranoia that may or may not have arisen from it, is an important but not central issue to the playwright. Jovette Marchessault’s overweening interest in Leduc seems to be that she was a writer, a rejected and misunderstood writer who nonetheless wrote continuously through her life. Indeed, Conlogue’s prioritizing of Leduc’s role as an outsider and misunderstood writer, and the minimal attention he pays to its feminist and queer politics in the rest of his review, are unsurprising given his critical approach, which emphasized universality and notoriously rejected feminist and queer theatre. His general acceptance here of *The Edge of the Earth* can be accounted for in his ability to fit the play into his paradigm of theatre, illustrating Robert Nunn’s assertion, quoted in Chapter Two, that as long as Conlogue can read universal themes into a play he can overlook the (minoritized) identity of its characters (Nunn 397). Conlogue’s approach is also in line with Lynda Burgoyne’s characterization of androcentric critics, as discussed in Chapter One: by focusing on aesthetic rather than thematic elements, these critics can reinsert the performance inside established norms. In the case of *The Edge of the Earth*, Conlogue spends two-thirds of his review discussing acting, and thus is able to avoid engaging with the play’s politics.
While both Mietkiewicz’s and Conlogue’s reviews can and should be problematized for their underlying universalist assumptions, the latter’s explicit engagement with the translation allows for a more complex understanding of the text-performance relationship and moreover, does not attempt an erasure of its québéctitude. Conversely, by not engaging with the translation, Mietkiewicz’s review undermines not only the text-performance relationship, but also the production’s role as a bridge between the “two solitudes.” Put slightly differently, Mietkiewicz enacts a kind of cultural imperialism by failing to acknowledge the play’s Québécois origins and their imprint on subsequent productions.

Standing in contradistinction to both Conlogue’s and Mietkiewicz’s review is Amanda Hale’s piece in Broadside. To be fair, Hale has the advantages of a much longer word count and (presumably) more time to file (Broadside was a monthly publication), but her review can still be compared to theirs as a counter-example of how to approach feminist translation. First, Hale resists trying to fit the play into a universalist paradigm and instead roots her analysis in a materialist feminist approach, which is perhaps unsurprising given the politics of her publication. Like Conlogue and Mietkiewicz, Hale acknowledges that Leduc is not always a likeable or sympathetic character, but her analytical framework allows her to explore the reasons for this rather than write the play off as uninteresting to a general audience or ignore the implications of the particular material conditions surrounding Leduc’s life. She sums up her assessment of Leduc at the beginning of her review: “Hardly a sympathetic character you might say. No. But when you see the play — and I urge you to do so — it becomes clear through Marchessault's writing, that Violette is a product of her society and her time, and that her behaviour and personality are reactions against the world she finds herself in” (11). In the analysis that follows, Hale continually returns to how the material conditions of Leduc’s life and early twentieth-century
Paris shape the plot and themes, while resisting a one-dimensional interpretation of Leduc as victim of the patriarchy.

Relatedly, Hale provides the “larger global perspective” that Josette Féral demands of critics in several ways. Not only does she use historical and socio-political context to illuminate her discussion of plot, but she also locates her examination of the production more generally within these frameworks as well as in an artistic one. Hale subtly demonstrates an understanding of feminist theatre as process when she writes of the dynamic between Renders as Violette and Cronyn as Hermine: “Although the erotic power between the characters has not yet fully emerged, their scenes together are in every other way successful […]” (11). Other reviewers including Conlogue had also critiqued this dynamic, but by framing the actors’ chemistry as “not yet fully emerged,” Hales leaves open the possibility that the show may continue to evolve. Theatre, in Hale’s conception, is neither fixed nor static, but in a state of change with every performance. As discussed in the previous chapter, this understanding of theatre, though perhaps quite obvious, is obscured in logocentric criticism and particularly damaging to feminist theatre.

Moreover, Hale provides one of the most nuanced explanations of translation of all the reviews of *The Edge of the Earth* to conclude her piece:

“It's because of women that you are so deranged,” Gabriel tells Violette as a parting shot as he goes out alone after she has begged to go with him. The English word 'deranged' is specific and loaded compared to the more generalized 'dérange' which ranges in interpretation from 'to bother,' 'to disturb,' 'to upset' to 'to derange.' Susanne de Lotbinère-Harwood's translation is insightful, here as elsewhere, pinpointing the fact that when women make real contact with each other, breaking the boundaries of institutionalized isolation, a derangement in the purest and most radical sense of the word does indeed occur, which turns the world right side up and begins the long slow process of feminist revolution. (11)

In this paragraph Hale accomplishes several things. She first of all establishes for her readers that the play is a translation. Further, she uses a concrete example to illustrate how translation
changes a text and affects meaning, and through this example also provides brief insight into the translator’s task, the French language and its differences from English, and the play’s process of development. Finally, her conclusion about women’s contact with one another alludes to the play’s and production’s intertextuality, as her statement can be applied most immediately to the various relationships between characters in the play, but also between them and the real women upon whom they are based, the playwright, the translator, and the creative team. While she essentially provides a close reading of the text in this paragraph, Hale avoids a logocentric bias throughout her review by spending extensive time on each element of production and weaving description of the show into her discussion of plot and theme from the beginning.

Hale’s review demonstrates the benefits that (word) space and (deadline) time can provide reviewers—it is undeniable that with two or three times the word count than a daily newspaper review and the extended time for reflection afforded by the longer deadlines of a monthly periodical, it is easier for a reviewer to develop a more nuanced analysis of translated theatre productions. But the strategies outlined above can be adapted in tighter space and time limitations, beginning with a simple acknowledgement of translation. While it might be tempting to suggest that Hale’s review is positive because her politics align with Nightwood’s—an assumption that is also problematic in its reductiveness—I want to suggest an alternative explanation: Hale’s materialist approach, her extensive consideration of production elements, and yes, the depth of analysis facilitated by a longer word count allow her to evaluate The Edge of the Earth beyond the simple good-bad terms employed by many of the other reviewers. I will take another look at possible strategies for reviewing feminist theatre in the next two chapters and in the conclusion of my study.
Feminist Translation Practices and their Ongoing Negotiation

If theatre production and reception are conceptualized as a critical dialogue, one of my guiding assumptions in this study, some tough questions must also be asked of the producing company. Did Nightwood’s emphasis on Violette Leduc’s connection to the Parisian literary establishment and the play’s universal themes provide bait to a critical community founded on principles of liberal humanism? Might less focus on this aspect in paratextual materials have dissuaded reviewers from expecting the play to speak to universal themes and fostered a different critical dialogue? Moreover, should Grant and her Anglophone actors have adopted a more naturalistic mise en scène and acting style in order to accommodate Toronto audiences not accustomed to Quebecois aesthetics? Or, should they have committed to the language and acting style demanded by de Lotbinière-Harwood’s translation despite the discord with their training and background? (Interestingly, Joan Henry, a Montreal actress in the role of Simone de Beauvoir, seems to have been able to do this, at least according to Conlogue, who notes the distinction of her style from the rest of the cast.) Do the politics underlying feminist theatres like Nightwood necessitate a more source-oriented approach to translation, or one that is oriented towards the target language and culture?

Nightwood’s more recent work reflects a continued struggle with these questions. The company’s current mandate and mission stress, among other things, “forg[ing] creative alliances among women” and its list of core values includes a drive for “creative exchange not exclusivity.” As discussed earlier in this chapter, the unprecedented creative exchange between Francophone and Anglophone feminist theatre artists in the 1980s, propelled by the women’s movement, relied on translation as its main mode of dialogue. The energy of this creative exchange is unmatched today—due, in part, to the TEF’s disbandment, but also to how Nightwood and other feminist artists and companies have had to evolve in a post-feminist
climate. However, Nightwood still features translated works in its seasons. In the fall of 2010, Nightwood produced Québécois writer Jennifer Tremblay’s *La liste*, translated by Shelley Tepperman. *The List* is a solo show about a woman whose preoccupation with the minutiae of her daily to-do list overshadows the more important things in life, including her friendship with a needy neighbour. The publicity material highlights the play’s 2008 Governor General award for French drama and its Québécois aesthetics—director Kelly Thornton stresses the latter in a YouTube video included with Nightwood’s online publicity material, saying, “I’m most excited by the beauty—it is an incredibly beautiful text and it’s lush and poetic. And it exists, like so much Quebec theatre, it exists in a very theatrical landscape. It offers huge theatricality in terms of its potential staging […]” At the same time, however, the material stresses the universal, and *The List* is presented as a play that will resonate with all audiences, its meanings not dependent on its québéctude. The press release on Nightwood’s website quotes the Governor General Award jury’s assessment: “Absolutely inspired…Jennifer Tremblay achieves the universal with economy and lucidity.” This duality is reflected in the production as well. While much of the poetic language is retained in Tepperman’s translation, as are some of the more literal markers of the play’s regional origins such as the French names of The Woman’s children (while they have names, she does not), the theatricality and potential for staging that excited Thornton are contrasted against particular naturalistic elements, such as the fully-functioning kitchen that comprises the set, and actor Allegra Fulton’s delivery. Indeed, reviews of the Théâtre d’Aujourd’hui’s original French language production suggest that it also played-up the theatrical elements to a greater degree than Nightwood’s production.\footnote{See, for example, Aurélie Olivier’s review in *Jeu* 136 (2010): 6-8; Marie Labrecque’s review in *Le Devoir* 23 Jan 2010 (http://www.ledevoir.com/culture/theatre/281626/submergee); and Alexandre Vigneault’s review on cyperpress.ca, published on January 15, 2010. The Théâtre}
While this brief examples illustrates that Nightwood’s attitude towards translation remains complex and ambiguous, the company’s conscious effort to move into the mainstream has led to a more explicit audience-oriented approach—not only in artistic choices related to the production, but in production choice itself. Whereas Violette Leduc fights the misogyny of the Parisian literary establishment and struggles with the power dynamics of her sexual relationships with both men and women, The Woman of The List deals with gendered issues only peripherally. Indeed, even in her name the latter character is constructed as “universal,” and while themes such as the isolation of motherhood and women’s responsibility to one another can be read into The List, it can also be seen more generally as a tale of compulsion, guilt, and the need to slow down in our increasingly fast-paced lives. I saw the production, and the latter reading seems to have informed Thornton’s approach; in fact, I found the production’s representation of gender somewhat problematic, as The Woman’s behaviour and Fulton’s performance often suggested the stereotype of the hysterical woman, something that earlier feminist theatre—including early Nightwood productions—worked hard to confront and destabilize. The mainstream press did not seem to be bothered by these constructions of gender, however, and instead latched on to the play’s universal quality celebrated by the Governor General Award jury. The Toronto Star’s Robert Crew writes, “Those lists are a wonderful trope; Tremblay cleverly shows a meticulous mind now burdened with intolerable guilt thanks to one, oh-so human little omission.” Jon Kaplan, reviewing the production for NOW, pulls out similar themes, writing, “In the hands of actor Allegra Fulton and director Kelly Thornton, the play is a stunning portrait of someone

d’Aujourd’hui’s production was presented in Toronto as part of the Théâtre Français de Toronto’s 2011-12 season. While it was reviewed sparsely by the Toronto press (presumably due to the language of production), it was received positively and also nominated for a 2012 Dora Mavor Moore Award in the Outstanding Touring Production category.
imprisoned in the ordinary, determined to keep her life together by means of the ordered lists that comprise her day.” Nightwood’s production of *The List* was a critical success across the board, reflecting strategic artistic choices and uses of paratextual materials to neutralize the play’s alterity, both in terms of its québécitude and gendered themes.

The questions I have posed above about translation in its literal sense, for which there are no easy answers, also point to some of the shortcomings of the translation metaphors described at the beginning of this chapter. Saying that a director, designer, or performer translates a playwright’s vision grants supremacy to the script—something of which English Canadian theatre criticism continues to be guilty, and something that has had particular ramifications for feminist theatre in the 1980s, characterized by its treatment of the script as evolving rather than fixed and its focus on consciousness-raising affected through various methods of audience interaction. This use of the translation metaphor also undermines the complex negotiation of meaning that occurs in the theatre. As demonstrated by the critical dialogue that occurred between the TEF and Nightwood productions and Montreal and Toronto reviewers, translation as a form of re-writing happens at all stages of theatrical performance and reception, yielding multiple and fluid meanings. Feminist theatre artists cannot control the meanings audiences—and critics—carry away with them, but their careful and conscious use of paratextual materials can support the critical dialogue initiated in their artistic work and work towards ensuring that their vision is not lost in translation. On the critics’ part, a less logocentric and universal approach would benefit their engagement with translations. Indeed, these two qualities work in constradistinction to feminist theatre and underlie much of the tension between critics and artists. In the next chapter, I will look at another outgrowth of these qualities: the art-politics divide. Critics’ consideration of feminist work as political at the expense of its artistic merits is related to
a text-focused approach to performance analysis and a de-valuing of art that is based on particularized experiences.
Chapter Four: *But is this theatre?* The Art-Politics Divide and Mainstream Reviewing

“Lisa Codrington is currently being championed by Obsidian and Nightwood Theatre as the great black hope for Canadian Drama. […] I will not jump onto the bandwagon until I’m in a better position to comprehend fully what Codrington is writing.”

-- Kamal Al-Solaylee, review of *Cast Iron*

“Malgré la portée essentielle et incontestable du propos de cette récente création de Pol Pelletier, on ne peut s’empêcher de questionner la nécessité de sa facture théâtrale.”

(Despite the essential and incontestable impact of Pol Pelletier’s most recent creation, we can’t help but question the necessity of her theatrical work.)

-- Jade Bérubé, review of *Nicole, c’est moi*

Nightwood and the Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes were founded at the end of the second wave of feminism, a time of fervent activity and activism when many women challenged the ways in which dominant social, political, and artistic institutions were structured and sought radical alternatives to them. While this study has so far shown Toronto and Montreal to be distinct contexts for feminist activism and feminist theatre during this period, what united both companies in their early years was a drive to change the ways in which women were represented on stage and to take control of the means of representation. Even before Nightwood identified itself as feminist, it was creating opportunities for women and using collective and collaborative models of operation that challenged the normative (patriarchal) structures in the theatre. The TEF, which was founded as a feminist company from the beginning, sought to bring women together to create a radically different kind of theatre in form and content. Nightwood’s and the
TEF’s actions challenged the status quo and promised to leave an indelible mark on their respective theatrical communities.

By the mid- to late 1980s, as the feminist movement began to shift and move away from the radical politics that had defined it in the two previous decades, both companies began to reinvent themselves and adapt to the changing socio-political landscape. Nightwood, which had started to become more entrenched in the theatre community while embracing its feminist mandate more overtly, changed in two significant ways: it prioritized inclusivity by engaging artists and audiences of diverse identities, and it moved away from its collective roots and adopted a more traditional administrative structure. Shelley Scott, in her history of the company, points to the hiring of Kate Lushington as artistic coordinator in 1988 as a turning point for Nightwood in these regards. Scott asserts, “Lushington ushered in a new and more politicized era at Nightwood by working with Diane Roberts, as her artistic associate, to enlarge the company’s mandate to include anti-racism work and to become more inclusive of women of colour” (Nightwood Theatre 112). Additionally, by 1990 Lushington’s title was changed to “artistic director,” a position that Nightwood retains today, reflecting,

an ongoing struggle to balance different agendas that were not well served by collectivity: 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 but also wants

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67 The 1980s saw a shift in feminism from the second wave to the third. Whereas the second wave focused on exposing the roots of sexist oppression within economic, political, and social structures as well as within private structures such as marriage, motherhood, and heterosexuality, the third wave brought issues of diversity to the fore. Critiquing the lack of representation of women of colour, feminist theorists and activists showed that oppression is contingent on the intersection of gender with factors such as race, class, and sexuality, which led to a questioning of the category of “woman.” Shelley Scott examines this shift in the context of feminist theatre specifically in Chapter Two of her book: “Breaking Away and Moving On, 1989-1993;” see in particular pages 109-111. Joan Sangster’s discussion of the changing concerns of women’s history in the introduction to her book, Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women’s History, provides more general context for feminism in Canada.
strong work; and the desire for a clear relationship between board and staff. (Scott 112).

While this struggle persists today to some degree, Nightwood’s move into the mainstream has clearly shaped how it negotiates these agendas—I will pick up this theme in the next chapter and briefly in the conclusion of this study. The mandate and administrative changes described above laid the groundwork for the direction Nightwood would take throughout the 1990s, as its artistic endeavours would continue to emphasize diversity and its operational structure would facilitate a courting of more widespread recognition. Plays like Ann-Marie MacDonald’s Goodnight Desdemona, (Good Morning, Juliet) (1988) and Monique Mojica’s Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots (1989), both now part of the Canadian canon; Susan G. Cole’s A Fertile Imagination (1991), a comedy about a lesbian couple embarking on parenthood; and Djanet Sears’ acclaimed Harlem Duet (1997) reflected a desire to look at the intersections of gender with sexuality, race, and culture, and to produce work that would appeal to wider and more diverse audiences. This commitment is reflected in the program notes for Pocahontas, which declare that the play, “highlights a commitment to anti-racism which will be reflected throughout the next decade” (qtd. in Scott, Nightwood Theatre 246). Over twenty years later, the first line of its current mandate, quoted in part in the previous chapter in relation to translation, highlights this sustained commitment: “Nightwood Theatre forges creative alliances among women artists from diverse backgrounds in order to develop and produce innovative Canadian Theatre” (“Mandate & Mission”).

Pol Pelletier and the TEF took a markedly different direction during this period. The TEF disbanded by 1987, with some members moving on to form Théâtre ESPACE GO in 1994, a company whose distance from its radical roots and penetration of the mainstream make it
Pelletier addresses the devolution of the TEF in her solo show *Joie (Joy)*. She suggests that the company’s increasing conformity to traditional methods of theatre creation and production and its simultaneous disconnection from the political and artistic ideals upon which it was founded, combined with her own growing disillusionment and exhaustion, eventually gave her no choice but to leave:

_Speaking to her hand:

Do you remember in the seventies when you were forging a completely new aesthetic – women on stage, physical, immodest, explosive, no make-up, no wigs, no fancy costumes, we could see their bodies and their muscles and their sweat and their feet, and it all took place in non-traditional spaces with the audience seated in all sorts of strange arrangements, and they could no longer tell whether what they were seeing was “beautiful” or “ugly,” there were no more points of reference, they were deeply disturbed.

What is beauty?

What am I doing? What happened?

I had set out to explore a dark continent—women, the unknown—and there I was doing the exact same things as everyone else. (168)

Pelletier then lists a series of factors, including the company’s turn away from its initial collaborative structure to individualized roles and a focus on producing single-authored written texts, and a dearth of grants, income, and time as preventing the TEF from achieving its original aspirations. Here, as in much of her subsequent solo work, Pelletier expresses a sense of nostalgia for the past—a longing to return to or at least recapture the spirit of those moments in history when feminism and _le féminin_ were forces more powerful than they are today, a desire to move backwards rather than forwards that stands in contradistinction to Nightwood’s direction.

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68 Though l’ESPACE GO asserts that women continue to fill the majority of creative and administrative roles in the company (“Histoire”), unlike Nightwood, its mandate no longer makes mention of women or feminist politics. See “Mandat artistique” on its website (espacego.com), also listed in my works cited.
Pelletier left the TEF in 1985 to pursue what Louise Forsyth aptly describes as “spiritual renewal abroad” (“Introduction to Joy” 115), travels to India that are documented in the second play of *La trilogie des histoires, Océan* (1995) (*Joie* (1990) is the first and *Or* (1997), the third).69 As Forsyth asserts, Pelletier’s post-TEF travels were particularly influential in the development of her performance theories, which hinge on “the presence of the whole person—mind, body, spirit, voice, memory—and the setting aside of the mental buzz of normal preoccupations” (“About Pol Pelletier” 117).70 In 1988 Pelletier founded her DOJO, *centre d’entraînement et de perfectionnement permanent pour acteurs*, a training centre for actors built on her theories of performance; these theories laid the groundwork for la Compagnie Pol Pelletier, founded in 1993. With her company, Pelletier began to create solo shows through which she drew on her personal history, espoused her artistic and political theories, and embodied her unique approach to performance. Indeed, while she would continue to struggle with financial support and various artistic ventures throughout her career, Pelletier’s focus on defining and refining her solo show

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69 Forsyth provides a good description of the trilogy in her article, “Self-Portrait of the Artist as Radical Feminist in Experimental Theatre”:

*Joie* was the first autobiographical retrospective in a theatrical trilogy: *La trilogie des histoires. Océan*, the second one-woman performance, evokes the period 1985-1990 and themes of personal transformation when Pelletier’s mother died and during the spiritual journey she took in India. *Or*, the third piece, is a return to the study in action of radically innovative theories of acting. For six years the three plays of the trilogy were a stage work in progress, with Pelletier performing and modifying successive versions. *La trilogie des histoires* served as a mobile mirror that Pelletier wrote and performed to understand and share understanding of her quest as a woman of theatre for practices that offer the possibility of representing women in their integrity, from both inner and outer perspectives. (186)

70 It is significant to note, as Louise Forsyth points out, that Pelletier “is one of a very few women anywhere to have developed, expressed and applied an original and coherent theoretical approach to acting and theatre performance” (“About Pol Pelletier” 117). Forsyth summarizes her theory in her introduction to *Joy* in her anthology; Pelletier discusses and demonstrates her approach in her *La trilogie des histoires* as well as in her article “Jouer au féminin” (*Pratiques Théâtrales* 16 (1982): 11-21).
aesthetic has been a driving force of her work in the theatre throughout the 1990s to the present day.

In short, the paths Nightwood and Pelletier pursued in the 1990s and early 2000s were notably divergent: while Nightwood broadened its outlook and began courting diversity through its developmental initiatives and artistic programming, Pelletier turned inwards, creating auto/biographical work that used her personal experience to illuminate women’s plight more generally. This resulted in very different kinds of artistic output and critical reception, making it difficult to draw obvious comparisons between the two. Though it is also not possible to neatly sum up the reception of Nightwood’s and Pelletier’s work over this broad period of time, as each experienced both critical successes and failures for varying reasons, in this chapter I will focus on two case studies that are particularly illustrative of their (increasingly) opposing styles and some of the critical issues that arise from them. My case study from Nightwood Theatre focuses on Lisa Codrington’s 2005 play *Cast Iron.*

Promoted by the company as exemplary of its diverse repertoire (“Our Story”), this play is significant for two main reasons: first, as a solo show about an immigrant woman from Barbados, the play belongs to Nightwood’s lineage of anti-racist and culturally diverse dramaturgy that can be traced back to Kate Lushington’s tenure as artistic director; second, it generated a significant amount of critical and public debate.

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72 Nightwood summarizes its history in the “About Us” section of its website; the first page under this category is titled “Our Story.” It lists the following plays as products of its “risk-taking approach”: *Good Night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by Ann-Marie MacDonald, *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* by Djanet Sears, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* by Monique Mojica, *The Danish Play* by Sonja Mills, *China Doll* by Marjorie Chan, *Cast Iron* by Lisa Codrington, and *Wild Dogs* by Anne Hardcastle (“Our Story”).
surrounding its use of Bajan dialect and represents a pivotal—and especially tense—moment in the history of Nightwood’s relationship with the mainstream critical establishment. My case study from Pelletier’s œuvre examines a 2004 production of her one-woman show, *Nicole, c’est moi*. Building on the success of and aesthetic developed in *La trilogie des histoires* in the 1990s, *Nicole, c’est moi* is illustrative of Pelletier’s turn inward and the sustained influence of radical feminism on her creative work.

These productions are drastically different, and cannot be easily compared aside from their generic similarity as solo shows. What their critical reception illustrates, however, is a questioning of theatre that is indicative of the reception of feminist theatre in general. The transnational politics underlying *Cast Iron* and its insistence on celebrating difference led critics to question its legitimacy as theatre and as Canadian theatre. *Nicole, c’est moi*’s status as theatre was also questioned in its critical reception, though for different reasons. As was the case with the reception of *La nef des sorcières*, which marked Pelletier’s early involvement in Quebec’s théâtre-femmes, critics suggested that *Nicole, c’est moi*’s political message and its performative elements overshadowed its artistic merits. The mainstream press’s response to both works reflects a persistent but sometimes hidden issue in the critical reception of feminist theatre: critics often focus on extracting, engaging with, and/or disputing its political messages and meanings at the expense of a consideration of the work’s status as theatre and its artistic integrity. This insistence on politics over art also enforces a separation of content from form that is damaging to both theatre and criticism more broadly. After examining the reception of *Cast Iron* and *Nicole, c’est moi*, I will conclude by briefly discussing the relationship between the art-politics and form-content binaries in feminist theatre and its implications for criticism.
Cast Iron

Language and Transnational Feminist Theatre

Lisa Codrington, in the preface to her play Cast Iron, writes, “This play is dedicated to those that have left and to those that will come. As always, this relentless pursuit of understanding is in remembrance and in anticipation of you” (n. pag.). Codrington’s play, like her dedication, reflects multiple border-crossings. The one-woman show’s narrative transcends borders of both time and space as Libya Atwell, a patient in a Winnipeg nursing home, is forced to confront the ghosts of her past when she receives an unexpected visitor from her homeland of Barbados. Cast Iron also represents an effort to transport the story of one woman—Codrington’s Barbados-born grandmother, an inspiration for the character of Libya—from the archives of memory and family history to the Canadian stage. In the case of Nightwood Theatre’s and Obsidian Theatre Company’s 2005 co-production of the play, these border crossings also incited another one, as Cast Iron attracted a new audience, members of Toronto’s Caribbean community, to the Tarragon Theatre.

Libya Atwell is described in the dramatis personae listing as “a seventy-five-year-old woman filled with contradictions. On the one hand she is a nursing home resident suffering from diabetes, but on the other hand she is a strong and determined survivor who has successfully evaded her haunting past for forty years” (3). As she delivers her dying confession to the audience, Libya occupies multiple, heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting identities shaped by her location in the Barbados of her past and the Canada of her present. As a black woman in Barbados she is a member of the racial majority; but she is also the descendant of white plantation owners and their black workers, living on the land where her ancestors have laboured for generations. In Canada, she is an immigrant, a visible minority, and a retired domestic without anyone to care for her in her old age. Her identities are also linked to her relationships to
other women. As the youngest daughter in her family, she uses her skill and talent in the
domestic realm as a means of asserting power over those under her care, particularly her half-
sister, who eventually comes to depend on her. As a domestic hired by a woman of privilege in
Canada, she has left her family and homeland to serve another and finds little agency in her new
role. The play’s movement between temporal and geographic locations highlights these multiple
roles, complicating a monolithic notion of “Woman” by emphasizing difference. As Libya
interacts with those around her (all embodied by the same actor), she also reveals power to be
fluid and highly contingent on factors such as gender, race, class, and nationality.

As suggested in my introduction to the chapter, this understanding of identity is
illustrative of Nightwood’s mandate at the time, which was informed by a transnational approach
to feminism and a desire to bring diverse stories to the Canadian stage. Indeed, its global
perspective is what distinguished Nightwood’s work in the 2000s from the 1990s, as the latter
decade saw the company increasingly produce works by Canadian women about women outside
of Canada, as well as works from the international repertoire. I use the term “transnational” as a
framework to understand the politics underlying Nightwood’s work and Cast Iron specifically
because it reflects this intersection of the local and the global. Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari
Tripp write: “Transnational activism brings feminists out of their local contexts to work across
national borders, and feminist discourses, such as the definitions of women’s rights as human
rights, travel from the international level where they were first formulated to offer new leverage
to local activists” (vii-viii). In a theatre context, this kind of exchange might manifest in artists
writing about women from outside of Canada and presenting their work on the international
stage—Sonja Mills’ The Danish Play, based on the Canadian playwright’s great aunt’s
experience in the Danish Resistance Movement, which Nightwood toured to Denmark in 2003-
04, is a good example of this. Stories from elsewhere also enrich the Canadian stage: in addition to *Cast Iron* itself, French playwright Véronique Olmi’s *Mathilde*, translated by Morwyn Brebner for the 2005-06 season, serves as an example. These circuits of exchange broaden audiences’ and artists’ understandings of women’s experiences, introduce new creative practices and aesthetics, and facilitate dialogue between women across national borders.

Nightwood’s self-description as “forg[ing] creative alliances among women artists from diverse backgrounds in order to develop and produce innovative Canadian theatre” (“Mandate and Mission”), quoted earlier, was central to its mandate in 2005. Its marketing brochure released the following year, in 2006, elaborated on what this mission entailed, including a list of seven values which remain unchanged on Nightwood’s website today in the “Mandate and Mission” section. The first four values connect directly to the company’s increasingly multicultural outlook:

- Nightwood Theatre promotes artistic innovation and diversity of expression.
- We operate with a firm belief in women’s equality and use theatre to challenge stereotypes and social assumptions about gender, race and sexuality.
- We believe theatre is a communal experience wherein differences can be shared and celebrated.
- We are driven by creative exchange not exclusivity. (qtd. in Scott 179)

Though articulated a year after *Cast Iron*’s debut, these values clearly underlie much of the company’s work since the late 1990s, as documented by Shelley Scott. On a similar note, Obsidian’s mandate in 2005 stated that the company, “produce[s] plays from the world-wide canon focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on the works of highly acclaimed artists of African descent. Through dramaturgical and performance workshops, OTC […] promote[s] and develop[s] the work of AfriCanadian playwrights.” The press release for *Cast Iron* underlines the

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compatibility of the two mandates: “Three years after producing Djanet Sears' Adventures of a Black Girl... Nightwood is happy to join forces again with Obsidian Theatre. Nightwood Theatre is committed to creating theatre about women's experiences from diverse backgrounds” (Sager). The nature of both companies’ work is understood to be heterogeneous, and the stories that constitute it are reflective of the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and citizenship as experienced by their tellers, many of whom are first or second generation Canadian, and others who are not Canadian but who share a common gender, racial, or ethnic identity. Significantly, both companies’ shared insistence on their work’s Canadian identity reflects a challenging of the Canadian dramatic canon, or at least a widening of it to include diverse, situated, and multicultural voices. Under the rubric of “innovative Canadian theatre,” audiences can participate in a “communal experience” by sharing and celebrating stories that are not necessarily their own. In other words, while the word “Canadian” may be repeated, both companies’ transnational outlook ensures that it is not a homogenous vision of nation and theatre.

Cast Iron’s emphasis on difference is most pronounced in its language: Libya speaks in a Bajan accent, true to her country of birth, which is transcribed phonetically in the play text—“Oh Lawd! […] Ha! You t’ink you gine catch me, but you can’. Just wait… just you wait nuh” (7)—and emphasized by actor Alison Sealy-Smith in performance. In an interview I conducted with Lisa Codrington in 2009 for an article in alt.theatre, she discussed her choice to write the play entirely in Bajan dialect, explaining, “part of the reason is that people in Canada do speak that way” (MacArthur 26). While the patois, in its hybridity, reveals the ability of language and the identities it helps to shape to transcend national borders, its presence in one of the country’s leading theatres also works to legitimate the experience depicted in the play as one that is
Canadian. Acknowledging that the majority of the Tarragon’s audience would not be made up of poor immigrant women of colour like Atwell, Codrington challenges them to occupy an outsider position to which she, as a black woman and a first generation Canadian, is accustomed as a theatre-goer: “I wanted to create a play that asks the audience to step forward and listen to this story of a person who would otherwise not have air time” (26). Codrington’s aim here reiterates Nightwood’s broader mandate of celebrating difference, but it also sets up the expectation that the audience must exert some effort in their engagement with the production. Codrington, along with the production team, subverts the traditional spectator-performer dynamic described by feminist theorists such as Jill Dolan and Sue-Ellen Case by demanding that her audience play an active role rather than a passive one.74

As if to prepare audiences for this role, pre-show interviews also focused on the Bajan dialect, stressing both its importance and accessibility. Gord McLaughlin’s profile of Codrington in EYE Weekly headlines, “That Bajan beat. Young playwright finds her voice in dialect.” While the article features an excerpt from the play to give readers a sense of what the dialect looks like, it emphasizes the importance of what it sounds like:

Yet Codrington says any English-speaker can follow the story – a lot of people have told her it's easier to read aloud than in their heads. And Codrington figures that a little effort isn't necessarily bad.

"I think it's a valuable experience to be in the theatre and not understand everything and have to work a little bit harder to hear the story and understand the story," she says.

Here Codrington voices the dual message that is woven through Cast Iron’s press materials: anyone can follow the story; following the story requires work.

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74 See Dolan’s The Feminist Spectator as Critic and Case’s Feminism and Theatre, both published in 1988.
Alison Sealy-Smith, in an interview with Jon Kaplan for *NOW*, reiterates Codrington’s message. Kaplan points out that the seasoned, Barbados-born performer has “rarely had a chance to play a Bajan character” and asks Sealy-Smith how she thinks audiences will react to the dialect’s “speech rhythms” (“Bold Cast”). Her lengthy response concludes the article:

"You don’t examine your own language very often, and I don’t often speak it, but rather carry it in my pocket as an accent," she adds, slipping intentionally into its open vowels.

"Usually when I’m playing a character from the Caribbean I use either a Jamaican accent or something I call trans-Caribbean," she laughs. "It hits everywhere from Jamaica to Guyana and every island in between.

"Here, I know I have to capture the audience from the beginning, not wait for them to get the Bajan rhythms.

"I’m doing my part by slowing it down at the start and enunciating more than usual, but later I’m going to speed up and hope they’ll go with me.

"And they should, because I believe in the craft of what Lisa’s written. The emotions and the characters are clear, and Libya herself provides a strong drive."

Like Codrington, Sealy-Smith stresses the importance of the story in making the case for the extra “work” required of the audience, while simultaneously assuaging any potential anxieties by positioning her role as actor as a kind of language instructor or tour guide who will prepare the audience for understanding through her performance itself. Sealy-Smith also uses the discourse of authenticity to legitimize the play’s patois: this is her language, which is often suppressed or distilled in a melting pot of language on stage. (Indeed, while she laughs off her “trans-Caribbean accent,” its distinction from her Bajan patois is noteworthy—the former, in its unspecificity, is catered to the audience’s needs; the latter is particular and rooted in the play’s needs, recalling the distinction between target- and source-oriented approaches to translation discussed in the last chapter.) In *Cast Iron*, Sealy-Smith is able to speak in a way that is natural to her, and through this, to access the play’s many characters. At the beginning of the article she
is quoted saying, “It’s usual to approach roles from the outside, mining the script and looking for subtext. […] When I’m working with Shakespeare, even the punctuation gives you some clues. Here, I don’t have to work that much, for these people live deep inside me. Now it’s a matter of sharing them with the audience.” Like Codrington’s framing of the play, Sealy-Smith presents it as an opportunity to celebrate difference that aligns with Nightwood’s broader mandate. Her comparison to Shakespeare also subtly reminds the audience that the language of the “classics,” too, can be hard to understand.\footnote{Kelly Thornton has also compared the experience to watching/listening to Shakespeare. I quote her response to the reception of \textit{Cast Iron} in my article in \textit{alt.theatre}: “[I]t’s the same challenge, and yet we don’t have the gall to say, ‘Stay away from that!’ […] That Bajan dialect is outside of our borders, it just shocked me.”}

\textbf{Language and Critical Reception}

Not surprisingly, language was a focus of reviews of \textit{Cast Iron}, both positive and negative. Critics from the alternative weeklies and the blogosphere praised the production, giving special attention to Alison Sealy-Smith. Jon Kaplan, in his review for \textit{NOW} headlined “Iron Maidens. \textit{Cast Iron} features series of strong women,” concentrates primarily on Sealy-Smith’s performance, and particularly her skill at moving between the play’s multiple characters. Though the language was a focus of his preview piece, Kaplan never explicitly addresses the Bajan dialect in his review. Instead, his focus is on how Sealy-Smith uses Codrington’s text to bring its characters to life: “[…] Codrington’s narrative and words give the actor a chance to parade before us a dozen or so characters, all beautifully characterized by vocal colours and physical gestures. […] Sealy-Smith demonstrates an impeccable skill at creating distinct figures, shifting from one to the other with a change in stance or a turn of hand.” Read alongside his preview piece, this review suggests the importance of the Bajan dialect—the “words” are integral to the characters; they also facilitate Sealy-Smith’s “vocal colours.” \textit{EYE Weekly}’s Christopher Hoile
matches Kaplan’s four Ns with four stars. Hoile’s review is three paragraphs in length, with the first two providing detailed plot summary, and the third zoning in on Sealy-Smith’s performance:

Sealy-Smith gives an outstanding, virtuoso performance, inhabiting a wide range of characters (including two men), each changing over the course of 40 years. Her dramatic reach encompasses everything from physical comedy and the mimicry of children to the pain of mature lives haunted by tragedy. The play is written entirely in the Bajan (Barbadian) dialect. For anyone willing to pay the close attention this demands, the ear soon adapts and one comes to relish the poetry Codrington finds in its distinctive rhythms.

Like the preview pieces, here Hoile’s review sets up the expectation that audiences must work to understand the dialect, but asserts that there is a significant pay-off. Similarly, Torontoist blogger and future Globe critic J. Kelly Nestruck writes,

One of the noteworthy things about Lisa Codrington’s first play, produced by Nightwood Theatre in association with Obsidian theatre company, is that it is written and performed in the Bajan dialect. [...] Don’t let that scare you off from going to see Cast Iron [sic], though: You don’t have to be fluent in Bajan [...] to get the story. Anyone who speaks English will understand most of it and get the rest intuitively. It’s definitely worth seeing for a real stomper of a performance by Alison Sealy-Smith [...].

Nestruck, writing for a similar, young audience as EYE’s readership, downplays any work on the part of the audience and again points to Sealy-Smith’s performance as their reward. His suggestion that spectators will “get the rest intuitively” places a level of trust in both the audience and the performance—trust that audiences will be able to follow the dialect just as they might in a Shakespeare play, for example, and that various production elements such as direction, acting, and design will contribute to the meaning communicated.

While Kaplan, Hoile, and Nestruck demonstrated a willingness to cross borders with Libya, Sealy-Smith, and Codrington, reviewers from the major dailies saw Cast Iron as more of a border guarding than a border crossing, a theatrical separatism enforced particularly through the production’s language. Kamal Al-Solaylee and Robert Crew, in reviews published in The
Globe and Mail and Toronto Star respectively, argued that the Bajan dialect effectively alienated the wider audience that the play’s story could have and should have reached. Both critics cite Cast Iron’s “incomprehensibility” as the main reason for their poor reviews. Al-Solaylee begins,

Lisa Codrington is currently being championed by Obsidian and Nightwood Theatre as the great black hope for Canadian Drama. [...] I will not jump onto the bandwagon until I’m in a better position to comprehend fully what Codrington is writing. What I need first is a crash course in Bajan [...] since the glossary in the program and the two-page guide to the dialect in the press kit were not enough.

Later, Al-Solaylee uses a migration metaphor to describe his alienation: “[T]he Bajan dialect acts as a border guard to prevent us from crossing lands and cultures along with Sealy-Smith [...].” Crew calls Codrington “a fresh young playwright with a distinctive voice, but then undermines this assessment: “Libya is originally from Barbados but four decades have done little to soften her Bajan accent, a patois so dense that at times it is all but indecipherable, at least for some of us.” The self-Other binary underlying these reviews is most evident in this last quote from Crew, where the critic positions himself as a member of an unidentified “us” distinguished from the character onstage and other members of the audience who are assumed to share her cultural background. While the production, in its proclaimed celebration of difference, presents an experience on stage that is not “Other” but legitimately Canadian, Crew and Al-Solaylee struggle to reclaim their subjectivity. By framing their relationship to the play within a self-Other binary, they intercept the production’s attempt to construct the female on stage in a way that is not inscribed by dominant, essentializing discourse, but is instead informed by the heterogeneous identities that she represents and performs to. In other words, the critics exploit the power of the printed word to resist Cast Iron’s subversiveness and re-establish their authority.

Al-Solaylee and Crew may not self-identify as feminists, but they do self-identify as advocates of Canadian theatre and champions of diversity. Crew calls Codrington “fresh” and
“promising” and Al-Solaylee, despite facetiously dubbing the playwright “the great black hope of Canadian drama,” labels Nightwood as “noble.” The production had tried to facilitate education about difference by providing reviewers with tools to help them understand the language, including a glossary, dialect guide, and copy of the play. Yet, both reviewers display some resistance to understanding—unlike their colleagues in the alternative press, they disregard their responsibility in the process and pay only minimal attention to other theatrical signs that could improve their reading of the play, in particular Alison Sealy-Smith’s performance. Crew praises the actor, dedicating three lines of his eighteen-line review to her: “Alison Sealy-Smith is at her considerable best as Libya, by turns exuberant, melancholy and vital. This is an actress of unstinting warmth and honesty who conjures up a rich and vibrant personality. She does so almost against all odds, however.” While the first two lines of Crew’s description suggest that the audience’s understanding and appreciation of Cast Iron might rely on more factors than the script, the third line undercuts the reviewer’s praise by shifting the focus back to the production’s failures. Crew proceeds to pan the only other elements of the production he chooses to discuss in one fell swoop… or sentence: “Director ahdri zhina mandiela’s work is lacklustre, while Camilla Koo’s set and Michelle Ramsay’s lighting are uninspired.” Al-Solaylee also finds fault with mise en scène and design, which he discusses near the end of his review in a single paragraph before moving on to a paragraph about the actor. He dismisses Sealy-Smith’s performance for “assuming more interest [from the audience] in the character’s life than the writing has allowed,” a somewhat perplexing statement as it critiques the performer for committing to her character, as if to assume that scripts deemed as weak do not merit strong and engaged performances.

Al-Solaylee’s and Crew’s inability to comprehend the language of the play leads to their failure to identify with the character and her story, something that they also count as one of Cast
Iron’s shortcomings. Al-Solaylee accuses Codrington of enforcing theatrical separatism through her use of Bajan dialect:

I get the impression that the main impulse behind this writing is not sharing and disseminating the story but placing a territorial flag on it that discourages others from appropriating, understanding or even sympathizing with it. This is more or less theatre of self-imposed segregation. You have your world and I’ll have mine, Codrington is implying, and the two will forever stand at the precipice of opposition and not dialogue.

While Al-Solaylee claims to want theatre to “celebrate differences but stress commonality,” he places more value on the latter condition, hinting at a desire for a universal story glossing over cultural, historical, and political specificity and difference. Both he and Crew insist that the play would only really interest a Bajan audience, or, as Al-Solaylee adds, “a white person with an excess of liberal guilt.” Their feelings of alienation in part reflect an anxiety of being unseated from their traditional position of power in the theatre, a position constructed by the performance onstage, which addresses them as ideal spectators embodying the dominant culture’s ideology—whether or not they actually fit this mould. In order to alleviate their anxiety, and rather than try to understand the subjectivities being presented on stage, the reviewers cast the play as exotica, as Other, thereby reclaiming their subject position and sustaining their own agency and authority.

Yet, the self-Other distinction they create in relation to the play is an imagined one: just as the Other is a construct, the “self,” assumed to be everything the Other is not, cannot be explicitly defined because the moment it is interrogated, the binary starts to break down. This is perhaps most evident when looking at Al-Solaylee’s identity, which deviates from the “normative” self assumed in his writing. In an interview on CBC Radio, Al-Solaylee attributed the vehement criticism he received from readers and artists during his time as the Globe’s national theatre critic to discrimination: “I think the fact that you have an ethnic byline, you have people’s backs up a lot more. I felt that definitely. I am a Canadian citizen, not a Canadian
native. I moved here twelve years ago by myself and I always felt that very subtle form of racism that we experience in Canada.” Interestingly, in his reviews he does not examine or acknowledge his subject position or complicate his relationship to the discourse that plays like *Cast Iron* are contesting. As exemplified in his piece on Codrington’s play, consciously or not, he takes on a critical voice rooted in phallocentric and imperialist values, similar values to those that, in the context of his own experience of race and citizenship in Canada, have positioned him as Other.

In Chapter One of this study I discussed Lynda Burgoyne’s concept of androcentric criticism, a critical voice which can be accessed by anyone but which embodies patriarchal values. The typical qualities of the newspaper review, including the importance it accords to objectivity and its historical domination by men, facilitate this voice, which, in addition to being androcentric, is also representative of other dominant racial, cultural, and economic identities.

Al-Solaylee’s and Crew’s responses raise the question of who is responsible for facilitating understanding. Should the playwright forgo the use of dialect, which she sees as integral to her representation of a Bajan immigrant woman, and instead write her play in a more “local” version of English? If so, given the diversity of Toronto and its audiences, one must ask what a “local” version of English would look and sound like. Or, should the director instruct the actor to “soften” her Bajan accent or to employ the “trans-Caribbean” accent that she has used elsewhere so that audience members who are unfamiliar with the dialect can clearly catch every word she is saying? Finally, if changes like these are made, then what are the implications for the transnational feminist aims of the production? Without the Bajan dialect, could this story still effectively cross borders without obliterating difference, or would *Cast Iron* risk becoming a play about a capital “W” Woman—an essentialized woman disconnected from the nation states that inform her identity.
These questions parallel those I asked in the last chapter in relation to translation, a field in which both artists and scholars wrestle with the dilemma of who must undertake the labour of understanding. The debate between source-oriented and audience-oriented approaches to theatrical translation apply here as well: in an increasingly multicultural theatrical community, one that proclaims a desire to celebrate difference—as Nightwood and Obsidian do—should fidelity lie with the dramatic material and the realities it represents, or with a diverse and potentially unfamiliar audience? Theatre artist Jovanni Sy reflects on these issues in “Found in Translation,” his review of *Where is here?*, a two-volume collection of radio plays about immigrant stories published in 2005. Framing the debate as one between authenticity and accessibility, Sy briefly references the *Cast Iron* controversy to illustrate the difficulty in negotiating these two poles. He writes,

> Although Al-Solaylee's reaction at his failure to understand a Bajan accent was ludicrously hysterical, the point is taken that the more culturally specific we are, the greater the risk of alienating portions of our audience (some of whom, unfortunately, may have a circulation of 300,000 readers). The trick is to find the middle ground where one is faithful to one's community and its stories while welcoming others as honoured guests. (13)

According to Sy, finding the middle ground requires Canadian audiences and artists to ask the anthology’s eponymous question, “Where is here?”, a question which is becoming increasingly urgent “in a world where borders are disappearing all the time” (13) and where there continues to be a push and pull between Old World and New World, acculturation and assimilation. Indeed, the question of “Where is here?” and perhaps “Where is the middle ground?” is central to *Cast Iron*’s critical reception, as both the production and its critics focus on its status as Canadian theatre.

The anxiety reflected in Al-Solaylee’s and Crew’s reviews is partially a response to the subaltern image of nationhood presented in the production, which reveals itself to be permeable
and heterogeneous. While Canadian theatre has moved beyond its problematic focus in the 1960s and 1970s on creating a unified vision of nationhood to an acceptance of particularist viewpoints and individual stories, the critical need in these reviews to immediately access and identify with all stories on stage betrays a continued desire to share a common Canadian experience. Al-Solyalee’s labelling of Codrington as “Canadian drama’s great black hope” and apprehension of “jump[ing] onto the bandwagon” is a testament to this: his comment assumes, albeit facetiously, that it is possible to elect one black person to represent a diversity of racialized people; Codrington only fails to fulfil this role because her view is too particularized and, perhaps, too different. *Cast Iron*’s transnational feminist politics and approach to understanding identity as produced by the interlocking factors of gender, race, class, and citizenship delegitimizes its status as Canadian theatre because it does not speak to the “common” or “universal” Canadian experience. Acting as border patrollers, Al-Solaylee and Crew may allow *Cast Iron* to migrate onto the Canadian stage, but only if it loses some of its “Otherness”—like a new immigrant to Canada, this play should take the language lessons to which it is entitled.

Indeed, universality is a linchpin in both the positive and negative reviews of *Cast Iron*. Jon Kaplan’s positive review concludes, “Though specific in locale, [*Cast Iron*] touches on universal subjects, notably power games tied to gender, race and class.” Christopher Hoile also shows signs of attempting to universalize the play’s meanings, concluding his plot description with, “It is a tale of envy, guilt and hope for forgiveness that provides no easy answers to the questions it raises.” For these reviewers, the play’s specificity does not undermine its universality—while these two qualities would seem to be oppositional, the suggestion here is that they can co-exist. As I noted in the last chapter, the quality of universality is not necessarily inherent in a text, but something imposed upon it through individual spectators’ engagement with
the constellation of conditions of production, conditions of reception, and of the performance itself. In the examples I cited in my discussion of translation, critics generally found works with fewer markers of specificity to be more universal. Here, this logic might apply to Crew and Al-Solaylee; for the other reviewers, specificity did not prevent them from extracting themes to which they could relate. Al-Solaylee’s and Crew’s hang-up on language prevents them from seeing the piece more holistically or reading how other theatrical signs contribute to the experiences and meanings created—for them, meaning is essentially contingent on language. In Al-Solaylee’s case in particular, the focus is on extracting the political implications of the Bajan dialect rather than looking at the performance as a whole. This logocentric focus on text and questioning of the play’s “Canadianness” in effect undermines its artistic integrity. While both logocentricity and universality, as discussed in the previous two chapters, are values held in high regard by the mainstream critical establishment, they become particularly problematic when applied to feminist theatre which, in its historic displacement of the text and focus on creating work by and for marginalized populations, often fails to fulfil both criteria.

*Cast Iron’s* impact in Toronto’s Carribbean community and beyond was affirmed in the feedback it received in a special forum organized by Nightwood around International Women’s Day on March 6th, 2005. “Talking Black: Canadian Women speak out on the politics of language” gathered a panel of distinguished black women, from artists to academics to activists, to discuss the impact of language on cultural and gender identity. The timing of this panel was not coincidental: it was organized in response to Crew’s and Al-Solaylee’s reviews. Codrington and Kelly Thornton deemed the well-attended event a success, as it generated a dialogue about the production and affirmed how important it was for members of the Carribean Canadian community to see representations of themselves on stage. An elderly Bajan woman stood up
during the session to thank Nightwood and Obsidian because she saw herself in the play and she was excited to hear someone speaking in a dialect that various social institutions had discouraged her from using throughout her life in Canada. A Jewish man shared his experience of suppressing his use of Yiddish for many years (MacArthur 26). The identification these two spectators made with the play attests to the effectiveness of Nightwood’s transnational approach and *Cast Iron*’s ability to create alliances between marginalized communities and across differences of gender, race, class, and citizenship. Beyond this, the testimony at the forum revealed the social anxieties surrounding the expression of difference through language: dialects challenge the imagined impermeability of national borders and unified character of nations. The reason for this is that dialects, although presumed to be local in nature, travel beyond their countries of origin and persist through time.

Returning briefly to my conceptualizing of feminist theatre as a dialogue with critics and audiences that I have used to frame this study, I want to suggest that this forum was an integral part of the critical exchange surrounding *Cast Iron*. Not only did “Talking Black” cheekily reference Crew’s and Al-Solaylee’s discomfort with the play’s language, but it also stressed the importance of talking back. Moreover, while this forum emphasized the centrality of politics within feminist theatre, it did not isolate politics from the theatre—significantly, the forum took place at the Tarragon, affirming the inextricable link between art and politics in a very material way. This stands in contradistinction to reviewers’ displacement of *Cast Iron* in their discussion of the work, which enforced a separation between art and politics. Presenting a unique opportunity to dialogue, the forum is crucial in understanding *Cast Iron*’s impact on Toronto’s black community and its success at claiming subject positions for marginalized peoples, but it has left no material traces of itself as it is not transcribed or even noted on Nightwood’s website.
Though a model of feminist theatre as critical dialogue attempts to avoid privileging the written word, the historical record, unfortunately, relies on it for evidence, meaning that critics’ voices remain louder than those of community members, in this case at least.

*Nicole, c’est moi*

**Performance /Ritual**

*Nicole, c’est moi (Nicole, that’s me)* is structured as a re-visioning of 70,000 years of history into which Pol Pelletier seeks to reinsert women, from the “femina erectus,” to late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century French artist Camille Claudel, to feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir. Originally performed in 1999 under the title *Cérémonie d’adieux* (*Goodbye Ceremony*) at la Maison de la culture Mont-Royal, *Nicole, c’est moi* was created to be a part of events commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Montreal Massacre. Pelletier was a fitting choice for the local memorial due to her personal connection to the events of December 6, 1989: beyond her own status as a key figure in the Montreal feminist community, making her an implied victim of Marc Lépine’s explicit targeting of “feminists,” her sister Francine is a prominent journalist whose name appeared on Lépine’s “hit list” of women, found after his death. The play deals with the Montreal Massacre mainly in the abstract, positioning it as a pivotal moment in Pelletier’s revisionist history in which the fourteen women killed acted as sacrificial victims, their deaths restoring the patriarchal order that had been threatened by the feminist movement. This interpretation of the Massacre-as-sacrifice is based on the work of Québécois Jean-Jacques Dubois, a self-identified “psycho-chamanologue” (“psycho-shaman”) who has been a key influence on Pelletier’s thinking and solo work since the 1990s. Informed by

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76 At the urging of Francine Pelletier, authorities released the suicide note just before the first anniversary of the massacre. The letter was published in its entirety in *La Presse* on November 24, 1990, and has since been republished in Louise Mallette and Marie Chalouh’s edited collection, *The Montreal Massacre* (Charlottetown, PEI: Gynergy, 1991).
Dubois’ theories, Pelletier views the events of the Polytechnique as a sacred ritual in which Marc Lépine acts as the patriarchy’s scapegoat, whose life was also lost with those of the women.\footnote{Pelletier summarizes her views on the Montreal Massacre in an interview in \textit{Le Devoir}. See Blanchette, Josée “Pol et Poly: Pol Pelletier entre vérité et guérison” in \textit{Le Devoir}, 6 March 2009: \url{http://www.ledevoir.com/non-classe/237501/pol-et-poly}. For more information on Jean-Jacques Dubois’ distinctive practices, see his website: \url{http://www.psycho-chamanisme.com/}.}

Also driving Pelletier’s search for women at the centre of the performance is a significant event in her recent personal history. Pelletier was invited to play Hildegard von Bingen, the twelfth-century German abbess, writer, composer, and philosopher, in a television series on the history of the last millennium, \textit{Chronique d’une fin de millénaire (Chronicle of the end of a millennium)} (2000), produced by Radio-Canada. Reading the script as she considered the role, Pelletier noticed that von Bingen was the only woman amongst the forty influential figures featured in the series. “Où est la transmission de notre histoire à nous, les femmes ?” (“Where is the transmission of our history, of women’s history?”), she asks in the performance (qtd. in Gagnon 26). Indeed, this impetus for recovery can be traced back to Pelletier’s work in the TEF, as demonstrated with \textit{La terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc}.

In addition to reinserting other forgotten women into the historical record, Pelletier affirms her own place within it. In an action that harkens back to the performative critique she produced with her collaborators in \textit{La nef des sorcières}, whose words transformed the Quebec stage and their relationship to it as they uttered them, here Pelletier makes the explicit suggestion that she is an under-recognized artist and seeks to rectify her misrepresentation in history through her performance itself. For example, lamenting a list of one hundred notable figures in Quebec published by the magazine \textit{l’Actualité} in 1999, Pelletier declares, “Je suis dans le désert, et il n’y a rien qui me reflète, moi. […] J’étouffe. […] On ne me donne pas de place. […] Je veux vivre...
dans le temple de la pensée des femmes” (“I am in the desert, there is nothing that reflects me. [...] I’m choking. [...] I am not given any space. [...] I want to live in the temple of women’s thought”) (qtd. in Gagnon 26). The intertwining of Pelletier’s personal history with the public history revisited in the show has some key implications. First, by addressing her relationship to the material, Pelletier foregrounds her role as author and the location from which she speaks, an acknowledgement of one’s subject position that is a common feminist strategy. Indeed, while the show deals with women—or, through its focus on le féminin, Woman—it also belongs to a tradition of auto/biographical performance, a point to which I will return shortly. More than this, Pelletier’s combining of personal and public histories and emphasis on the theatre space as one of ritual creates a kind of mythology of self that gets picked up in the critical reception of the piece.

Nicole, c’est moi runs from about ninety minutes to two hours, depending on which version of the script Pelletier is performing, with the walk through history providing a loose structure for the performer’s philosophizing on gender relations and her at times violent calls to action. Pelletier performs alone, burdened by a heavy cross, which she drags across the stage, aided only by a walking stick. This image of sacrifice is central to the performance, representing her conception of the Montreal Massacre and, more generally, the suppression of le féminin throughout the history of humankind—at one point she asserts, “Pour que l'espèce survive, je dois tuer ma femme. C'est à l'intérieur de moi. Cela dure depuis 70 000 ans” (“In order for the species to survive, I must kill the feminine. It’s inside me. This has lasted for over 70,000 years”) (qtd. in Gagnon 25). Towards the end of the performance Pelletier crucifies herself, singing “La Vie en rose” as she affixes her body to the cross. Lise Gagnon, in her review for Jeu of the 2004
run of *Nicole, c’est moi* at l’ESPACE GO, sees a glimmer of hope in this embodiment of women’s act of self-sacrifice. She writes,

Pol Pelletier met sa conscience féministe dans son corps, ce corps qu'elle a entraîné, délié, pour nous, pour qu'on comprenne. Elle rejoue le drame de Polytechnique, les jeunes femmes meurent de nouveau, mais nous sommes avec elles, elles ne sont plus seules, enfin. [...] Avec Pol Pelletier - grâce à sa présence, à sa lumière, à sa conscience -, nous disons adieu, finalement. Comme si on avait retrouvé les corps des victimes et que, malgré la barbarie, on allait enfin leur rendre leur dignité. Le théâtre devient rituel, originel. (27)

(Pol Pelletier channels her feminist consciousness in her body, this body that she has trained, liberated, for us, so that we can understand. She replays the drama of the Polytechnique, the young women die again, but we are with them, they are no longer alone, at last. [...] With Pol Pelletier—thanks to her presence, her illumination, her consciousness—, we say goodbye, finally. Like we had found the bodies of the victims and, despite the barbarism, we were going to finally return their dignity to them. The theatre becomes originary ritual.)

Like the Christ figure Pelletier channels as she bears the cross, though she may offer her body as a sacrifice to take on the pain of others and offer her “followers” (the audience) healing, she also carries with her a promise of rebirth. As the title of the performance suggests, Pelletier is reborn as Nicole, her given name that she changed later in life to “Pol,” a modified version of her father’s name (Gagnon 23). (Interestingly, however, along with her resolve that the 2004 performance of *Nicole, c’est moi* would be her last, her new/old name did not stick, as Pelletier continues to go by “Pol,” professionally at least.) The performance’s name was changed from *Cérémonie d’adieux* to its current title, *Nicole, c’est moi... Spectacle d’adieux*, when it was presented in 2004 at l’ESPACE GO in a limited, nine-show run to fill a spot that had opened up in the season; it went on to tour France from 2005 to 2008.78

Though by its 2004 run the word “Cérémonie” had been replaced with “Spectacle” in its title, mystical imagery and language still framed the performance through its paratheatrical

78 For the production history of *Nicole, c’est moi*, see Pelletier’s website: http://www.polpelletier.com/fr/repertoire.php?id=1.
materials. For example, an image of Pelletier carrying her imposing cross is prominently featured on the poster and program. Beside the image in the poster is the following quote from the performance: “Je suis une dinosaure. Je pense que je pratique une forme très archaïque de théâtre. Je suis vraiment une conteuse. Et une conteuse, c’est une porte sur l’univers” (“I am a dinosaur. I think that I am practicing an archaic form of theatre. Really, I am a storyteller. And a storyteller is a door to the universe”). The program also underlines the dinosaur theme, highlighting a definition of “dinosaur” in large font at the top of the inside right page before Pelletier’s notes: “Personne, institution jugée archaïque dans son domaine, mais y conservant une importance considérable” (“person, institution deemed archaic in its domain, but holding considerable importance”).

The ritualistic function of the performance is emphasized on two levels here. First, Pelletier distinguishes herself as an artist who embodies a high degree of authenticity, a dinosaur connected to a truer, purer form of theatre. Pelletier’s emphasis on her importance as an artist, as discussed earlier, permeates much of her solo work—this is an explicit focus of Joie, which in its retelling of the origins of the TEF remains one of the most comprehensive histories of that company and of Pelletier’s early career. I would argue that in this aspect of her work, Pelletier uses the auto/biographical form to create a kind of mythology of self: not only does she retell her story, but she imbues herself with an importance she has not previously been accorded. Sherill Grace, in the introduction to Theatre and Autobiography, explains the appeal of auto/biography or AutoBiography to marginalized peoples “who have been excluded from the dominant discourse and whose stories have been dismissed as worthless” (15). She explains,

With the post-postmodern return of the author and the waning of the deep-seated anti-humanism associated, in Western culture, with modernist ideology and aesthetics, a desire for agency, voice, visibility, and subjectivity has surfaced, clamouring for attention and seeking ways to create meaningful identity (personal
and public, individual and communal) in the face of contemporary dehumanization, fragmentation, trauma, and commodification. While this predilection for AutoBiography no doubt satisfies a basic voyeuristic impulse (and does well in the marketplace), it also represents a crucial site for inscribing and preserving cultural memory. (15)

It is important to note, however, that while auto/biographical performance provides the disempowered with a voice and a space in which to claim or reclaim their subjectivity, it does not necessarily impose claims of absolute truth. Its personal and often politicized material carries the risk that its subjects will be conflated with their onstage personae, leading critics to question auto/biographical performance’s legitimacy as theatre, something that will be discussed shortly in the context of the reception of Nicole, c’est moi.

Connectedly, the second way in which Pelletier and her paratheatrical materials frame her performance as ritual is by setting the performer up as a portal through which audience members can gain insight into the universe and access ancient and pure forms of theatre. Ginette Noiseaux, artistic and general director of l’Espace GO, reinforces these roles in her program notes:

Pour moi, Pol est avant tout une présence qui m’agrippe par le bouton de mon manteau, une Électre insistante avec le même refus obstiné d’oublier les crimes, mais ici, commis contre les femmes.

Alors qu’on voudrait nous convaincre qu’on ne peut rien y faire, Pol / Nicole pose son regard sur les graves défaillances de nos sociétés et nous rapelle à la Fidélité et à la Mémoire. Elle crée des images sublimes en portant sa croix, des chants magnifiques avec sa voix, du Théâtre avec sa longue queue de dinosaure.

(For me, Pol is before anything else a presence who grips me by the collar of my jacket, an insistent Electra with the same obstinate refusal to forget crimes, but in this case, crimes committed against women.

While we would like to convince ourselves that there is nothing we can do, Pol/Nicole focuses on society’s serious failures and reminds us of our responsibility to Fidelity and Memory. She creates sublime images in carrying her cross, magnificent songs with her voice, Theatre with her long dinosaur tail.)
Noiseaux’s language here supports the presentation of the performance as ritual, as she compares the artist to a vengeful and powerful figure from Greek mythology and celebrates her commitment to her politics. Noiseaux uses language often associated with religion—“sublime,” “magnificent”—to describe the performance, and capitalizes “fidelity,” “memory,” and “theatre,” emphasizing their heightened importance in connection to Pelletier, as if the artist sheds a new light on these matters or has the final word. “Grip[ping] her audience by the collar,” she enlightens them and rouses them to action.

By drawing so heavily on ritual—a strategy that I would argue informs much of Pelletier’s solo œuvre—Nicole, c’est moi is also framed as possessing performative qualities similar to those of La nef des sorcières. In Chapter Two I relied on Louise Forsyth’s definition of performativity in my discussion of La nef; I include the extended version of it here to show its application to Pelletier’s work. Forsyth characterizes women’s theatre in Quebec between 1966 and 1986 as performative, explaining,

First, it was the intent of the playwrights and all those working with them for the shows to produce change in theatre practice, dominant discourse, and sociocultural realities. Their intent was not in any way to either reproduce existing reality nor simply to entertain. Second, and to an amazing extent, these plays—which position themselves playfully and defiantly on the boundaries between art and documentary, between high and popular culture—anticipate a genre that has come in recent decades to be called performance art […] (“Introduction: Québec Women Playwrights” xii)

While Nicole, c’est moi came much later than the time period delineated by Forsyth in her definition, it embodies the same performative qualities as the early feminist theatre that preceded it. (And this is no surprise given Pelletier’s longing to return to this movement, as expressed in Joie, for example.) Pelletier’s call for social and political change is loud and urgent in Nicole, c’est moi: not only does she point out omissions from the (patriarchal) historical record, but she corrects them by retelling the histories of often forgotten women; not only does she highlight the
political nature of the Montreal Massacre, but she attempts to heal the social wound it created by saying a final goodbye to its victims. These performative actions connect to the second aspect of Forsyth’s definition, as Nicole, c’est moi merges art and documentary, and fiction and reality, and shares many traits with performance art.

**Reception/Ritual**

Critics focused on the performance’s role as ritual as well, in both preview pieces and reviews. Lise Gagnon, in her longer form review in Jeu quoted earlier, writes,

Dans Nicole, c'est moi..., Pol Pelletier, conteuse, entremêle mémoire et présent, destin individuel et destin collectif. Elle ramène à la surface des faits occultés, ou qu'on ne veut plus voir ou comprendre. Elle fait ses adieux à des êtres morts ou oubliés, en procédant à un rituel où alternent le chant, l'humour et la tragédie, et qui tient tout à la fois de l'offrande et du sacrifice. (23)

(In Nicole, c'est moi..., Pol Pelletier, storyteller, mixes memory and past, individual destiny and collective destiny. She brings hidden facts to the surface, or facts that we no longer understand or want to see. She says her goodbyes to those who are dead or forgotten, proceeding to a ritual that alternates song, humour, and tragedy, and that is rooted in offering and sacrifice at the same time.)

Gagnon likens Pelletier to a spiritual guide, teacher, and priest, and her construction of the artist as a mythical being is shared in the popular press. Genviève Thibault, after comparing Pelletier to the Ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, writes,

De l’*homo erectus* à Françoise Loranger, en passant par la cofondation du Théâtre expérimental des femmes, Pol force des tombeaux et converse avec des super gisantes. Mausolée vivant, elle nous fait enfin pleurer les sacrifices du Polytechnique. (41)

(From *homo erectus* to Françoise Loranger, passing by the co-founding of the Théâtre expérimental des femmes, Pol raids tombs and converses with the dead. A living mausoleum, she makes us mourn the sacrifices of the Polytechnique at last.)

Building on Gagnon’s understanding of the performance, Thibault suggests that it is through

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79 In some documentation, Nicole, c’est moi is listed with an ellipsis after the title. I have chosen to refer to it without the ellipsis, as this is how Pelletier lists it in the repertory section of her website.
Pelletier that we can finally mourn the victims of the Massacre. The reviewer constructs Pelletier as a medium who can conjure ghosts and connect them to the living. This image is reflected earlier in her article as well, in her description of the show: “Sur scène, quelqu’une ‘passée de l’autre bord’, une apparition du théâtre antique, hallucinée, extralucide, jeune et vielle comme le monde” (“On stage, someone ‘from the other side,’ an apparition from the ancient theatre, hallucinating, clairvoyant, young and old like the world”) (41). Le Devoir reviewer Solange Lévesque writes, “Resplendissante, Pol Pelletier renaît de ses cendres avec ce solo, avouant qu’elle emerge d’une ‘presque mort,’ d’un silence de trois ans qu’elle brise enfin pour venir faire des adieux” (“Radiant, Pol Pelletier is reborn from her ashes with this solo show, confessing that she’s emerging from a ‘near death,’ from a three-year silence that she is breaking at last to come and say her goodbyes”) (B8). Again, religious and mystical imagery permeates Lévesque’s review—radiance, rebirth from death, and a return to deliver a final message.

Given its performative and ritualistic elements, as was the case with the reception of La nef des sorcières, reviewers often commented on or questioned its status as theatre. For many reviewers, these qualities were actually positive, making for a communal experience that had a transformative effect on its audience. Thibault describes the production as “une cérémonie d’adieu ; un hommage à ces femmes qui ont fait l’histoire et son histoire ; un manifeste mémoriel contre leur disparition” (“a goodbye ceremony; an homage to those women who made history and her story; a memorial manifesto against their disappearance”) (41). In her conclusion, she enforces the effects of this hybrid performance on the patriarchal order that was re-established on December 6, 1989: “Pol ne veut plus de monde là, s’en dépouille et reprend son prénom, Nicole, étymologiquement : Victoire du peuple. Un passage annonçant la fin d’un monde, une renaissance” (“Pol is done with this world, she strips down and reclaims her first name, Nicole,
etymologically: victory of the people. A passage announcing the end of one world, a rebirth.”) (41). A representative of the people of Quebec, Pelletier breaks the collective silence surrounding the Massacre and challenges the patriarchal order created by that silence, ushering in a new era for everyone.

Lévesque also focuses on the power of the performance as she describes it. She concludes her review writing,

Pol Pelletier offre, comme toujours, le meilleur d’elle-même : une interprétation hors catégories, une présence à tout casser ; une intelligence extraordinairement déliée, le cadeau d’une parole divergente ainsi que la grâce de son authenticité. Et ce, que l’on soit d’accord ou non avec ses assertions. (B8)

(Pol Pelletier offers, as usual, the best of herself: a performance beyond categorization, an awesome presence; an extraordinarily liberated intelligence, the gift of dissenting speech together with the grace of her authenticity. And this, whether or not we agree with her assertions.)

Lévesque interprets the performative elements of the production as making it “beyond categorization,” a description that was a frequent refrain in the discourse surrounding La nef, as discussed in Chapter Two. Her focus on authenticity is also notable given the paratheatrical materials examined earlier and the auto/biographical nature of the performance, wherein Pelletier’s “body as archive,” to borrow Susan Bennett’s term, leads audiences to attribute an element of truth to her performance. Bennett explains, “When there is a coincidence between the subject of the autobiographical performance and the body of the performer for that script, then the frenzy of signification produced along this axis has, for audiences, an unusually strong claim to authenticity” (“3-D A/B” 35). In Lévesque’s conception of the performance, Pelletier the performer and Pelletier the subject and author are indistinguishable: Pelletier offers herself. Indeed, the Pelletier presented on stage is in fact an even truer version of herself: she is Nicole, her actual identity which she has denied her audience until this performance. Whether or not we
agree with Pelletier, as Lévesque points out, we can appreciate that her discourse comes from a genuine place. In Lévesque’s construction, the acceptance of the discourse relies on her authenticity: “an extraordinarily liberated intelligence, the gift of divergent speech along with the grace of her authenticity.”

*Voir* reviewer Jade Bérubé, whose response to *Nicole, c’est moi* is positive overall, calls the production, “[...] plus du manifeste que du théâtre” (“more manifesto than theatre”) (“La dernière scène”).

She continues,

"Malgré la portée essentielle et incontestable du propos de cette récente création de Pol Pelletier, on ne peut s’empêcher de questionner la nécessité de sa facture théâtrale. La créatrice, qui se définit elle-même comme une artiste en mutation, laisse transparaître la nature cahoteuse de ce passage. La théâtralité qu’elle choisit ici reste rarement à la hauteur de la parole, même si, dans une figure symbolique aussi chargée que celle du Messie, elle se place efficacement dans la position du Verbe et du sacrifié. Néanmoins, l’image perd de sa force et vient presque altérer un discours qui, lui, devra avoir l’attention qu’il mérite. (Bérubé “La dernière scène”)"

(Despite the essential and uncontestable significance of Pol Pelletier’s aim in this most recent piece, one can’t help but question the necessity of this theatrical endeavor. The creator, who self-identifies as an artist in transformation, leaves the chaotic nature of this journey visible. The theatricality she chooses here rarely reaches the height of her words, even if, in such a charged, symbolic figure as the Messiah, she effectively places her self in the position of the Word and of the sacrificed. Nevertheless, the image loses some of its force and comes close to changing a discourse, which, itself, should get the attention it deserves.)

Like Lévesque and Gagnon, Bérubé emphasizes the transformative nature of the production and its ritualistic and religious elements. For her, however, the transformation is limited to Pelletier, as the performance essentially fails to fulfill its role as theatre. While Pelletier’s speech has an impact, her inability to meet the reviewer’s artistic expectations mean that the play is a manifesto, not suited for the theatre. Implied here is a separation between form and content, art and politics, that is also noticeable in the following review, though more subtly.
Erwan Crochet, writing for an online cultural publication about a 2007 remount in Brittany, France, emphasizes the transformative power of the production in the beginning of his review: “Personne ne peut en ressortir indemne” (“No one left unscathed”). He concludes his piece by reiterating the change experienced by the audience:

Histoires poignantes vite devenues cris du cœur. D'autant plus que Pol Pelletier est une grande Dame qui n'hésite pas à déranger par son jeu, sa présence et sa mise en scène. En témoin cette croix qu'elle porte quasiment tout le spectacle. Et Pol Pelletier aime en plus titiller le spectateur. Et cela marche. Elle nous invective avec sa voix de contralto au mileu de ce théâtre Max Jacob devenu une antre mystérieuse où tout nous est révélé. Non il était vraiment impossible de ressortir indemne de ce spectacle.

(Poignant stories quickly turn into cries from the heart. All the more so since Pol Pelletier is a grande dame who does not hesitate to disturb with her work, her presence, her mise en scène. Witness the cross she bears for most of the performance. She also likes to titillate her spectators. And it works. She insults us with her contralto voice in the middle of the Max Jacob Theatre, which has become a mysterious den where everything is revealed to us. No, it was really impossible to leave unscathed from this performance.)

Pelletier the mystic transforms the space of the theatre, and then its audience. Though Crochet bookends his review with the latter point, he never specifies how the audience is changed. Indeed, his word choice of “unscathed”—repeated twice in reference to the audience—suggests that spectators somehow suffer injury or harm. What is the nature of the injury? An answer might be found in Crochet’s conception of the performance’s status as theatre, elaborated in the second paragraph of his review. After providing some brief contextual information about Pelletier’s career, he writes, “[C]ette sexagénaire énergique est acteure et auteure de haut vol. Son œuvre ou ses choix de rôle sont des combats de tous les instants, combat qu'elle continue de mener avec ce spectacle” (“This energetic sexagenarian is a high flying actor and author. Her œuvre or her choices of roles are battles at every moment, a battle that she continues with this piece”). There is a tension here between theatre and “real life” that connects to the performance’s
rooting in auto/biographical theatre and its performativity: Pelletier is both actor and author; she is using a performance ("spectacle") to continue a long-running yet unspecified (by Crochet) struggle. While Crochet names the performance a performance, it is also not a performance—it is a battle. Though he never identifies the nature of her fight, Crochet’s description of the production focuses on Pelletier’s search for women through history, suggesting, perhaps, that it is rooted in this journey. What of the audience then? Do they leave scarred by this fight? Is she fighting with them or against them? Are they traumatized by history’s missing women, or by Pelletier’s “cris de cœur” and her insulting (assaulting) contralto voice? Crochet offers no answers.

Again, the questioning of the play’s status as theatre underlying all of these reviews is, in and of itself, partly merited and indeed solicited by the paratheatrical materials surrounding \textit{Nicole, c'est moi}. Pelletier’s emphasis on ritual and her material’s basis in history and auto/biography lead her to straddle several genres, including, as discussed earlier, fiction and non-fiction, and theatre and performance art. In Gagnon’s, Lévesque’s, and Thibault’s purely positive assessments, this amounts to a performance that transcends theatre; in Crochet’s and Bérubé’s, it amounts to a performance that is more politics than art. Indeed, the latter two critics are not alone in their assumption: as Marie-Christine Lesage has documented, there is an historical precedent of questioning the artistic value of Pelletier’s work. Examining the critical reception of \textit{Joie} in Quebec and France, Lesage identifies three recurring themes that were a focus, though interpreted differently, by critics in both places: feminism, autobiography and collective memory, and physical performance. Each of these themes reveals tensions between art and politics, and the universal and particular. For example, Quebec critics interpreted Pelletier’s explorations of the early feminist movement as militant and overly didactic—“un stéréotype
éculé” (“an overused stereotype”) (182), as Lesage aptly describes it—while French critics’ detachment from that history allowed them to view it as a glimpse into women’s history and appreciate the piece’s humour, irony, and self-criticism without dissecting the particularities of its feminist politics. Quebec critics’ focus on debating the facts and politics of the play prevented them from engaging with its aesthetic features in the depth that the French critics did. In short, local critics’ proximity to the performance’s material led them to focus on its particular meanings, while French critics’ distance led them to extract universal meanings.

These tensions are even clearer in how critics took up the auto/biographical aspect of *Joie*. Examining Quebec critics’ response, Lesage writes,

On s'aperçoit que les jugements de valeur qui portent sur l'autobiographie se ramènent à des jugements sur la valeur artistique du spectacle : la majorité des critiques déclarent implicitement que *Joie* est ‘non artistique’. Du coup, ils affirment que la forme autobiographique n'est pas une forme artistique, faisant fi de ce courant pourtant majeur dans les années 1980-1990. Plutôt que de parler de récit autobiographique, les critiques parlent de ‘discours’, ce qui est une manière de refuser le statut d'histoire racontée, de narration, à la création, ou, encore, ils associent ce récit au témoignage. (184)

(One sees that the value judgments that bear on autobiography come down to judgments on the artistic value of a production: the majority of critics implicitly declare that *Joie* is ‘non-artistic.’ Thus, they affirm that the autobiographical form is not an artistic one, ignoring this current which remained a major one in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than talk about the autobiographical story, critics talk about the ‘speech,’ which is a way of refusing the status of the history told, from the narration to the creation, or, again, they associate this story with witnessing.)

This is the double-edged sword of auto/biographical performance: while its “claim to authenticity” is essential to its performative work, in reception it risks overshadowing theatrical value. Moreover, this bias against the auto/biographical form is intertwined with criticism of the play’s feminist message, and it is difficult to separate the two. Quebec critics’ rejection of *Joie*’s status as art is rooted in both the performance’s feminist politics and its auto/biographical form, making the response to the form inevitably gendered. (Indeed, given that the auto/biographical
mode has traditionally been employed by women and other marginalized groups with limited access to artistic platforms, the rejection of the form has specific political implications. If this mode is used as a way for these groups to tell their stories—which are otherwise not recorded—then its de-legitimization also sustains the dominant historical narrative and their under- or mis-representation within it.) The parallels between the reception of *Joie* and *Nicole, c’est moi* are striking: as discussed earlier, in the latter play’s reception there was a focus on examining its politics and the history it re-told; reviews, both positive and negative, also used non-theatrical language to describe *Nicole, c’est moi* (“manifeste,” “combat”). Ultimately, in both cases, critics’ focus on the implications of Pelletier’s historical re-visioning and on her central role within it resulted in a framing of *Joie* and *Nicole, c’est moi* as more political than artistic. While Pelletier’s aim of inciting critical, political dialogue with both works was made clear, critics’ focus on extracting and/or disputing her “messages” glossed over her works’ artistic merits.

The notion that politics can overshadow art, or that art that contains a political message does not belong in a theatre, undermines the driving purpose of feminist theatre. Louise Forsyth asserts the following about radical feminist theatre in Quebec between 1976 and 1986:

> It is important to note, along with several respected critics, that feminist theatre in Québec was not a movement that put on stage unimaginative political diatribes or realistic documentaries of the lives of women. While socio-political issues were not alien to it, it was a richly creative phenomenon that was, first and foremost, imaginative and experimental and that never stepped away from the central perspective of artistic integrity. (Forsyth, “Introduction: Québec Women Playwrights” vi)\(^\text{80}\)

The distinction between art and politics rests on a separation of form and content—as if a performance’s “message” or meaning can be extracted and evaluated independent of its aesthetic features. This assumption surfaces in Lesage’s examination of *Joie*. Writing about the third and

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\(^\text{80}\) I use a definition that precedes the time period under examination again because Pelletier’s solo work is closely tied to her performance roots in the 1970s and 1980s.
final theme underlying Quebec and French reviews, that of physical performance, Lesage
describes the critical reaction in Quebec:

Si toutes les critiques québécoises ont souligné la performance physique fascinante et
remarquable de Pelletier, ces commentaires positifs ont été, chez certains,
schizophréniques, c'est-à-dire qu'ils séparaient radicalement performance physique et
récit, appréciant l'un sans l'autre, […] (186)

(If all the Quebec critics underlined Pelletier’s fascinating and remarkable physical
performance, these positive comments were, in some cases, schizophrenic, meaning
that they radically separated physical performance and story, appreciating one
without the other, […]

Lynda Burgoyne makes a very similar point in her article, “Critique théâtrale et pouvoir
androcentrique,” where she argues that one way in which critics deal with feminist work is to
focus on the performance over its content (51)—I discussed this strategy in the last chapter in
relation to Ray Conlogue’s review of The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc. Using
Joie as one of her case studies, Burgoyne’s observations corroborate Lesage’s:

Si tous ont souligné—avec plus ou moins de conviction—la performance physique
extraordinaire de la comédienne qui tient le spectateur en haleine pendant trois
heures, peu d’entre eux ont insisté sur le caractère inhabituel et original d’un tel
spectacle. On trouve plutôt, sous la plume de la plupart des critiques, un vil
acharnement à faire le procès de Pol Pelletier. (47)

(If everyone underlined—with more or less conviction—the actor’s extraordinary
physical performance that holds the spectator in suspense for over three hours, few of
them insisted on the production’s unusual and original character. Rather, we find, in
most reviews, a shameful relentless unkindness to put Pol Pelletier on trial.)

The separation of form from content observed in Joie applies to Nicole, c’est moi as well.
This is most evident in Bérubé’s review, cited earlier, in which the critic separates Pelletier’s
speech from her performance on stage, questioning whether theatre is the right form for her
message (“[t]he theatricality she chooses here rarely reaches the height of her words”). Crochet
makes the distinction between form and content more implicitly in his review, in the way he
structures it. His article is four paragraphs long: the first is a short lead; the second provides
context about Pelletier, unknown to many of his French readers; the third provides a loose plot summary (inasmuch as this is possible with the work); and the fourth provides some brief description of the performance along with the critic’s assessment, in which he affirms that it is impossible to leave unscathed. Similarly, Lévesque limits her description of the *mise en scène* to one paragraph in her review, dedicating the rest to distilling and evaluating the performance’s meaning. Reviews for *Cast Iron* reflect a similar approach. *Eye Weekly*’s Christopher Hoile, for example, dedicates his first two paragraphs to plot summary and his third to performance, siloing the elements from one another.

Indeed, the distinction between form and content is not unique to criticism of feminist theatre: it is embedded in the very structure of many theatre reviews, which separate plot summary from a description of the various elements of *mise en scène*. But like many of the other qualities of mainstream criticism discussed throughout this dissertation—its logocentrism, its valuing of the universal, its “objectivity”—it has distinct implications for feminist theatre. In Pelletier’s case, for example, critics’ sustained focus on identifying, evaluating, and often disputing her political message, combined with their refusal to acknowledge her work’s status as theatre, contributes to the dearth of documentation surrounding her work and the under-recognition of its contribution to Quebec theatre, women’s theatre, and experimental theatre more broadly. Scholars including Louise Forsyth have worked tirelessly to recover Pelletier’s work and stress its artistic importance, but this has yet to be recognized by mainstream critics. In the following section, I will look more closely at the implications of the form-content distinction in criticism, and conclude by examining an alternative model of theatre reviewing that might benefit feminist theatre.
Towards a New Model of Criticism?

My case studies of Nightwood’s *Cast Iron* and Pol Pelletier’s *Nicole, c’est moi* have revealed two related, false binaries informing the critical reception of feminist theatre. The first is a separation of art and politics, wherein theatre that aims to create socio-political change by bringing marginal experiences to the fore, whether those of a fictional Libya Atwell or an auto/biographical Nicole, is questioned in terms of its artistic merits. Critics who challenged *Cast Iron*’s status as Canadian theatre, seeing its celebration of difference as alienating, prevented an in-depth discussion of the performance as a whole. The *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*’s focus on the political implications of the play’s Bajan dialect displaced the actual performance in their reviews. Particularly in the case of Al-Solaylee’s review for the *Globe*, in the words of Josette Féral, the critic became the spectacle. Féral warns of this risk for newspaper reviewers in “‘The Artwork Judges Them,’” suggesting that the constraints of this genre of writing can lead the critic to position him or herself as the average spectator rather than an informed mediator maintaining a distance from the work. Favouring emotional pronouncements over genuine arguments, numerous critics “place themselves at the forefront, thus risking overshadowing the work completely” (312). Féral continues, “One ends up seeing the critics themselves, not the work” (312). Pol Pelletier’s performance was also displaced in negative reviews of *Nicole, c’est moi*, where critics’ engagement with it as auto/biography and political manifesto overshadowed its importance as theatre. This distinction between art and politics, where the latter obscures the former in critical writing, is related to the second false binary, form and content. As noted earlier, these two elements are often pulled apart in theatre reviews, with meaning seen to be embedded in content rather than as a product of the piece as a whole and its interaction with its material context.

Scholars writing about criticism have problematized both of these binaries. In the realm
of feminist scholarship, much attention has been paid to logocentricity and how it cleaves form from content, or relatedly, performance from text. Stefka Mihaylova, in her article “Whose Performance is It Anyway?” traces a lineage of theatre criticism that privileges text over performance, placing value primarily in the former. Mihaylova suggests that this binary is gendered: men are associated with the text and its connection to the mind, and women with performance and its rootedness in the body. Criticism that privileges text and separates form from content, as I discussed in the last two chapters, has particular implications for feminist theatre that emphasizes process and experimental aesthetics. Indeed, in Chapter Two this issue was also closely linked to the separation of art and politics—there I noted Louise Forsyth’s observation that the controversy surrounding Les fées ont soif has taken the place of the play itself and precluded much discussion of its dramatic qualities and radical aesthetics.

The form-content binary is Susan Sontag’s central concern in her influential 1967 essay, “Against Interpretation,” in which she argues that interpretation of artistic works sustains the unnecessary distinction between form and content and the related assumption that a work of art is its content. By reducing a work of art to its content, Sontag argues, interpretation undermines the sensory experience of artistic engagement. Sontag concludes her essay by imagining acts of criticism “that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place” (12). She suggests that these acts should pay more attention to form, developing a critical vocabulary that is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Pointing to examples from Frye and Barthes, amongst others, Sontag suggests that this criticism should “dissolve considerations of content into those of form” (12) and/or “supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art” (13).

I want to skip ahead forty years from Sontag and conclude with Matthew Reason’s approach to criticism, outlined in his 2006 book Documentation, Disappearance and the
**Representation of Live Performance**, as he provides practical examples of how critics might actually avoid reducing art to its content. Influenced by Sontag’s ideas and adapting them to theatre reviewing in newspapers specifically, Reason argues that criticism should not and cannot “aim to record performance in any objective, complete or comprehensive manner” (205); instead, we must move towards critical practices that seek to represent the subjective, embodied experience of watching a performance. He explains, “Such representation would be partial, transformative, evaluative and interpretive, yet crucially would also focus on the lived experience, on the distinct character of being there in the auditorium and on the particular nature of the performance” (205). While Reason does not discuss the art-politics binary or political theatre specifically, his ideas could be particularly beneficial in this context. In what follows, I will focus on Reason’s concepts of writing time and intersubjectivity, and examine how they might benefit writing about feminist theatre in particular.

I noted earlier how the traditional structure of a newspaper review separates elements such as plot, character, *mise en scène*, and theme and places them in distinct paragraphs. This is what Reason, borrowing from Bernard Beckerman, calls an “horizontal approach to analysis,” which, in addition to fragmenting the production rather than considering it as a coherent whole, also fails to give the reader a sense of how the production exists in time—its “performative temporality” (210). Reason’s alternative approach develops Beckerman’s idea of a “vertical method,” treating units of time rather than separate elements such as plot and character as its elements of analysis. Reason suggests that the critic choose salient moments that contribute to the audience’s lived experience of the event as a whole and thickly describe them.\(^{81}\) He explains,

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\(^{81}\) Patrice Pavis makes a related suggestion in *Performance Analysis*. In discussing the segmentation of performance, he urges his readers to move from a “textocentric” approach that
“Here evaluation and interpretation are present, but take a backseat to description directed toward inviting the reader to imagine what the experience was like as it happened” (214). Rather than flattening the ephemeral experience of watching a performance, Reason’s “momentary analysis” highlights individual moments not as “unitary instances but [as] changing processes” (229). Jon Kaplan employs this technique within the strict word limit of his NOW review of Cast Iron: “For the first few minutes of the production, in fact, there’s not a word spoken. Sealy-Smith begins with her back to the audience, finally turning and engaging in simple activities that suggest much about the impassive, rigid 78-year-old whose life is bounded by routine, stress and nerves.” Here the reader gets a sense of Sealy-Smith’s dynamic performance and its integral role in (non-verbally) communicating meaning. Kaplan’s description tells his readers about acting, mise en scène, and story all at once.

By focusing on describing moments in time rather than individual production elements, this approach to analysis resists the temptation to separate form and content: both must be present in order to describe one’s lived experience of the performance. Moreover, while description does not preclude interpretation and evaluation—two goals necessitated by the contemporary newspaper review—it prevents them from usurping the actual event. Treating a performance as a coherent whole might also avoid dominating political exegesis or reclassification exercises (Is it a diatribe? A manifesto?). Momentary analysis, in short, divides a play into macro units according to the lines, scenes, and acts constituting the script, and to instead focus on the dynamics of performance. He explains:

I propose a mode of segmentation based on the overall rhythm of the performance, the rhythm of the physical actions and of the musical composition of the mise-en-scène—in other words, in accordance with the temporal organization of its rhythmic frameworks. In brief, one should take into account those sequences when text and stage move out of sync, paying particular attention to possible vectorization(s) in the mise-en-scène as a whole. (21-22)
encourages a tighter focus on the performance as performance.

While the review’s focus remains on the performance in Reason’s “poetics of liveness” (226), it does not deny the reviewer and his/her experience. Rather, it brings them to the fore. This is made clearest in Reason’s concept of the “evocation of intersubjectivity”: “The concept of intersubjectivity, at its basis, draws attention to the level on which our experience of the world is human, bodily and intrinsically sharable experience. Intersubjectivity roots ideas of empathy, representing an invitation and ability to see what others see and feel what others feel” (227). In practical terms, this begins with a writer’s description of his/her bodily experience in the performance space, using language that evokes the five senses and considering affective responses to the performers. This also extends to the writer’s relationship to his/her readers, inviting the reader “to imagine the performance via the body of the writer—to metaphorically take their seat at the event” (227). Reason continues,

This requires the creation, in language, of a sense of an experiencing subject: the location of the experience in a specific mind body. This is achieved, by reference to an individual or collective gaze and presence, constructing a representation of the performance as a human scaled and experienced event. This resists possibilities of abstraction and detachment, which can result from writing seemingly originating from an anonymous and unbodied ‘expert’ voice. An intersubjective writing denotes the experience as one of people and with people and therefore a definitively live experience. (227-28)

This element of Reason’s approach has a few key benefits in the application of writing about feminist theatre. First, by conceiving of the experience as a live one, it resists the performance-text and related form-content binaries, again encouraging critics and readers to see the performance holistically and its meanings as individualized and informed by one’s bodily experience in space. Erwin Crochet evokes an intersubjective experience in his review of Nicole, c’est moi when he writes the following (quoted earlier as well):

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While I have challenged Crochet’s construction of the performance, his interest in the performer-spectator relationship works towards recreating for his readers his affective and bodily experience of watching *Nicole, c’est moi*. His word choice of “unscathed,” though not explained any further, suggests a visceral response to the performance that might resonate on a physical level with his readers. Second, by resisting abstraction and detachment, this writing avoids the feigned objectivity that has been troubled by both scholars and artists writing about theatre criticism. Indeed, it is the “unbodied ‘expert’ voice” which mines a text for meaning at the expense of an appreciation of it as art. By acknowledging the position from which one watches and writes, power differentials might become more transparent. Finally, rooted in the notion of empathy, intersubjective writing might encourage critics to approach work based on difference from a place of openness and understanding, something which could greatly benefit feminist theatre, whose target audiences and goals may not match the profile of the dominant critical establishment. Writing about our collective responsibility of questioning “Where is here?”, Jovanni Sy, in his review quoted earlier, asks, “We must listen when it is not our turn to speak. And when the voice we hear sounds strange or foreign, we must listen more intently” (13).

While the newspaper format’s tight word limits and focus on the reader as consumer may make Reason’s vision seem difficult to achieve in practice, the very brief examples I have cited demonstrate that it is possible to make inroads in this genre of writing. (And, in fact, Reason supports his argument with many examples from mainstream critical writing in his book and by
re-writing existing reviews within the constraints of the format.) Feminist theatre’s political objectives and provocations are important ones, and they should not be denied in critical writing—taking them up allows the conversation initiated by the work itself to flourish. However, pulling the politics apart from the work undermines the artistic value of feminist theatre and its contribution to theatre and Canadian theatre more broadly. In my next and final chapter I look at how blogging might offer an alternative way to dialogue about feminist theatre and address many of the problems that have traditionally been identified with mainstream reviewing practices.
Chapter Five: The Feminist Spectator as Blogger

On Wednesday, September 20, 2006, theatre critic Maxie Szalwinska took to the Guardian’s Culture Vulture blog to declare that bloggers are, as her headline reads, “The new critics.” Her article is followed by a handful of respondents in the comments section, many of whom run their own blogs in addition to reviewing theatre for print publications. While all respondents are enthusiastic about the growth of this medium and its potential impact on reviewing, none is as invested as HardHead, who begins his or her post writing, “Dear God, please let this be the case. Anything to be rid of the putrid pack of current critics: more pleased with their own bons mots than any analysis of a show. This bunch of white, middle-class, middle aged spreaders need their power diluted fast.”

HardHead’s prayer bears traces of arguments made by both artists and scholars critiquing mainstream reviewing practices, particularly those made by feminists, who have problematized the homogenous identities of reviewers in the popular press. As I discuss in Chapter One, these critiques emerged in the 1980s with writers like Carole Corbeil describing the male critic as a “sanctioned voyeur” (33) whose gaze objectifies the female actor, and theorists including Lynda Burgoyne and Ann Saddlemyer studying the ways in which ubiquitous “androcentric” reviewers treat discourses of gender and feminism. While HardHead omits gender and sexuality from the identity he or she gives the “spreaders [who] need their power diluted fast,” these are central to Jill Dolan’s critique in The Feminist Spectator as Critic. Groundbreaking when it was first

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82 Part of this chapter was first published in Theatre Research in Canada. See my article “The Feminist Spectator as Blogger: Creating Critical Dialogue about Feminist Theatre on the Web.” Theatre Research in Canada 34.2 (Fall 2013): 162-86.

83 As I note in Chapter One, Burgoyne avoids Corbeil’s essentialism by insisting that reviewers can take-on a gendered voice distinct from their sex; i.e. “androcentrism” is not limited to male critics.
published in 1988, Dolan’s book seeks to unseat the ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male spectator and make room for a feminist one, whose alternative approaches to criticism promise to “unmask the naturalized ideology of the dominant culture most theatre and performance represents” (17). With the launch of her blog, *The Feminist Spectator*, seventeen years later in 2005, Dolan began to carve out a space where she could, as she puts it, “preach to the converted through a more in-depth discourse about the interrelationship between the arts, identity, and culture,” free from the constraints of the “presumptive ‘universals’ of the mainstream press” (“Blogging on Queer Connections” 492).

From blogging to YouTube-ing to social networking, feminist theatre audiences and artists are increasingly using the Internet to shift the power dynamics in their relationship with mainstream critics. In this chapter I will consider how the alternative critical practices made possible by the web address the problems posed by the static, single-authored nature of traditional theatre criticism and the “presumptive universals” upon which it relies. After establishing the field through a survey of feminist theatre reviewing in the blogosphere, I will examine Pol Pelletier’s and Nightwood’s web activities, throughout the chapter asking what blogging means for the feminist audiences and artists who practice it, the mainstream critics whose profession it threatens, and finally, the scholars who rely on reviews in their own work as critics and historians. I argue that while blogging, in some ways, provides a means for feminist spectators and artists to address key gender issues present in both theatre and criticism, its potential to transform these institutions is rooted in its negotiation of two key functions: on the one hand, its ability to “preach to the converted” and create community, and on the other, its ability to navigate more mainstream spaces on the web and engage with hegemonic critical

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84 See Chapter One for a more detailed discussion of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* and its connection to feminist scholarship on theatre reviewing.
discourse. As my case studies of Pelletier and Nightwood will show, if feminists are to take advantage of this ever-expanding medium, they must find a balance between these two functions, and carefully tread the shifting centres and margins that constitute the blogosphere. Put more simply, the power of the “middle-aged spreaders” is not diluted by the mere presence of blogging, but through its strategic use.

**Scholarly Approaches to Theatre Blogging**

While the role of the blogosphere in the processes of theatrical production and reception and its impact on critical practices have been much debated online—appropriately, on blogs themselves, like The Guardian’s theatre blog—scholars have been slower to take up these issues. The alternative critical practices emerging from blogging and other online activities have so far been under-theorized and documented, in both Canadian and international contexts.

The ephemeral and boundless nature of the web poses challenges to scholars aiming to explore its critical territories: how can we rely on a review on a personal blog or a comment in an online newspaper’s forum section when, unprotected by the permanency of print, it can disappear the next day (not unlike the performance it reviews)? When a Google search of a particular production yields limitless results, how do we establish parameters for the research and sort through the host of voices we uncover? Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, deeply-entrenched ideas about the distinctions between professional and amateur and what constitutes credible knowledge may lead to a certain reluctance within the academy to legitimize the critical voices on the web in the first place. Yet, the growth of these voices and their undeniable imprint on the landscape of theatre criticism demand our attention as scholars.

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85 In 2007, the Guardian online featured a series called “Who needs reviews?” in which a number of its arts critics answered the question, “Do reviewers have a role in today's web-savvy world?” See [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/who_needs_reviews/](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/who_needs_reviews/) for links to each of the articles.
This last point is echoed by Australian researchers Neal Harvey, Helena Grehan and Joanne Tomkins, who argue that “bloggers and blog posts now contribute so significantly to Australian theatre practice, production and reception that researchers need to find a methodology to engage with this practice as part of their analysis of live theatre production and reception in Australia” (109-10). Harvey, Grehan, and Tomkins’ wide-ranging survey of the theatrical blogosphere is so far unmatched by scholars in other parts of the world. Focusing on Australian theatre blogs, the taxonomy they develop is a useful foundation for theorizing blogging practices. Moreover, in pleading for more research on performance-related blogging, the authors suggest its fundamental role in the processes of theatrical production and reception:

[B]y instigating discussion based on theatrical work or theatre makers, Australian theatre blog authors are (perhaps unwittingly) extending the performative event beyond the confines of the theatre. The prolonged discussion surrounding particular productions, the politics of the industry or the semantic arguments about what constitutes ‘criticism’ and ‘opinion’ in Australia are all intrinsically part of the Australian theatrical landscape. The forum that blogging provides to air these discussions implicitly contributes to the production of theatre in that country. (118)

Later on in this chapter I will discuss the significance of the prolonged discussion enabled by the blogosphere in and of itself, and specifically how it might answer feminist critiques of traditional theatre reviewing. For now it is important to note the relevance of Harvey, Grehan, and Tomkins’ point in the North American context as well. In a time when print publications are folding and the surviving ones are reducing space for arts reviewing, spectators must often turn to the web for theatre coverage—to blogs run independently and/or those associated with print publications that feature extended theatre sections online. Meanwhile, non- or semi-professional artists, who are often not reviewed by mainstream print publications, rely on blog reviewers to get the word out

Harvey, Grehan, and Tomkins’ taxonomy consists of five main categories of blog posts: (1) review posts, (2) role of the blogger-as-critic post, (3) blogosphere round up post, (4) autobiographical post, and (5) comment post (111).
about their productions, and in turn they legitimize these reviews by using them in their publicity materials. (Indeed, even professional artists and companies strategically use blog reviews in this way.\(^87\))

Beyond these functions, as theatre reviews become more like consumer reporting—a fact which North American theatre critics bemoan\(^88\)—the blogosphere is increasingly providing a space for “prolonged discussion” about issues related to theatre and criticism, such as those identified in the above quote from Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins. In Chapter One I cited The Globe and Mail’s Kelly Nestruck’s blog as a space in which in-depth and critical conversation involving artists and audiences is occurring. This kind of conversation is also taking place on artist-run blogs. For example, Toronto’s Praxis Theatre manages an active blog that extends its mandate to create “works [that] emphasize challenging sociopolitical ideas while remaining dedicated to creating theatre that is accessible to a wide spectrum of our community” to the web (“About Praxis”). A July 2011 posting on the federal government’s decision not to fund the 2011 SummerWorks Theatre Festival in Toronto elicited lengthy responses from prominent members of the theatre community, debating the nature of this decision and related accusations of censorship, with some echoing the widely-held belief that the funding cut was related to Prime Minister Harper’s 2010 statement of concern about Catherine Frid’s SummerWorks play

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87 Take, for example, Mirvish Productions’ 2011 presentation of the Tony award winning musical *Billy Elliott*. The show’s official site, billyelliotintoronto.com, features a page dedicated to local reviews: scrolling down past the quotes from the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* critics, one finds praise from blogger Lauren Gillett of *Theatromania*, “Toronto Theatre Reviews by a Couple of Local Drama Queens,” and from Carol Mott of themotts.ca, a blog associated with a husband and wife, self-produced radio show from Erin, Ontario.

Homegrown and its “glorification” of terrorism. Though not all respondents were in agreement, Praxis’ blog provided an important space for mobilization on this issue. After playwright Michael Healey took to Facebook to encourage Canadian theatre companies to stage readings of Homegrown in protest of the funding cut, Praxis posted information about readings occurring across the country as well as links to articles about the issue on other blogs and online newspapers. Indeed, the Praxis blog was one among many involved in facilitating debate and eventual social action surrounding the SummerWorks controversy: from posts on Nestruck’s blog to tweets and retweets by spectators, critics, and audiences, the conversation snowballed. The integral role of the blogosphere in the debate about SummerWorks and the planning and promotion of the July 15th nation-wide fundraiser, which involved over seventy theatre companies and was organized in just over one week after Healey’s initial plea, illustrates Harvey, Grehan, and Tomkins’ point about the blogosphere’s implicit contribution to theatre production and its intrinsic role in the theatrical landscape.

The rest of the small but growing body of research on theatre blogging is concerned with how this medium might influence our archival practices and methods of performance analysis. For example, while Shakespearean Peter Holland’s approach to blogging is somewhat tongue-in-cheek in “‘It’s all about me. Deal with it,’” his 2007 article which documents his processes of watching a performance of Coriolanus at the Globe from the introspective perspective of a blogger, his conclusion suggests that academics writing performance criticism could take a page from this mode of writing. Academic writing, he argues, does not define the complexities of

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89 For reportage on the funding cut and the 2010 controversy, see Nestruck’s article, “Ottawa cancels funding for Toronto theatre festival that presented terrorist play,” published in The Globe and Mail online on June 27, 2011.
watching, creating a disjunction between the performance under analysis and the activity of engaging with it. Holland concludes,

That dispiriting night at the Globe last summer taught me at least that I have to deal with the politics of performance not as some cerebral activity of intellectualized response but as a powerfully, almost uncontrollably immediate and imminent anger. Far from being a proper exclusion from academic writing, a part of the self that cannot be admitted, it too must find its place as a part of the self that watches, the self that is moved by the play and with or against the production, in approval or disapproval, with joy or with annoyance, in celebration or despair. This too is me and I have to deal with it. (38)

Referring to the anger he felt in response to the performance (the reasons for which he outlines in his article), Holland advocates that scholarly reviewers should confront their emotional responses to performance more explicitly in their writing—something from which bloggers typically do not shy away, as they detail their affective reactions to everything from the weather to the latest film in the Twilight franchise.

Holland expands on how blogging might influence scholarly practices in a later article, published in a special issue of the journal Shakespeare on theatre reviewing. In addition to acting as a model for performance analysis, blogging can also provide valuable evidence to historians hoping to paint a picture of contemporary audiences:

Although we know a remarkable amount about who went to the theatres and why in early modern London or Yorkshire, we have nothing to place beside them in terms of the culture of Shakespeare playgoing now. Forgetting audiences and concerned too much with ourselves, we have had too little to say about the cultures of reception both of reviewing and of what is reviewed. (“Critics and their Audiences” 303)

Holland’s suggestions about the lessons academics might glean from blogging here are two-fold: firstly, blogging’s open and accessible nature and its ability to generate conversation amongst a diverse readership might be considered by academics, who often write for a much more insular community (ourselves!); secondly, and more significantly, blogs can allow us to develop a more holistic and inclusive picture of theatre-going cultures than the reviews historians often rely on,
as the latter are written by only a small fragment of the population and are shaped by the needs of their publication and its assumed readership.

Eleanor Collins, in another article appearing in the special issue of *Shakespeare*, argues that the “the open-ended dialogue” (330) facilitated by blogs and other web-based forums provides a more appropriate way to deal with the collaborative, spontaneous and ever-evolving nature of performance than the “static, often single-authored texts fixed in print” that constitute academic and journalistic reviewing (332). Collins goes on to explain,

Not only does the blog or ‘e-review’ lend authority to the experiences of a multitude of people and a variety of different interpretations, it is also a forum that enables practitioners or those directly involved in the production to comment, and facilitates a dialogic model of reviewing that can provide a truer sense of the production, its changing features and varied reception, over a period of time. (334) Collins’ point here is part of her larger argument that posits a model of criticism based on blogging, which, she argues, should and will eclipse traditional print criticism. Like Holland, Collins suggests that this “live archive” could ideally enrich the work of scholars, as well as directors researching production history and the interested public (334). I will return to the connection between blogging and scholarly work at the end of this chapter, in the context of feminist theatre and criticism specifically. In the meantime, I’d like to draw attention to Collins’ implicit criticisms of mainstream theatre reviewing, particularly her troubling of its authority and accessibility by only a privileged few. These criticisms are preceded by a small but significant body of scholarship on reviewing (much of which I discussed in Chapter One), and like HardHead’s pointed comments, also speak to feminist concerns with this medium. Similarly, Holland’s call for performance analysis that takes embodied and affective experience into account and for more inclusive historiographic practices has been answered by a rich history of feminist approaches to criticism dating back to pre-Internet times (and surveyed in Chapter One
of my study). The proliferation of feminist voices in the blogosphere is no surprise then, and supports Collins and Holland’s vision of the blog and its potential to create a more open, dialogic model of criticism. The ideal model, however, is established amongst feminist audiences and artists only when they are able to strike a balance between creating a community outside of the mainstream and engaging with—and challenging—it. Studying the feminist blogosphere facilitates an exploration of how it might be used most effectively to create change inside and outside of the theatre, essentially fulfilling Jill Dolan’s vision of feminist spectatorship first articulated nearly three decades ago. More generally, this kind of study provides insight into the directions in which the online critical conversation about theatre might proceed.

**Feminist Theatre Blogging**

Feminist theatre blogging occurs in three main forms: gender- or feminist- focused articles on theatre blogs or online newspapers, and conversations in their forum or comments sections; one-off posts about theatre found on feminist blogs or online magazines; and theatre blogs run by either audiences writing about theatre from a feminist perspective or feminist artists or companies themselves. The diversity of these spaces means that feminist theatre blogging is not limited to “preaching to the converted,” Jill Dolan’s explicit goal with *The Feminist Spectator*, whose audience she describes as “anyone committed to the arts’ political meanings” (*The Feminist Spectator*), but that feminist theatre blogging simultaneously infiltrates more mainstream spaces on the web and dialogues with myriad voices and positionalities, some that could be characterized as anti- or post-feminist.

Indeed, while at first glance the web might seem to be a democratic space, the power dynamics that structure it are complex, with “offline” categories of mainstream and marginal persisting online as well, meaning that the blogosphere is not feminist by default nor does it
provide a utopian escape from patriarchy. Scholars have examined these issues from a variety of angles. In their study of the gendering of the political blogosphere, Dustin Harp and Mark Tremayne argue that the ability to express oneself by accessing speaking space or “discursive power” online is not enough to upset traditional hegemonic structures. They write,

Through the Internet and blogging, people with relatively little political and economic capital can enter into the public sphere of political discourse. But entering into, or having access, is only the first step in participating in a public dialogue. Voices need an audience to truly be part of a larger public conversation. A greater audience promises a louder voice and, theoretically, more power. While the Internet may allow more voices to enter into public discourse, current systems of power lend validity and volume to some voices while virtually ignoring others. While the Internet may allow access to a public sphere, an intellectual, patriarchal hegemony exists. (259)

Their findings concerning the patriarchal hegemony of the Internet are corroborated by several earlier studies, highlighted by Tracy L.M. Kennedy in her article, “The Personal is Political: Feminist Blogging and Virtual Consciousness-Raising.” Answering the frequently asked question, “Where are the women in the blogosphere?”, Kennedy replies, “Indeed, there are many women blogging, but whether these blogs are legitimized is another story” (3). Because political and economic systems of power translate to the virtual world as well, the blogosphere is, as Kennedy puts it, “a gendered and raced environment” (3). In the political blogosphere at the centre of Harp and Tremayne’s study, this means that only ten percent of the top or most-read bloggers are women. Using network and feminist theory, Harp and Tremayne speculate different causes for this: for example, network theory might explain the perceived dearth of female political bloggers by showing that many female-run political blogs are not widely-linked in other blogs, particularly highly-ranked or “A-list” ones, resulting in lower rankings and traffic to these

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90 See page 3 of Kennedy’s article for an excellent synopsis of this research and analysis of the issues at the centre of the “where-are-the-women?” debates. See also Melissa Gregg’s article “Posting with Passion: Blogs and the Politics of Gender” in Bruns’ and Jacob’s Uses of Blogs.
sites; feminist theory might account for this dearth by highlighting narrow assumptions about the
definition of politics that exclude some of the topics of choice of female political bloggers, such
as the cost of childcare or healthcare. While to date no comparable study has been conducted on
theatre blogs, one must ask if similar power dynamics operate. What is the readership of female-
written theatre blogs? How do the ways in which theatre blogs are networked sustain traditional
power structures? Are feminist theatre blogs considered part of the normalized discourse on
theatre and criticism, and if not, what are the implications of this for their place in the
blogosphere?

If the theatre blogosphere is indeed structured similarly to the political blogosphere, then
the importance, for feminist bloggers, of navigating both mainstream and marginal web spaces
becomes clear. While Harp and Tremayne’s guiding assumption that a greater audience equals
greater power is logical, the authors overlook the power that can be attained in marginal spaces
in the blogosphere, when the discussion is not part of a larger public conversation but caters to
the needs and interests of a particular community. Surely, it is valuable for female political
bloggers to engage with one another and mobilize through their online networks, just as it is for
artists in the example of the Toronto SummerWorks Festival I discussed earlier. Calling feminist
blogging “feminist virtual consciousness-raising” (1), Kennedy shows the similarities between
second and third wave praxis and the lineage that connects blogging to consciousness raising
(CR) groups of the 1960s and 1970s. She argues, “At a time in feminist history when feminism
itself has been called fragmented, disjointed, or even dead, blogging is an important way for
feminist thinkers to connect and build community and to advocate for social change” (1). Kennedy
goes on to suggest that though “the blogosphere can be considered challenging terrain
for women” (3),
There are several specific ways in which blogging as a virtual consciousness-raising tool can be a vibrant platform for feminist activism, as both an intimate and communal political practice. These areas include self-expression, sharing stories, and interaction and dialogue. (3)

Though it is often assumed that feminism has moved past the need for CR groups, women’s ability to make connections between their personal experiences and broader social, political, and cultural contexts is still a vital first-step in feminist collective engagement, and the blogosphere, as a platform for self-expression, facilitates a space for this. Virtual consciousness-raising, however, can move past its offline predecessor by connecting women across geographic boundaries and racial, class, and sexual identities, avoiding the exclusivity of the predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual CR groups of the second wave. (The only caveat for involvement, of course, is that women are literate and have access to a computer and the Internet. While in many ways the blogosphere facilitates an open space for feminist activism, these barriers should not be ignored.)

A significant amount of scholarship on feminist blogging stresses the blogosphere’s use as a virtual consciousness-raising and community-building tool. For example, in another article in the special issue of The Scholar and Feminist Online in which Kennedy’s article appears, Marie Varghese recounts the case of Rashawn Brazell, a black, queer teen whose gruesome murder in New York City in 2005 was overlooked by the mainstream press. The blogosphere, Varghese argues, provided a crucial outlet to raise awareness about Brazell’s death and for bloggers to express their frustration at the lack of attention given to the story. Black, gay scholar

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91 See Hosu Kim’s “A Flickering Motherhood: Korean Birthmothers’ Internet Community” in the special issue of Scholar and Feminist Online on blogging in which Kennedy’s article is published. See also Adriana Braga’s article “Gender Blogging: Femininity and Communication Practices on the Internet,” on Brazilian women’s social interactions on a modern motherhood blog. For an examination of community and academic feminist blogging, see volume 22, issue 4 (Winter 2010) of the Journal of Women’s History.
and self-described feminist Larry Lyons blogged about the issue on multiple occasions, prompting other bloggers from across the United States to respond and link to his posts. Bloggers eventually founded a memorial fund to support scholarships for students of colour and created a series of queer-friendly fundraising parties in memory of the victim. Varghese’s conclusion parallels Kennedy’s argument about virtual consciousness-raising:

In a number of concrete ways, blogging represents a new media technology that enables people from marginalized groups to communicate with each other, share information, and form powerful networks of belonging that can function both within and outside of cyberspace. Furthermore, the act of blogging serves to refocus the lens and add depth to the few available images of queer experiences in the United States. (3)

While the mainstream media’s ignorance of Brazell’s murder was unacceptable—indeed, Varghese complicates the discussion by comparing it to the treatment of Matthew Shepard’s death in 1998, which she argues received more media attention due to Shepard’s whiteness—bloggers’ ability to use the case as a catalyst to generate discussion surrounding issues of identity, prejudice, and the intersections of racism and homophobia, and to mobilize in political action that moved online to offline is a strong example of the potential power available in the margins. This idea is one I touched on in Chapter One in relation to Robert Wallace’s work on criticism and Canadian theatre. Exposing how mainstream-marginal dichotomies are constructed and upheld by social, political and economic power structures, Wallace argues that marginality can be “‘reformed’ as a strength that can prefigure historical change” (30). In my examination of Pelletier’s and Nightwood’s blogging practices that follows I study their work in this framework, and consider the importance of “preaching to the converted” as well as engaging with hegemonic voices on the web.

Moreover, as Varghese’s example illustrates, when looking at virtual consciousness-raising and community building, it is important to consider the relationship between online and offline
activism and, more broadly, online and offline power dynamics. This is the focus of Margaret Beetham’s article “Periodicals and the New Media,” which examines the distinctions between the feminist blogosphere and the realities outside of it. Beetham historicizes women’s use of new media in the twenty first century by looking back to women’s roles in the print revolution at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain. She argues that the “gap between the printed image and the embodied self” meant that, “there was a gap, even a contradiction, between the New Woman visible in the press and the conditions in which women continued to read, write and live out their lives.” (237) This gap is widened in contemporary times, she continues, as the Internet, even more so than the printing press, empowers consumers in new ways through the access to knowledge it offers and the ability to create “imagined communities” (a term she borrows from Benedict Anderson) in chatrooms and blogs, dissolving distinctions between writers and readers. This apparent democratization of power is met by a new level of “disembodied communication”: “There [in cyberspace] we are all virtual presences. We lose our bodily selves but gain access to riches unimaginable by our foremothers.” (238) The benefits of this loss of materiality can be further elucidated through Gay Gibson Cima’s concept of the host body, which I introduced in Chapters One and Two. Host bodies, whether past or present, allow women to safely intervene into public discourse, providing “a zone in between embodiment and abstraction, a bodily space within which they [can] safely speak or write, while protecting their material bodies and creating new hermeneutic pathways for perceiving those bodies” (Cima 6). Drawing on Donna Haraway’s vision of the cyborg, which itself would qualify as a type of host body, Beetham writes:

Cyberspace represents the ultimate playground for this post-modern self. Here we can leave behind our embodied selves, play with gender and sexuality, discard differences of age or physical ability and create virtual communities. However, I would question whether we should embrace this brave new world without qualms. We may all be
cyborgs now but we are also — as Haraway acknowledges — still embodied creatures whose material circumstances both enable and limit us. Cyberspace may make us all appear as equals but we are still very differently situated in terms of access to power, whether political power, economic power or knowledge power (and these are often related). How does the identity constructed in cyberspace relate to the materiality of the lives of those who play there? How do cyborg societies relate to political movements which seek to redress inequalities of power? (238-39)

In other words, how can women reclaim their material bodies and transfer the power they access online to the social world in which they live? How can they safely move between the host body and material body? As the case of La nef des sorcières demonstrated in Chapter Two, while the characters of the play served as host bodies allowing the women to articulate powerful critiques of socio-political institutions and theatre itself, once they stepped off stage they were no longer afforded the same protection.

Beetham’s concerns lead to other questions when applied to the feminist theatre blogosphere: what are the goals of feminist theatre blogs and bloggers, and how do these goals translate to offline realities? How does feminist theatre criticism generated in the blogosphere intersect in structures of production and reception that exist offline, in the “real world,” but increasingly involve online activities as well, as Harvey, Grehan, and Tomkins’ work on the Australian theatrical blogosphere shows? Moreover, as I noted in relation to Harp and Tremayne’s work, are there instances when the disjunction between virtual and embodied identities can be politically productive?

I’d like to now look at some examples of feminist theatre blogging from the categories I have outlined and discuss how this practice responds to the central criticisms scholars have launched at mainstream reviewing over the last twenty years: its pretense of objectivity, its inaccessibility, and the unequal power dynamic it sets up between critics and artists. Framing the examples in this way elucidates some of the key traits of feminist theatre blogging and
demonstrates how blogging, more generally, is changing the landscape of criticism. Characterized by its self-reflectivity, political positioning, accessibility, and dialogic nature, feminist theatre blogging has the potential to challenge traditional criticism by enabling audiences and artists to assert a new form of agency in the processes of theatrical production and reception.

**Self-Consciousness, or, “About Me”**

A first problem identified with mainstream reviewing is its lack of transparency or self-consciousness. From the prevalent assumption that “good” art speaks to universal human experience emerges the myth of objectivity: there exist objective criteria by which to evaluate art, and critics can write from an objective position and are therefore immune to the influence of ideology or, indeed, any of the factors that might frame their theatre-going experience, from personal beliefs to the temperature of the auditorium. This was a focus of scholarly interest in criticism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and part of a broader discussion of the implications of New Criticism and liberal-humanist ideology, which I summarized in Chapter One. Paul Leonard, in his 1988 article “Critical Questioning,” describes the power of objectivity as a driving goal and value of both popular and scholarly critical practice in Canada. He writes:

> Because criticism turns its attention outward—toward productions and/or scripts—it often is able to avoid examining itself with the same assiduity that it brings to bear on the objects of its critical attention. In fact, many Canadian theatre critics seem to believe that their work has no theoretical infrastructure; they operate on the assumption that they can assess and interpret the work they see as it is—that is, objectively, without themselves being in the sway of any particular ideology. (4)

Though over twenty years have passed since the publication of Leonard’s article, the myth of objectivity persists. This notion is the driving force behind the critical reception of

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92 For a more recent study of how New Criticism and liberal humanist ideology manifest in mainstream theatre criticism, see Robert Nunn’s analysis of Ray Conlogue’s tenure at *The Globe*
Nightwood’s production of *Cast Iron* in the mainstream press, discussed in the last chapter. The *Globe and Mail*’s Kamal Al-Solaylee and the *Toronto Star*’s Robert Crew in particular posited a “neutral” position that was clearly anything but. As noted in that discussion, it is also important to acknowledge that theatre reviewers across spectra of identities can take on a neutral stance and what critic Carol Woodis, whose work I quoted in Chapter One, calls “an assumption of omnipotence” (195). Reiterating the same point as Leonard, that theatre critics write from unacknowledged conventions based on values rooted in logic, reason, and objectivity, Woodis argues, “There is a cabal, a silent conspiracy around critics and criticism that seems to suggest it is written from within a watertight bubble, unclouded and impervious to personal idiosyncracy or the influence of current fashion” (195).

Current technologies, however, have also enabled an environment where Leonard’s vision of a shift from criticism as “self-portraiture,” wherein a review purported to focus on a production reveals more about the reviewer than the reviewed, to “self-conscious” criticism seems more and more possible. Leonard concludes his article describing the latter:

> [T]heater criticism must stop attempting to efface its subjectivity and must acknowledge its arbitrary nature. This does not mean that critical texts which become more introspective can no longer be “about” specific productions; rather, critical self-consciousness provides an opportunity for a more genuine dialogue between performance and critique: the hollow posture of aloofness and objectivity can give way to an engagement with more profound questions about what constitutes the pleasures of theatre. (10)

While readers can follow a print critic over time and come to understand his/her perspective, personality and biases, blogging provides an explicit way to foreground identity and ideological positioning. This is not only possible because of a blog’s unlimited word space—wherein, unconstrained by a 500-word maximum, a writer can spend time locating him/herself and his/her

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*and Mail* in Anton Wagner’s *Establishing Our Boundaries*, cited in Chapters Two and Three of my study.
viewing position—but also because of the self-reflective and self-presentational nature of blogs. Perhaps Peter Holland describes it best when he writes that,

To maintain an active blog denotes a time commitment to this act of telling others about oneself, one’s activities and views that is far beyond most of us. In the engagement with a discourse about theatre, theatre bloggers watch themselves watching in a particularly intense way, not least because of the lack of necessity in the act of blogging itself. (“‘It’s all about me. Deal with it’” 30)

This “telling others about oneself” can, of course, be selective or exaggerated or altered, as it can in any other medium, but perhaps to a greater degree in the blogosphere, which is characterized by its fragmented nature, wherein posts are added at the blogger’s discretion and may not necessarily be connected to one another except by broad theme, resulting in varying levels of continuity. As new media theorist Jodi Dean points out, blogs and even more so, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, allow users to engage in a “performance of authenticity” by providing short glimpses into their lives as they are being lived (36). Dean argues, “Blogging is a technology uncoupled from the illusion of a core, true, essential and singular self. The subjects of blogs are fragmented, appearing as neither true nor false, just appearing as whatever they happen to post” (56).

Holland’s use of the word “telling” and Dean’s invocation of “performance” are important to note, as they imply a key distinction between blogging and journaling or diary-writing, to which it is often compared: bloggers write for an audience, and not just for an audience of friends and family, but for one of strangers as well. While it is beyond the scope and goals of this chapter to discuss blogging through the lens of performance studies, I want to suggest that despite the presence of a performative element—which exists in any kind of writing—and related debates about authenticity, blogging can still facilitate a higher level of transparency or
self-consciousness compared to other forms.\footnote{For further discussion on blogging as performance, see the first chapter of Dean’s \textit{Blog Theory}. Both Ashley Donnelly’s and Adriana Braga’s contributions in Ames’ and Burcon’s \textit{Women and Language} discuss the performative element of blogging and Internet communication through Erving Goffman’s work. Melissa Gregg also invokes the language of performance, though it is less of a focus, in her article on the politics of gender and blogs in Bruns’ and Jacobs’ \textit{Uses of Blogs}.} In other words, regardless of the authenticity of the “self” presented, the blogging medium facilitates a foregrounding of identity through its introspective style of writing and technical features, such as profiles and blog rolls, as I will describe below. In fact, the “hollow posture of aloofness and objectivity” which Leonard identifies in mainstream reviewing is not valued in the blogosphere as it is in traditional print criticism—once again, Holland’s apt article title: “‘It’s all about me. Deal with it.’”

Locating the particular position from which one is speaking is a common feminist practice, and feminist bloggers achieve this in different ways. Jill Dolan, for example, uses her “About Me” sidebar and blogger profile to clearly outline her political position and approach to criticism:

Princeton, New Jersey, United States
I'm a writer who loves going to the theatre and the movies, watching television, reading novels, and then thinking about what all of it means. I teach at Princeton University, in the English Department and in the Lewis Center for the Arts Theatre Program. I also direct Princeton's Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies. I believe in quality writing about the arts and the importance of the arts to social life. I also believe the arts do and should give us pleasure and hope, as well as inspiring our creativity and a more expansive sense of what our lives together can be. (“About Me”)

Dr. Parker, another feminist theatre blogger whose site, \textit{The Feminist Critic}, shares similar goals to Dolan’s, uses the same strategy, not only sharing that she is “a feminist who acts, directs, writes” and holds a PhD in Theatre and Women’s Studies, but also that she is in the process of rehabbing a 1970 Shasta Camper with her partner Jeff, and is the owner of two dogs and one cat (“About Me”). These details may seem insignificant or indulgent, but if our unique identities
shape the meanings which we take away from theatre, then Dr. Parker’s love of Bernese mountain dogs may have bearing on how she watches a performance, and our knowledge of this fact, as readers, can help us understand her approach to criticism. This, of course, is a materialist approach to performance analysis taken to the extreme, which I use only to underline how the level of self-reflectivity and self-consciousness facilitated by the blog format might allow feminist bloggers to avoid the pretense of objectivity and the erasure of the writing subject. At the same time, I am also not endorsing reading any text, whether critical, dramatic, or performative, exclusively through the lens of autobiography. Rather than privileging the critic as the sole source of meaning in his/her review, I am suggesting that a more intimate knowledge of his/her identity, values, and unique theatre-going experiences can give readers greater insight into his/her act of watching, as Holland terms it, and make the subjectivity of this process more transparent. Ideally, this leads to criticism that is not positioned as capital-T truth, but as one of many possible ways of viewing a production, opening up space for other perspectives and voices. As part of the archive, a more self-conscious criticism avoids upholding one person’s voice as representative of the masses.

Bloggers also link to other blogs to help to fashion and expose their identities, essentially locating themselves in the virtual world in much the same way that feminist critics position themselves in the social world. Harvey, Grehan and Tompkins describe this practice, writing, “It positions the blogger’s blog amongst those blogs listed; it also associates the blog with a particular style, standard or peer group with which the blogger wishes to be associated” (115). Holland elaborates,

The network of theatre blogs—and the interlaced referencing and engagement of these blogs with their sidebars of other blogs to read […] is a conversation of knowledge shared, knowledge that may be informed or amateur but which is determined to let us know about the author’s views on every aspect of theatre culture, mainstream and
radical, high-profile and almost undetectable, in process as product, in high hopes and anguished despair, a space in which the emotional import of the intellectual experience is always emphasized. (“It’s all about me. Deal with it” 30)

For feminist bloggers, networking in this way not only contributes to the transparency of their identities and ideological positioning, but also plays an important role in building community and political solidarity. Hyperlinking and blog-rolling represent a modern day method of creating feminist intertextuality, similar to how feminist writers and critics interweave one another’s work, creating a community of shared knowledge, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Nicole Stoddard’s blog roll on her site Drama, Daily links to a wide variety of theatre blogs, from Confessions of a Chicago Theatre Addict to Lee Jamieson’s Shakespeare Blog, but her “Women in Theatre” resource page and her post listing seventy one-and-counting theatre blogs run by women help her to identify her feminist politics and make her ideological position clear. Stoddard addresses this more explicitly by reposting Jill Dolan’s “Feminist Performance and Utopia” manifesto, originally published in 2007 in the edited collection Staging International Feminisms. Stoddard frames the manifesto with, “I share her belief, her hope, in the power, the necessity of performance to serve as a vehicle for social change. I find her use of ‘utopias’ as a cornerstone objective especially interesting, and I think this is partly because her thoughts are at once practical/realistic(?), yet positive and progressive” (“Feminist Performance,” her italics).

For Stoddard, online networking through her blog plays a significant role in working towards the social change she and Dolan desire. Her list of women theatre bloggers was developed partly in reaction to a list of top ten theatre blogs published in the Guardian’s Noises Off blog. The Guardian’s list included only one female blogger, and the top five were all white men—evidence to suggest that Harp and Tremayne’s findings about gender inequity in the
political blogosphere translate to the theatre blogosphere as well. This list creates visibility and awareness, and, as the network theory informing Harp and Tremayne’s study shows, holds the potential to have an impact on blog rankings by increasing linking and, ideally, traffic to women’s sites. In addition to these outcomes, Stoddard describes her goals with the list project as facilitating dialogue “among women working in and/or writing about the theatre AND among women and men working in and/or writing about the theatre” and “camaraderie, networking, and future collaboration” (“The WTB”). Returning to the mainstream-marginal framework I introduced earlier, Stoddard’s blog straddles both spaces: her blog roll and list of women bloggers work towards creating community, but with the broader intention of gaining access to mainstream spaces both within the blogosphere, through increased traffic to women’s sites, and outside of it, through more opportunities for collaboration in the theatre world between women and men.

Accessibility, or, “Post a comment”

In addition to identifying a lack of critical self-consciousness in mainstream reviewing, scholars have highlighted its elite status, noting that the authority to review theatre in a public forum such as the newspaper is only granted to a privileged few, often those who already hold power in society. I have already touched on this criticism in reference to Dolan’s and Collins’ work; it is also at the centre of Robert Wallace’s Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada and Ann Wilson’s article “Deadpan: Ideology and Criticism.” While the blogosphere is constituted by complex power relations, it cannot be denied that blogging democratizes access to criticism for everyone, and has opened up and diversified the public discourse on theatre. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out in her recent explorations of online criticism, the explosion of reviewing sites in connection to everything from books to hotels and the concurrent slow death
of print publications has led to a “major shift in reviewing practices around the world” ("Reviewing in Canada") that, for better or worse, emphasizes experience rather than expertise as authority ("Reviewing Reviewing").

This democratization of access is not only reflected in online reviewing on blogs like those I have listed above, but in the comments sections of blogs and online newspapers as well. Peter Holland likens this phenomenon to “an animated discussion among friends and strangers in the pub after a performance, but within eye-shot of anyone who looked at or continues to look at The Guardian online” ("Critics and their Audiences” 302). The blog thread, according to Holland, creates an interpretive community in which posters see themselves as active and knowledgeable participants. Returning to Hutcheon’s framework, here the only requirement to participate is that one can access a computer and write. Expertise is not necessary, as knowledge is measured through experience: did you see the show? Or, at the very least, did you read the review to which you are responding? As Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins point out, the blog forum also allows writers to respond to a review in an immediate, public, and uncensored way that was previously not possible, even through outlets such as letters to the editor (111).

Blogs enable feminist spectators to challenge the elite status of mainstream reviewing by publically responding to sexist reviews and participating in critical debates about gender issues. For example, while the implications of Brad Wheeler’s lead in his review of the comedy show Women Fully Clothed—“Don’t let the Kardashian witches or Whoopi Goldberg convince you otherwise – women can be funny”—go unchallenged in the print edition of The Globe and Mail where the review was published on June 15, 2011, its online publication the following day is

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94 In “Reviewing Reviewing,” Hutcheon puts it this way: “These, then, are some of the reasons to think about reviewing at this particular time: its popularization, its ubiquity, its continuing usefulness as an instrument of discernment in an electronic and capitalist consumer culture overflowing with excess goods and services” (6).
accompanied by multiple reader comments questioning the age-old stereotype that women cannot be funny. Debit Card responds first, succinctly and sarcastically, “Women ‘can be funny’? Gee, thanks,” followed shortly by JB Dal Mas, “Honestly, can NO ONE review a show or movie or anything created by a woman WITHOUT having to reference that fact?” Other blog postings incite more lengthy debate by asking their readers provocative questions. In February 2011, Guardian online writer Miriam Gillinson posted an article headlined, “No sex onstage, please, we’re career women,” which asks, through a discussion of two recent London productions, “Why does so much contemporary theatre stereotype working women as sharp-suited, work-addicted ball-busters with no love life or softer side?” Gillinson’s question solicited thirty responses exploring this issue from a number of angles, with some historicizing the debate by referencing The Taming of the Shrew, others insisting that dramaturgical needs trump gender stereotypes, and still others questioning the institutional barriers for female playwrights in Britain.

Indeed, the dialogue generated in these posts is a form of criticism in its own right. As Holland is careful to point out, forum conversations are a dialogue, but not necessarily a dialogue between critics and readers, as critics rarely intervene in the conversation. This is not a negative thing, but it suggests that these spaces, while framing the articles or reviews they follow, should also be regarded as distinct from them. (And, in fact, a large part of the pleasure in reading a theatre blog is watching the debate unfold in the comments section!) Though blog thread debate is not always “intelligent, informed and informative” as Holland describes it (“Critics and their Audiences” 302), it represents a valuable alternative critical discourse that can have a real impact on the ways in which a particular production is understood, and on our understandings of gender and theatre more generally. Blog forums are especially significant for women and other
marginalized groups, who, as I discussed in Chapter One, have historically had limited access to the medium of print criticism, and who, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, may still reside on the margins of the blogosphere.\textsuperscript{95} For feminist artists and audiences, blogs and their forums offer spaces where the insights of feminist theory can be brought to bear on broader conversations about theatre and performance. Jill Dolan, perhaps drawing from her own extensive experience blogging, recommends the practice as an important way to popularize feminist methods. Reflecting on the connection between feminist theory and practice in her 2010 article, “Making a Spectacle, Making a Difference,” she concludes by stressing the importance of these more popular acts of criticism:

> While we continue training our students in feminist theatre and performance criticism, let us urge them to use their skills and to apply their knowledge in the world at large, to write for the press, to create blogs, to become cultural pundits and watchdogs for women and gender issues in the theatre. We have made a spectacle—now it is time to make a difference. (565)

Even in her six-word response to Brad Wheeler, Debit Card takes on a watchdog role and adds to the critical conversation about \textit{Women Fully Clothed}, influencing the ways in which both the review and performance are read. Significantly, by appearing on \textit{The Globe and Mail} online, her comment has the potential to reach a large and diverse readership.

**Power, or, “Preaching to the Converted” (?)**

A third problem with mainstream criticism that has been the subject of scholarly debate, and the final issue I will discuss here, is the unequal power dynamic between artists and critics. I introduced this issue in Chapter One in relation to Josette Féral’s essay on criticism, “‘The

\textsuperscript{95} Following Gay Gibson Cima’s, Stefka Mihaylova’s, and Laura Shalson’s models discussed in Chapter One, reconsidering what constitutes criticism and knowledge production legitimizes non-traditional forms of critical commentary such as performance, unofficial public speaking, and blog forums, of course. For this reason, it is important that more scholarly attention be paid to blog forums as non-traditional forms of criticism.
Artwork Judges Them,’” in which she makes the salient point that the reason criticism is so powerful is because reviews will always reach a wider audience than the performances they critique. As I argue throughout this thesis, there are significant material and ideological outcomes that emerge from this relationship, particularly for feminist companies and for other artists existing on the margins, whose work often fails to meet mainstream critical standards of “good art.”

Feminist artists seeking to redress this power imbalance can take advantage of the options offered by the web to not only speak back to critics, but to set the terms of the critical discourse about their work in the first place. Earlier I quoted Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins, who argue that blogging extends “the performative event beyond the confines of the theatre” (118). Indeed, blogging extends the event both forwards and backwards in time. Writing about the ubiquity of blogs and vlogs (video blogs, commonly posted on YouTube and open to viewer comments) that “envelop the act of going to theatre,” Holland sums up, “These materials are spoken, filmed, written in the hope that the theatres’ intervention into the discourses around the performance will generate an engagement, a conversation, in which their own positions will seem significant and worth listening to and reading” (“It’s all about me” 31). I have suggested previously in this dissertation that looking at performance and paratextual materials as forms of critical discourse in and of themselves helps to avoid the gendered text/performance and mind/body dichotomies that inform much of the history and practice of theatre criticism and performance, and legitimizes the work of feminist theatre artists by seeing them as active agents engaged in a collaborative dialogue with critics and spectators. The Internet opens up myriad possibilities for this dialogue. While I have spent most of this chapter focusing on the blogging practices of audiences, I am now going to look at how Pol Pelletier and Nightwood Theatre use blogging and
other web-based practices to create community and exert control over the critical discourse about their work, reaching beyond their immediate audiences to feminist spectators located in what Holland terms the “rootless blogosphere” (“Critics and their Audiences” 302).

**polpelletier.com**

Pol Pelletier currently runs the website polpelletier.com, though until 2012 she also ran the site polpelletier.info; in addition to this, she has an active email list which she uses regularly to send out newsletters about upcoming productions and workshops she is offering. I examine these sites as blogs because they exhibit many characteristics of the medium: rather than just including information about Pelletier’s work, they feature personal observations, notes to and from her audiences, artistic and political commentary, and excerpts from other sites and sources. Pelletier uses these forums to create a relationship with her audience and readers and to frame her story and work on her own terms. These objectives are especially important given her long-standing, tenuous relationship with mainstream criticism and the limited discourse surrounding her oeuvre in the first place. Pelletier achieves these objectives by using her blog in three main ways, which I will describe below: (1) to critically reflect on her work and share these insights with her readers; (2) to shape her identity as an artist by engaging in broader socio-political discussions; and (3) to frame and validate her work through (selectively) re-posting and linking to outside criticism.

A first and most important function of Pelletier’s role as a burgeoning blogger is to provide her readers with interpretive strategies with which to approach her work, thereby affirming the importance of her perspective in the critical conversation about it. One of the key ways she does this is by providing detailed information about each of the performances in her repertory, including an extensive description of the show, its story, themes, and production history. Pelletier’s use of the web in this way is not necessarily unique, as many companies and
artists include information about past productions on their sites. However, the level of detail she uses is more than most, with a full page dedicated to each production. (As a point of comparison, while Nightwood’s site also features this kind of information, its descriptions are quite brief: pre-2006 productions are simply listed on a timeline on a page dedicated to the former category, a practice that is common amongst other professional theatre companies; post-2006 productions are linked on a page entitled “Recent Productions” with brief plot summaries, a few lines of context, and a listing of the artistic team members.) Moreover, Pelletier’s language and focus on themes in her production descriptions take on an interpretive function that is usually not attempted by artist- or theatre-run websites. Pelletier describes her recent production *Une contrée sauvage appelée Courage* (*A Savage Land Called Courage*) in four short paragraphs and just under two hundred and fifty words, weaving her interpretation into a description of the performance. She introduces its themes as ones that are fundamental to her oeuvre—the true role of the artist, and the role of the feminine in the history of humanity—and goes on to write,


(Pol Pelletier has created a beggar character because she considers this archetype as approaching the true essence of the artist. Will true artists and beggars be the last free beings? Pol Pelletier resists the image of the artist as docile servant of the state. She is searching for the giving artist, artist-examiner, far-reaching-artist, and artist-healer.)

This description is important because beyond giving her readers a sense of the production, it reinforces Pelletier’s goals and concerns as an artist, suggests the performance’s underlying meanings, and makes broader implications about the importance of art and the significance of her work as part of this medium. Even for older productions, Pelletier offers the same kind of detailed interpretation—for example, she goes into a comparable amount of detail when
describing À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine (To my mother, to my mother, to my mother, to my neighbour), a production she created with the Théâtre expérimental de Montréal (TEM) in 1979. This interpretive function distinguishes Pelletier’s use of the web and asserts her place in larger critical conversations; it also shows a clear attempt to influence audiences’ and readers’ understanding of her work.

Indeed, many readers may not have seen À ma mère, à ma mère, à ma mère, à ma voisine or have had the opportunity to see more recent works like Une contrée sauvage appelée Courage, so in addition to working as a potential paratext and influencing audiences’ processes of meaning-making in their interaction with the production (whether before or after), Pelletier’s site also intervenes in the critical discourse of theatre history more generally. As a divisive and too-often forgotten figure in the history of Canadian theatre, Pelletier can use her blogging practices to rewrite her own place in history and affirm the significance of her works. And so, in her description of the first play, she reframes the controversy it stirred, writing,

La forme théâtrale qui résulta de cette exploration causa tout un émoi dans le milieu théâtral car elle présentait un jeu physique et vocal jamais vu auparavant, des costumes et des accessoires choquants, une juxtaposition de mythes anciens et de recherches contemporaines sur les femmes et les petites filles, ainsi que des textes poétiques et brutes surgis directement de l’inconscient collectif féminin.

(The theatrical form resulting from this exploration agitated the theatre world because it presented a physical and vocal technique never before seen, shocking costumes and accessories, a juxtaposition of ancient myths and contemporary research on women and girls, as well as poetic and violent texts rising straight up from the female collective unconscious.)

Pelletier, who left the TEM because she felt her artistic vision and interest in feminist issues were being overshadowed by the male members of the group, asserts her role as a ground-breaking artist. The “agitation” caused by the play is framed as related not only to its radical and
urgent content and style, but also to the public’s limited exposure to this kind of work. Pelletier uses her blog to counter any dissension about the play in the “official” public record.

Pelletier also addressed her history in a section on the now-defunct polpelletier.info entitled “De Pol à vous,” which featured a post entitled, “Une grande fraude intellectuelle: Espace GO a 30 ans.” This post, framed as a letter to her readers under the title “From Pol to You,” is a more detailed version of an ad she took out in Montreal’s Le Devoir and an email she sent to her list in 2010. In this post, Pelletier disputes the Montreal theatre company’s celebration of its thirtieth anniversary because of its claims that it is an outgrowth of the TEF. Pelletier denies its ties to the company she co-founded and insists that it is therefore twenty years old, not thirty. She argues that ESPACE GO has abandoned its feminist roots, and through contrasting its history with her own, distinguishes her work and identity as “genuinely” radical and political. Perhaps just as important as the content of this piece is the way it is presented. Pelletier uses a rounded font that resembles handwriting, and addresses her readers in the page title, adding a sense of intimacy to the letter. This sense of intimacy, however, does not require that Pelletier know her readers personally: part of the power of this letter is that a simple Google search of “ESPACE GO” can yield it, making it accessible by anyone and everyone. Its placement in the blogosphere means that the letter can influence the public record and critical discourse about Pelletier, the TEF, and the younger company. While the blogosphere is ephemeral in some ways, with the possibility of posts being removed at any moment or web addresses expiring (as this one has), it is also paradoxically permanent. Jodi Dean explains,

Even if the entire blog is deleted, the fact that posts can be copied, pasted, and repeated, that they can drift and circulate throughout the information networks of communicative capitalism, gives them a kind of haunting permanence. Posts are blogs’ immortal remainders, revenants that once released can never be fully contained. The capacity of blog posts to circulate endlessly means that even dead blogs persist as digital zombies. (47)
In this haunting permanence and threat of non-containment is a power that has been harnessed by Pelletier. Her letter has the potential to continue reproducing itself and repeating her message in a way that printed materials do not—hence the importance of her using her blog and listserv to contest ESPACE GO’s history in addition to taking out an advertisement in *Le Devoir*.

Pelletier also complements posts about her work and history as an artist with posts about socio-political issues. The “Pol veut vous faire connaître” (“Pol wants you to know”) section of polpelletier.com contains two important entries to this end: a text by Maurice Zundel that Pelletier feels describes her approach to acting (which she has marked up for its use of the generic male personal pronoun), and an homage to Quebec feminist Marie-Andrée Bertrand, who passed away in 2001. Additionally, her media sections on both sites contain interview clips of Pelletier speaking about the Montreal Massacre, an event she sees as forever altering women’s position in Quebec and which is a recurring theme in her solo work, as noted in Chapter Four. This social and political commentary, not unusual for the blog format, adds to the identity Pelletier is fashioning with her online presence, however fragmented it may seem. It also illustrates my earlier point quite clearly, that socio-political criticism and theatre criticism are not two distinct entities, but intertwined with one another. Pelletier produces criticism in multiple ways, *through* her artistic work and *about* it, challenging masculinist knowledge paradigms. The blog format facilitates these multiple types of criticism while presenting them under a cohesive identity.

Finally, Pelletier uses her blogs to legitimize her work through others’ words, selectively posting links to reviews, interviews, and letters sent to her by audience members. For example, in addition to the “De Pol à vous” page on polpelletier.info, the site featured a page entitled, “De vous à Pol,” which is comprised of letters written to Pelletier from her audience and workshop
participants, presented in different fonts, many of which imitate handwriting, as if to lend each letter a sense of authenticity and intimacy. To call these letters positive would be an understatement. The first letter on the page begins by addressing Pelletier as “Grande prêtresse de la vie” (“Great priestess of life”), and continues later on, “Grande déesse, chat woman, femme qui bouge et qui enseigne la pureté des mots. La connivence maîtresse s’est installée entre vous et tous les amants de savoir intérieur et rieur.” (“Great goddess, cat woman, woman who moves and teaches the purity of words. The complicit mistress has taken her place between you and all lovers of amused, intimate knowledge.”) Pelletier has created a similar section on polpelletier.com, where there are currently two letters posted in reaction to her latest piece, *La robe blanche* (*The White Dress*). These letters are lengthy and detailed, describing each spectator’s transformative experience watching Pelletier perform her solo show about the history of Quebec, women’s oppression, and sexual violence (and the intersection of all three). For example, the first writer, Chantal, describes bringing a friend to the show who had, like Pelletier’s character, been a victim of violence as a child. Chantal writes at length about how she was very touched by the performance, and proceeds to ask Pelletier more questions about the violence she experienced.  

These personal stories of the power of Pelletier’s performances stand in contrast to the criticism written about them. Indeed, even if the review is not negative, mainstream critics’ tendency to take on a distanced, objective voice often results in criticism that does not explore the embodied and emotional experience of engaging with a performance. This is one of Peter Holland’s key criticisms of academic writing as well, and his reason for exploring

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96 I saw a workshop version of this production at the Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival in May 2011 and a later version in November 2012 at l’Église Sainte-Brigide-de-Kildare, an abandoned church Pelletier was occupying in Montreal. In it, Pelletier discloses being molested as a child by a local priest, although because of the nature of her performance style, it is not clear if she is claiming this as autobiographical.
blogging in the articles I cited earlier. Pelletier’s audience letters present another side of the experience of watching her work. While including these letters on her website might be partially motivated by public relation and marketing goals, it also allows Pelletier to validate her audience’s voices as important ones and continue the dialogue that she has initiated in the theatre, strengthening her relationship with them. As I will discuss shortly, this is essential to creating and enforcing a sense of community with her audience, an objective that also has implications for her blog’s critical role.

@nightwoodthea

Like Pelletier, Nightwood Theatre also uses blogging and other web-based practices to influence the critical discourse about its work and create community amongst audience members and readers. However, perhaps because Nightwood is currently positioned closer to the mainstream than Pelletier, its online presence is more obviously informed by marketing motivations. Nightwood’s choice to produce less radical work over the last fifteen years, its partnerships with more established companies like Canadian Stage, and its more stable funding mean that it has moved closer to the centre of the theatre scene and enjoys some of its privileges, including paid marketing and communications staff to create sophisticated online and print materials. Nevertheless, as a women’s theatre company focused on nurturing women artists’ careers and creating and maintaining a loyal audience base, Nightwood must continually work to sustain and strengthen its position and has taken advantage of new technologies to do so. In Chapter Three I briefly discussed how Nightwood used online paratextual materials to influence readings of Jennifer Tremblay’s *The List*. Here I would like to focus on its use of Twitter and the importance of this tool in creating critical discourse and community-building.

Labeled as a form of microblogging, Twitter shares many features with blogs previously discussed in this chapter: both are fragmented, self-reflexive and self-conscious, and easily
accessible and user-friendly. Moreover, the Twitterverse, like the blogosphere, while at once free to all, is structured by complex power relations. Though the two platforms operate somewhat differently, the ways users interact with one another on Twitter and the subjects of users’ tweets result in similar imbalances observed earlier on the blogosphere: some Twitter users have thousands of followers, while others have very few. The dialogic nature of blogging is even replicated on Twitter, wherein users can reply to others’ tweets or retweet others’ posts.

While writers may be limited to one hundred and forty characters or less, Twitter’s appeal and effectiveness as a mode of criticism are clear in its immense popularity amongst theatre artists, audiences, and critics. Kelly Nestruck is a frequent Twitter user, sharing quick impressions of a production (“Loved Aaron Krohn’s Lenny in Stratford’s The Homecoming. Four stars is my first impression rating…”); posting links to his reviews on his Globe and Mail blog (“Aha, and now the full review: Pitch-perfect, this Homecoming sizzles from the start: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/theatre/pitch-perfect-this-homecoming-sizzles-from-the-start/article2127759/); providing glimpses into his work as a reviewer (“Hmmm... Have just been dis-invited to review Da Kink in My Hair. That's unusual. Should I buy a ticket and review it anyway?”); and musing on non theatre-related topics, especially politics and current events (“Dave Bidini wins for stupidest theory re London riots: The Arctic Monkeys are to blame for not writing political songs. http://t.co/wtXLElp”). Praxis Theatre, whose blog I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, is also a force in the Twitterverse, with an impressive 4,455 Tweets and 2,721 followers at last check in mid-August 2013, figures which are growing each day. In addition to tweeting about its own work, Praxis is particularly notable for regularly replying to audience and critic tweets (“Thanks! RT @Clara_scott: @praxistheatre congratulations mike

97 The Twitter statistics included in this chapter were recorded on August 13th and 14th, 2013.
wheeler and praxis theatre! Well deserved.”) and for experimenting with Twitter in the theatre, regularly featuring special sections of “tweet seats” at its performances. Indeed, herein lies a clear distinction between the blogosphere and the Twitterverse: whereas, as previously discussed, in the former area of cyberspace critics do not often engage in the discussion unfolding in online forums, in the latter critics, audiences, and artists are often engaged in dialogue with one another much more actively. This is due in part to the nature of Twitter, as users are notified when they are tagged in a post, and key words can be noted and searched through hashtags; moreover, response time and commitment are minimal given the character restraints, making it easier for users to converse. For artists in particular, this kind of quick communication means that they can be in touch with their audiences much more frequently and more personally than through other means. As shown in the Praxis example above, companies and artists can establish one-on-one communication with audience members through Twitter as well as target their followers more broadly.

Though not as active as Praxis, Nightwood is an increasing presence in the Twitterverse. Since its first tweet in September 2009, the company has gained nearly 3,000 followers and generated over 1,350 tweets and re-tweets. I tallied and categorized all of Nightwood’s tweets from the year 2012, and the table that follows shows how they break down. The categories I chose overlap and often meet multiple goals. For example, behind-the-scenes photos and posts generate publicity for the company’s shows, so this category could be lumped into the first one, publicity and marketing. But, behind-the-scenes tweets also help to build community by giving users insight into the company that might not be available elsewhere; they also meet a third goal of documenting Nightwood’s history, creating an online archive that is valuable to critics, scholars, and audiences wishing to research the company. As a second example, when
Nightwood responds to a tweet from an audience member, they reap positive public relations rewards while sustaining and potentially growing their community of online followers and offline audience members.

Table 1. Nightwood Theatre (@nightwoodthea) Tweets in 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publicity and Marketing</td>
<td>information about ticket sales and box office; information about upcoming workshops and events; re-tweets from fans; tweets promoting current and upcoming shows; job and internship opportunities at Nightwood</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind-the-Scenes</td>
<td>photos of design process, rehearsals, and events; links to online interviews with artists in rehearsal and blog posts</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising</td>
<td>news about Nightwood’s fundraising campaign and events</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contests</td>
<td>contests exclusively for Nightwood’s Twitter followers to win tickets and other small prizes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previews, Reviews and Reviewers’ Tweets</td>
<td>links to preview pieces and reviews on online publications, including newspapers, blogs, radio, and television; re-tweets of prominent critics and bloggers tweeting about Nightwood</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations with Other Users</td>
<td>responses to users tweeting @nightwoodthea—usually about tickets, feedback, and general questions</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and Women’s Issues in the News</td>
<td>tweets and re-tweets about women and women’s issues, non-theatre related; links to charitable and social justice campaigns related to gender</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theatre and Arts Related News</td>
<td>tweets and re-tweets about theatre and the arts in the news; promotion of other theatre companies’ work</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political News</td>
<td>tweets and re-tweets about local and global news; links to socio-political initiatives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While on first glance it might be tempting to dismiss Nightwood’s Twitter account as purely a marketing tool, I want to suggest that the company’s use of social media is much more complex: Nightwood’s micro-blogging practices meet multiple and simultaneous objectives, not unlike Pol Pelletier’s blogging practices. Beyond contributing to financial survival by promoting its shows, events, and fundraising initiatives, Nightwood’s strategic use of Twitter allows the company to define its identity on its own term and build relationships and expand its audience—
two goals which ultimately shape the critical discourse surrounding its work. In what follows I will examine these objectives more closely.

Similar to how feminist bloggers link to other blogs to locate themselves and define their identities, Nightwood uses its tweets to delineate its community and political positioning. For example, on March 8, 2011, the company tweeted, “Happy International Women's Day from all of us at Nightwood Theatre! #internationalwomensday.” Many of the tweets falling into the “news” categories are re-tweets from other sources: for example, a September 2012 re-tweet cites a headline from *The Globe and Mail* that reads, “Rise of women in Canadian politics is unmistakable and unstoppable,” while an August 2012 re-tweet shares a post from comedian Roseanne Barr simply stating, “I am getting a divorce from the patriarchy.” Earlier, on September 16, 2009, Nightwood tweeted, “Congrats to Brendan Healy new AD of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, we'll see you there in November when we present *No Exit*,” showing their alliance with Toronto’s queer theatre while simultaneously promoting their show. (Indeed, though marketing motivations clearly underlie their tweets to Buddies, Nightwood’s consistent posts in connection to them reflect a deeper association with the nationally known queer theatre.)

As a last example, on July 28, 2011, in the heat of the controversy surrounding Toronto Mayor Rob Ford’s proposed library cuts and Councilor Doug Ford’s comments that he does not know who Margaret Atwood is, Nightwood creatively combined publicity and political protest by holding a contest on Twitter. Followers were asked to tweet a photo of themselves holding a library card in order to win tickets to the company’s January 2012 presentation of Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*.

The presentation of identity that occurs through Nightwood’s strategic use of Twitter is important for two reasons. Firstly, it grants Nightwood a level of transparency that gives readers
further context to its online activities and artistic work, in the same way as blogging allows users to identify themselves and avoid the pretense of objectivity that underlies mainstream criticism. Because Twitter limits users’ self-descriptions on their homepage to one hundred and forty characters as well, each of Nightwood’s tweets complicates its profile on its homepage, which simply states, “Canada’s National Women’s Theatre Company.” Secondly, this presentation of identity is important because of its connection to community-building: when Nightwood uses the hashtag, #internationalwomensday, for example, Twitter users not following the company but interested in International Women’s Day and searching the hashtag can see Nightwood’s tweets and connect to them. Re-tweeting and tagging users can similarly expand their network by making Nightwood’s tweets visible to users who do not follow them. This community-building strategy is a unique feature of Twitter, and has similarly been harnessed by critics. Kelly Nestruck, discussing his use of social media in a public panel on theatre criticism and the Internet that I chaired in 2011, shared how he uses Twitter to attract more online readers to his reviews:

One of my worries about the online world of theatre criticism compared to the old print days is that you don’t have that “stumble upon” factor as easily online. Readers buy the Globe for very different reasons, but there is the possibility that they’re going to pick up the paper and come across your review of a play. In terms of how that affects my Twitter persona, at first I was really only tweeting about theatre and didn’t want to alienate those people by tweeting about other subjects, but then I gradually came to realize that the more I tweet about other subjects, the more followers I get who are interested only tangentially in theatre, and then they may end up clicking through my four-star review of a show and going to see it. (MacArthur, “#th8r_crt” 93)

Nestruck is using Twitter in this way to compensate for the large disparity between readers of the print edition of The Globe and Mail and those who follow him on Twitter— theatre companies do not face the same problem, but like critics, they must try to broaden their audience base. Twitter then provides Nightwood with a supplemental method for outreach and community building:
through this tool and by creating their own “stumble-upon” factor, Nightwood can reach audiences it might not have otherwise engaged.

While exploiting Twitter’s technical features in these ways can expand Nightwood’s followers and develop interest in the company—two motivations that are again related to publicity and marketing to some extent—this kind of community building is also important for maintaining and mobilizing its current audience base. The tweets and re-tweets I quoted earlier act as a kind of communal affirmation of feminist values and political and artistic ideals. Nightwood’s news tweets about women, the arts, and politics, the last three categories in my table, constitute just over 20% of their total tweets for the year 2012, meaning that followers are actively encouraged to think about Nightwood’s role—and their own roles—within larger socio-political structures. Indeed, beyond just thinking about these issues, followers are also presented with opportunities to get involved, as Nightwood regularly promotes online activist initiatives through its tweets. For example, on May 15, 2013, Nightwood tweeted a link to The Everyday Sexism Project (“A bit disheartening, but a good indication of the work we still have left to do”), a site which asks women to catalogue their experiences of sexism with the goal of “showing the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women everyday and it is a valid problem to discuss” (“The Everyday Sexism Project,” their italics). The developers of this site also plan to use the anonymous stories in print publications and in a possible book project, bringing their online activism offline. A tweet on October 1, 2012 reads, “You'll probably want to have your voice heard on this upcoming vote in Ottawa! Help defeat #M312 #cdnpoli http://www.leadnow.ca/defend-our-reproductive-rights ... @leadnowca,” pointing followers to a website where they can write the prime minister to oppose the Conservative motion (M-312, ultimately defeated) that would require Parliament to study the law that dictates that a baby
becomes a human being at the moment of birth, which critics saw as a backdoor attempt to re-
open the abortion debate in Canada. Nightwood also frequently tweets about gendered violence,
an issue it has been involved with since its early years, most notably with The Anna Project in
the 1980s. Nightwood refers followers to campaigns chaired by organizations such as the YWCA
and One Billion Rising For Justice, a global anti-violence initiative; these campaigns offer
various levels of involvement, from volunteering, to protesting, to fundraising. Again, by
engaging with this aspect of Nightwood’s micro-blogging—whether clicking on a news link or
becoming involved in a social justice campaign—followers affirm their membership in a
community of people sharing similar feminist values and demonstrate this community’s ability to
make an impact offline as well.

Returning to Nightwood’s tweets about itself, a final example of this community
development function is how the company uses Twitter in connection to its “Lawyer Show,” an
annual fundraiser launched in 2010 in which local lawyers audition for spots in a Shakespearean
production directed by Nightwood Artistic Director Kelly Thornton. The production then has a
limited run, with all proceeds from ticket sales going back to the company. Nightwood uses
tweets to link to a production blog, where lawyers post about their rehearsal process and first
experiences acting. The blog itself is different from the feminist blogs described earlier,
including Pelletier’s, because its primary aim is not to initiate a critical dialogue or influence
critical discourse—as a fundraiser featuring amateur actors, the production does not seek or even
qualify for critical attention in this way. Instead, the blog facilitates community amongst cast
members and production crew, who can express feelings of nervousness and anxiety, share new
insights into the parallels between law and theatre, and regale one another with rehearsal
anecdotes. Linking to the “Lawyer Show” blog through Twitter not only publicizes the
fundraiser, but also provides Nightwood’s followers with inside information about the company’s rehearsal process. This kind of “privileged” information adds to followers and audiences’ (because the two groups are not necessarily one and the same) sense of belonging to the Nightwood community.

**Online Communities and Critical Dialogue**

Both Nightwood’s and Pelletier’s online activities could be characterized as “preaching to the converted,” as they are delineating a particular community and often assuming a like-minded or easily amenable audience. Indeed, the blogosphere is a useful place for this activity, as “conversion,” like community, is not a static state, but one that must be actively sustained. In Chapter One I quoted Tim Miller and David Román, who argue, “‘the converted’ needs to be understood as a dynamic assembly that both individually and communally enters into the space of performance to sustain the very state of conversion” (qtd. in Shalson 226). This does not only happen in the space of performance: through their online activities, Pelletier and Nightwood actively engage their audiences and readers in building a dynamic feminist community. The web also allows them to be in touch with their audiences much more frequently than they might through face-to-face contact at productions and other events such as workshops or fundraisers, and to expand their networks beyond the geographic boundaries of their theatre districts. This community-building function of feminist theatre blogging is inextricably connected to its critical function: if feminist theatre bloggers are ultimately aiming to transform the institutions of theatre and criticism, then an integral first step is creating and maintaining an activist community that can work together to counter hegemonic discourse, whether online or off. In this sense, Pelletier’s and Nightwood’s use of blogging can be considered within the framework of virtual consciousness-raising, introduced earlier in this chapter. Though their online activities are
distinct, with Pelletier taking on a much more explicit critical role and Nightwood being driven by marketing and publicity goals, both connect feminist audiences, artists, and readers who are advocating for social, political, and artistic change—whether by generating dialogue about the Montreal Massacre and the implications of patriarchy in Quebec, cleverly protesting municipal library cuts, or soliciting participation in letter-writing campaigns about reproductive rights.

I have argued that the transformative power of feminist blogging lies in audiences’ and artists’ strategic and simultaneous intervention into the centres and margins of the blogosphere. Perhaps the next step in shifting the power dynamics with mainstream reviewers will be exploring the possibilities for independent and balanced dialogue offered by the blogosphere. This would be more complicated than feminists commenting on online forums or replying to critics’ posts on Twitter—reviewers, too, would have to change their roles and objectives. Reviewers do not write for theatre workers, but for audiences, and as many opine, with the driving purpose of consumer reporting. A true artist-critic dialogue would thus have to happen beyond the confines of an online newspaper and also the safe space of an artist or company website. This kind of “third space” is not a utopic one. Indeed, the blogosphere is in some ways an ideal place for an equitable dialogue about theatre because of the distinction between online and offline identities discussed earlier. While mainstream-marginal power dynamics are still present on the web, as Beetham argues, the blogosphere also holds the potential for bloggers to temporarily escape their embodied and material realities, discard differences, and create virtual solidarities. If bloggers can access sources of power in these ways, then a search for a level playing field for discussion and debate on the web is worthwhile.

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98 Examples of this kind of dialogue in the Canadian academic context are listservs like CANDRAMA and MASCARENE, where scholars, students, and artists engage in lively discussion about theatre.
Finally, as scholars, we might examine the blogosphere in more depth and grant legitimacy to the critical acts that occur in it. The limited literature on theatre blogging I cited earlier has not yet explored the political implications of our engagement with criticism. Relying on newspaper reviews in our work as theatre historians not only gives us a limited view of audience response, but, and especially in the case of feminist and other marginalized theatre artists, also ignores the reactions of the community for whom the productions are targeted. This risks overlooking the significance of particular productions or leaving them out of the archive altogether, which can have both material and ideological consequences for companies and artists existing on the margins. While not all critical commentary is created equal, the diverse voices that have been given a forum on the web allow us to get a better picture of the varied responses to theatre productions, beyond those of “middle aged spreaders.” It is in this way, through our use of blogs to archive productions and write histories, that we can also contribute to diluting the power of the hegemonic critic and answer HardHead’s prayers.
Conclusion: The Critic Seeks Pleasure

In July 2013, as I finished revisions on the first draft of this dissertation, Jill Dolan’s latest book, *The Feminist Spectator in Action: Feminist Criticism for the Stage and Screen*, was published. My reaction upon learning of its release comprised mixed emotions: first, excitement that I’d have a new book to read by a scholar whose work I truly respect and whose ideas have shaped and inspired my own; second, selfish fear that the book would make my research redundant, covering everything I had to say and more with deeper insight and eloquence; and third, a huge sense of relief that what I had spent years researching and writing actually is and remains a valid and serious scholarly matter. It is the third emotion that quickly took over, and that I still feel today after pre-ordering Dolan’s excellent book and eagerly devouring it.

*The Feminist Spectator in Action* harkens back to the title of Jill Dolan’s first book, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, and reflects what I admire most about her: her commitment to feminist praxis. Connecting theory and practice is a primary and consistent concern for Dolan in much of her work, but she does not just pay lip service to it—she *is* the eponymous feminist spectator in action, going to the theatre, theorizing her experiences and pushing scholarship forward by introducing indispensable frameworks for analyzing cultural production, and writing for a mainstream audience to add a much-needed feminist perspective to the critical discourse about theatre and pop culture. Her book reflects her ability to bridge theory and practice, and scholarly and mainstream criticism: it is structured as a collection of her reviews of theatre, film, and television written for her blog, *The Feminist Spectator*, and followed by a detailed how-to guide with tips on writing feminist cultural criticism. In her introduction, Dolan emphasizes the importance of developing strong feminist critical voices:

> With global gender, racial, or economic equality still not a foregone conclusion, criticism needs to provide a different quality of attention to women’s expression
and experience. Theatre won’t change until the critics’ corps diversifies and until more critics of any race and gender start writing from a broader perspective on the myriad stories that deserve to be told and embodied. As playwright/novelist Sarah Schulman insists, “The American theatre will neither reflect the American playwright nor serve the American audience until it decides to expand what is known about being alive, instead of endlessly repeating already established paradigms.” By attending closely to the critical (and audience) reception to plays and films by women, and detailing their production context, advertising and marketing, acting choices, and design, feminist criticism can break through the persistent male stranglehold on what’s considered universal or even worthwhile. (8)

It is my hope that my own study contributes to the change Dolan envisions by examining the critical reception of plays by women in the Canadian context. In addition to exploring the relationship between mainstream critics and feminist theatre, as well as adding a different perspective to the histories of some important artists and companies, I hope that this dissertation has provided some new ways to think about writing criticism. Moreover, I hope that the alternative strategies I have identified in response to the problems with mainstream criticism can begin to transform the ways we speak and write about women, feminism, and theatre, and support the development of critical practices that are ultimately more feminist.

The case studies featured in this dissertation have revealed the significant disjunction that exists between mainstream theatre criticism and feminist theatre—the values, history and traditions, and material conditions that inform these two institutions can yield opposing perspectives on theatre. Reviewers often favour texts with “universal” meanings and approach theatre from a “universalist” position, avoiding coming to terms with the complexities of their actual viewing position and the weight it bears on their interpretive practices. Meanwhile, feminist artists foreground the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and other elements of identity in their approaches to both performance and reception. Additionally, reviewers often consider spectacle apart from text and value one element over the other: in my case studies, Anglophone critics in Canada demonstrated a persistent logo- or textocentric bias, as
Francophone critics in Quebec favoured spectacle and questioned whether the théâtre-femmes qualified as theatre in the first place. Feminist artists, on the other hand, insist on the inextricability of these two elements while underscoring the importance of performance in fulfilling their transformative agenda. La nef des sorcières is a quintessential example of this, as the text exposed women’s experiences previously untold and unseen on the Quebec stage, while its enactment and refrain of “Je parle” allowed its creators to performatively produce the change they demanded in the script. Reviews of this production—and of many subsequent ones documented in my study—challenged its status as theatre, parsing politics from art and suggesting that theatre questioning dominant ideology and socio-political structures is not theatre at all, but something closer to soapbox preaching.

Feminist artists and companies feel the effects of their clash with critics on several different levels, as gendered reviewing practices have an impact on everything from ticket sales, to season choices, to grant applications, to projected identity, to public profile. Nightwood Theatre provides the perfect example of a company whose identity has been shaped in response to the critical reception of its work. Reviewers’ focus on Nightwood’s founders’ gender identities in the company’s early days prompted it to reclaim its image from the press and embrace its feminist politics more overtly, but the absence of the word “feminism” from its current marketing materials might also suggest a particular response to critical reception in today’s post-feminist climate. Nightwood still operates as a feminist company in many ways, providing opportunities to women artists not otherwise available and advocating for more equitable representation in all aspects of theatre production and reception; however, its programming choices, the venues in which it produces its work, and the ways that it currently represents itself in its marketing and publicity materials reflect a move closer to the mainstream and further away
from its radical roots. Though more research would have to be done to gather evidence to support such a hypothesis, one might ask if the negative response to transnational feminist productions like 2005’s *Cast Iron*, compared to the overwhelmingly positive response to plays credited with “universal” themes like 2010’s *The List*, have influenced Nightwood in its branding and play choices. Theatre production and reception are more complex than this, but criticism, as a key factor in these processes, undoubtedly bears an influence.

Beyond having a direct impact on artists and companies themselves, the ways in which critics write about feminist theatre can reflect and perpetuate problematic conceptions of gender, women, and feminism and work against the progress the feminist movement has made in the last several decades. It is for this reason that both feminist theatre and theatre criticism require further academic study, and it is for this reason that we must heed Dolan’s call and continue to develop—and practise—feminist approaches to reviewing that can infiltrate mainstream critical discourse. In what follows I will outline some areas of future research and then conclude with a few practical suggestions for writing about theatre, feminist or otherwise.

**New Directions of Inquiry**

I embarked on this project with the intention of uncovering the material and ideological implications of mainstream theatre reviewing for feminist artists, a goal that has proved to be more challenging than I initially thought. While archival research and published interviews and histories point to some significant outcomes of the artist-critic relationship in this context, these have been difficult to quantify. In an early thesis committee meeting, Professor Paula Sperdakos asked me if there is data on how reviews affect audiences’ decisions and productions’ box office results, and the short answer is that there is not, as far as I have been able to find. The most helpful studies in addressing her question come from the sociological literature I discussed in
Chapter One. Wesley Shrum’s study of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, published over twenty years ago now, continues to stand out because of his blending of quantitative and qualitative research methods: he spent an extensive amount of time in Edinburgh interviewing critics, artists, and audiences; categorizing the Fringe offerings; and tracking ticket sales and reviews to establish possible correlations. This kind of study might be made easier today with most reviews available online and the ability to use the Internet to survey audiences; however, the explosion of the theatre blogosphere also means that there is probably much more data to collect and analyze. Grant Blank’s more recent and more generalized study of reviewing, *Critics, Ratings, and Society* (2007), also provides a useful model for applying methodology typically used in the social sciences to theatre studies.

This kind of sociologically informed research would complement the existing scholarship on theatre criticism by providing data to support—or complicate—our assumptions about the effects of criticism. For example, it is commonly accepted that negative reviews decrease ticket sales while positive reviews have the reverse effect (indeed, I have made this statement above), but how often do we ask ourselves how we know this? Ticket sales, after all, are influenced by other factors as well, from the weather on the day of a performance to a theatre company’s marketing strategy. Audience surveys and other quantitative data might help to better appreciate the complexity of the dynamics of production and reception. The effects of reviews could also be further divided into the effects of mainstream newspaper reviews, online or in print, and reviews on amateur blogs. Looking into this question more deeply would provide answers for scholars, and also for the companies and artists we study.

As Shrum’s study and Bourdieu’s work on Parisian theatre demonstrate, quantitative and qualitative methods can also help us to understand how reviews impact broader social
structures—a more important goal than analyzing ticket sales, to be sure. Indeed, this research orientation is appealing to the discipline at a time when, as Susan Bennett puts it in “Theatre Audiences, Redux,” “we are now rarely interested only in the theatre performance but also in the cultural effects it produces in all contexts involved in its production and reception” (225). In advocating that scholars look to the research on audiences collected by theatres themselves, Bennett is careful to qualify that she is “not suggesting that we add to theatre studies a social-sciences subfield that specializes in data collection and analysis. […] Nor do I want to suggest that we shift our scholarly attention from the kinds of theoretical and critical approach we bring to the study of plays and performances and to theatre historiography” (227-28). I agree with Bennett, but want to emphasize the usefulness of updating studies like Shrum’s to fill in what she aptly terms the “blind spots in making theatre history” (228). Following Bennett’s suggestions, some of this data could be made available to us by theatres themselves, who gather information on their audiences for marketing and other purposes; in our age of interdisciplinarity, I wonder if collaboration with researchers in the field of sociology would also be productive.

A second area that I have encountered through my research that still has troubling blind spots is the history of feminist theatre and performance in Canada. Turning to Susan Bennett’s work in another area, in her introduction to Feminist Theatre and Performance, part of the Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English series, Bennett points to the need for a book-length study on feminist theatre in Canada in a similar vein to the monographs written in other parts of the English-speaking world, including Lizbeth Goodman’s Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own (1993), Peta Tait’s Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre (1994), and Charlotte Canning’s Feminist Theatres in the USA (1995). She urges, “[G]iven these three books all appeared more than a decade ago, a similar book chronicling
feminist theatre across Canada and Québec is surely long overdue” (vii). For Bennett, this is particularly important because it will ensure that the traditions, companies, and artists encompassed under the rubric of feminist theatre and performance in Canada will be remembered in the historical record (viii).

Shelley Scott’s recent publication of Nightwood’s history, an invaluable resource in my study, provides a model for this kind of scholarship. Scott’s book is based on her doctoral research, and there are currently other dissertations in progress that are similarly documenting the history of feminist theatre and performance in Canada—for example, a colleague at the University of British Columbia is writing the history of Winnipeg’s Nellie McClung Theatre, Canada’s first feminist theatre company, founded in 1968. On the French side, the history and tradition of Quebec feminist theatre also requires further documentation. Louise Forsyth has worked tirelessly towards this goal with her Anthology of Québec Women’s Plays in English Translation; the three volumes of this series bring together a significant collection of plays and introduce them to a new audience, with many works translated for the first time. Forsyth’s detailed introductions to each volume and to the individual plays and playwrights builds a chronology of the théâtre-femmes and its legacies in Quebec, and also suggests areas for future research. For example, information about the TEF’s production history is available in bits and pieces in published articles—many cited throughout this dissertation—and in Pol Pelletier’s Joie, which is the most comprehensive account of its major productions. A book-length study on the TEF’s complete history, however, has not yet been written, and would make an important contribution to scholarship on feminist theatre in Canada. A similar project on Pol Pelletier would do the same. Though she has been the subject of substantial scholarly discourse, especially in the French language, Pelletier’s extensive career as a performer, creator, theorist,
and teacher provides ample material for a more focused and extended project. Given her reticence in recent years to publish her solo work or an extended treatise on her acting theory herself, this kind of project would ensure that the imprint she has made on theatre in Quebec and beyond receives the recognition it deserves.

Chapter Five surveyed the state of research on theatre blogging and revealed several areas in the burgeoning field requiring further study. First, Canadian researchers need to develop a clearer picture of the theatre blogosphere before we can begin to theorize it and understand the complex roles it plays in processes of theatrical production and reception. This was the reasoning behind Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins’ study of the Australian blogosphere, discussed in the last chapter. Their project took place over a two-year period, between 2006 and 2008, and consisted of quantitative surveys of blog posts and interviews with active bloggers; as a result, they were able to elucidate some of the qualities of this new genre of writing and develop an initial taxonomy of Australian theatre blogging that laid the groundwork for future scholarly research. A study similar to theirs would help to map out this relatively unexplored territory in Canada. I should note that while national borders are much more permeable online, there is a case to be made for enforcing them in this kind of initial research, as blogging has become a key condition of reception in the context of Canadian theatre—indeed, it may even be worthwhile (and more manageable) to further reduce the scale of such a study by focusing on blogging in particular cities across the country.

Twitter, as a form of micro-blogging, should also be included in this sort of project. Its uses are somewhat different from longer form blogging, but its ubiquity in the theatre world is undeniable: critics tweet their first impressions at intermission and link to their reviews once they are filed online; audiences use Twitter to share their opinions and directly converse with theatre-
makers; and artists invite tweeting at their performances and take to the medium themselves to show appreciation to fans and respond to their critics. “Tweet seats” have been debated recently in the news, with advocates asserting that audience tweeting makes performance more interactive and accessible, and opponents arguing that it is plain rude and annoying—this example reflects one of the ways that this growing phenomenon is changing spectatorship and could benefit from a more nuanced study. Indeed, one productive way of looking at audience tweeting is seeing it as a form of micro criticism, wherein spectators are given the chance to interpret, analyze, and evaluate in the moment of performance. In some cases, tweeting can shape the performance as it is happening, allowing performers to incorporate audience feedback or ideas in real time.

As more exploration is undertaken, there are many questions that can be asked of blogging and micro-blogging practices. Jill Dolan articulates some of these in her introduction to *The Feminist Spectator in Action*. Reiterating the growing influence of “citizen critics,” as she terms them, in the arts, Dolan writes:

That this new critic corps might not be “professional” seems a judgment handed down mostly by powerful curators afraid that what they consider a necessary step, cultural arbitration, will be neutralized. Without career critics determining taste and worth, they fear, what will happen to conventional standards? What if so-called barbarians begin guarding the gate? […] What power might be derived from a kind of informed amateurism in cultural criticism, perhaps for now in conjunction with the more established professional critics? And how might such an expanded cadre of arts writers be a boon to feminist and other art production marginalized by identity politics? (12)

The amateur-professional divide Dolan identifies here is noteworthy because it mirrors the framework imposed on feminist theatre artists, especially at the beginning of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s, wherein because of their interest in political subject matter, feminist artists

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99 For Canadian perspectives on the debate, see for example [http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/03/14/view-from-the-tweet-seats/](http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/03/14/view-from-the-tweet-seats/) and [http://thetyee.ca/ArtsAndCulture/2013/05/04/Care-to-Reserve-a-Tweet-Seat/](http://thetyee.ca/ArtsAndCulture/2013/05/04/Care-to-Reserve-a-Tweet-Seat/).
were not seen or treated as professional. But whereas feminist artists had to struggle to be taken seriously, this fight is less challenging for bloggers because of the nature of the Internet. Resistant reviewers need not “make room” for bloggers within critical discourse, as bloggers are making a room of their own online—to adapt Virginia Woolf in a very modern context—with or without the cooperation of their colleagues in the mainstream press. There is space for both kinds of voices, which I think is what Dolan is getting at in the above quote as well, but their co-presence is changing the power dynamics between artists, critics, and spectators. The nature of this transformation continues to fascinate me as a researcher of both feminist theatre and theatre criticism, and I hope it interests others as well.

Some Final Ruminations on Reviewing

In my introduction to this project I shared an anecdote about the genesis of my research, which involved a group of graduate students lamenting the current state of theatre reviewing with Nightwood Theatre Artistic Director Kelly Thornton. Our conversation was critically engaged and important, but it was also somewhat hopeless. What we didn’t talk about that day in class was how criticism might change for the better. This, I have realized, is a crucial part of the conversation, and a fitting place to end it for now.

One of the benefits of blogging, as I noted in my discussion in Chapter Five, is that it challenges mainstream criticism’s reification of objectivity, pulling the curtain on the supposedly “neutral” critic to reveal the Wizard of Oz behind it. The problems with the pretence of objectivity and the authority it presumes have surfaced throughout my case studies, but blogging does not provide the only solution. As feminist writers have been demonstrating across genres for some time now, it is possible to acknowledge one’s unique subject position in all kinds of writing. I have quoted Peter Holland’s article, “‘It’s all about me. Deal with it,’” in a few places
in this thesis; Holland’s primary aim in this piece is to write scholarly criticism from the introspective position of a blogger. His chronicle of every aspect of his experience watching a performance at the Globe Theatre, from the wine he drank at intermission to his prejudices against the lead actor, is critical self-consciousness writ large, but it proves the point of how confronting instead of denying one’s subjective experience of performance can enrich critical writing.

In a tighter word limit, this can be achieved by a strategic use of language. Personal pronouns are conspicuously absent from many newspaper reviews—they are easiest to cut in the editing process, but they also enforce the reviewer’s objectivity and authority by masquerading opinion as fact (“I thought that Diana Rigg’s performance as Edwina Lionheart was terrible” / “Diana Rigg’s performance as Edwina Lionheart was terrible”). Re-introducing the “I” of the critic within the constraints of the genre would remind readers where the evaluative statements in a review are coming from.

Verb tense is another linguistic tool that can influence objectivity and authority. This is the subject of Shakespearean Peter Kirwan’s article “‘What’s past is prologue,’” in which he compares journalistic reviewers’ use of present tense to academics’ use of past tense. The problem with the present tense, Kirwan argues, is that it does not account for performance’s fluidity and spontaneous nature: instead, it treats performance as unchanging and constant, and sets up the expectation that the performance that the reader will see will be identical to the one the critic attended. The present tense makes a single performance stand in for a production’s run, and in the same way sets up the reviewer’s opinion as absolute, something which negates how memory and opinion develop and change over time. Kirwan concludes by advocating for a
switch to the past tense in mainstream reviewing, and offering this as a way to save the practice against the threat of the blogosphere:

The value of the professional opinion, therefore, may be more usefully located in its archival positioning, locating a production in both the history of the play and the history of the experienced reviewer.

If professional theatre criticism is therefore to re-articulate its authority […] it can utilize the past tense to do so, reconfiguring performance as live experience and the reviewer as the archivist of a moment. What the past tense loses in not simulating an omniscient, objective experience of an entire production, it gains in identifying a true, subjectively realized moment over which the reviewer has absolute authority, communicating to the reader not clinical observations of a fixed object, but an engaged report of a lived and unrepeatable moment. (342)

What Kirwan is ultimately moving towards with this suggestion is criticism driven more heavily by description.

I discussed description in Chapter Four by way of Matthew Reason’s work on writing the live, and here I want to emphasize the usefulness of this approach in the long term, especially for scholars consulting reviews to reconstruct performances and write theatre history. Irving Wardle is another advocate for description, suggesting in his book on theatre criticism that the practice “supplies a means of addressing the present and future reader simultaneously” (13). Wardle explains:

The views of eighteenth-century critics on Shakespeare are of interest to me only for what they tell us about the eighteenth century; but what they have to say about Mrs. Siddons’s Lady Macbeth or Garrick’s Richard III only gains interest with the passage of time. What most infuriates you when reading these old notices is their habit of wasting space over moral generalization when they might have been describing what the performers did and how the performance was staged. (14).

Indeed, how might reviews of Cast Iron read if they focused on the performance rather than musing on the politics of multiculturalism in Canada? While I am not denying that theatre and criticism are appropriate venues for socio-political debate, the trick for the writer is how to foster that debate while keeping the focus on performance. Wardle acknowledges that rich description
is often the first thing to be cut by editors focusing on word counts and consumer reporting, but encourages reviewers to “cheat” by submerging description, opinion, and plot, which are usually prioritized in the opposite order. He advises, “Thus, instead of outlining a plot, then stating an opinion and backing it up with illustrative detail, the detail is made to carry the comment: a process that simultaneously makes the notice harder to cut and harder to disagree with. This discipline of compression makes for focused and muscular writing; you are in control of the material rather than being dragged along in its wake” (14).

I taught an undergraduate course on theatre criticism for four years, and as I refined the course over time I put increasingly more emphasis on description. One way in which I drove this point home was through an exercise I developed wherein I distributed mini chocolate bars (usually of the Halloween variety) and guided my students through a tasting, requiring them to use all of their senses to experience the chocolate bar, as if for the first time. Following Matthew Reason’s emphasis on “synaesthetic experience,” I wanted my students to engage in thick description that recreated their tasting for their reader in a vivid and all-encompassing way. I used this exercise as an analogy of the experience of watching and writing about theatre; I wanted to show my students that theatre operates on several different levels, and that descriptive writing about theatre can involve more than just the visual and aural. But I also did this to remind

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100 Reason explains “synaesthetic experience,” one of his recommendations for critical writing, in this way:

Audiences witness performances through their eyes and ears, yet they experience it with their whole bodies. […] By using embodied synaesthetic descriptions writers present their own bodies as the medium through which readers can access the experience themselves. By translating emotional and intellectual responses into embodied reactions, readers are empowered to intersubjectively access that experience with their own bodies. (228)
them of the pleasure of engaging with any work of art, whether a performance at the Tarragon Theatre or a mini Coffee Crisp.

And pleasure can make criticism better too, even for feminist spectators. Reflecting on her writing on film, bell hooks states, “If we were always and only ‘resisting spectators,’ to borrow a literary phrase, then films would lose their magic. Watching movies would feel more like work than pleasure […]” (136). Hooks recounts her experience watching Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction and the simultaneous pleasure and annoyance it elicited in her. She returned from the theatre and wrote until dawn, ignoring her physical signs of exhaustion: “I was trying to capture the fierce impressions the film had made on me. It’s awesome when a creative work can charge my critical batteries in this way” (137). Indeed, just as hooks found pleasure in watching Pulp Fiction despite her deep-seated ideological problems with it, she found pleasure in writing about the film—the critical act energized her. Approaching theatre from a place of enjoyment, remembering one’s love of the art even when it causes great displeasure, I think, fosters critical writing that is constructive, committed, and compelling. Like hooks’ work as a cultural critic, it is clearly pleasure that ultimately drives Jill Dolan’s work on her blog, The Feminist Spectator, a labour of love which she actively maintains on top of her myriad responsibilities as a professor and researcher.

And it is pleasure, also, that has motivated me to pursue this research project and carried me through my own critical writing since that fateful day when Kelly Thornton visited my class.
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