



INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

Seasons - July issue 2004

Guest Editors Welcome

Dear Playwrights,

I'm pleased to present to you (drum roll) the summer edition of *Seasons* (cymbals, applause). This issue includes an array of international perspectives from India, Czech Republic, Philippines, France, Wales, the United States and Canada. Yes it's true, we span the globe. The articles cover a wide range of topics from practical tips to personal accounts of playwriting and production in all its glory.

Hands-on experience is revealed in articles on: the successful adaptation of a play into a novel; the benefits to a writer of having a public reading; and the learning curve of self-directing. Personal accounts are illuminated in: a Prague theatre diary; and the challenges of being a playwright in India. As well, there is an interview spotlighting a Canadian playwright being produced in Europe.

You'll find two reports from meetings in Wales and Manila; one a symposium on eroticism, death and theatre; the other the Women Playwrights International Conference.

You can also read about the second annual women playwright's festival named after an Indic Goddess, as well as ponder the Hot Topic of the listserve – submission fees (to pay or not to pay). But let's start by visiting the Play Doctor who is in the house for consultation on: staging your own life story!

Readers, thank you for your interest in this issue (applause). Contributors, you were marvellous (standing ovation). Many wishes for continued successes to all of you (bow).

Elena Kaufman, Guest Editor

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The Play Doctor is in! All playwrights are welcome to submit questions on structural and craft issues for diagnosis by **Rebecca Ritchie, JD, at rtritchie@att.net**

Disclaimer: Please note that the Play Doctor did her residency in The Well-Made Play. All comments reflect that bias.

Dear Play Doctor:

I'm preparing a performance piece about my life. I've got some really fascinating stories to tell, but in my first workshop presentation before a group of theatre professionals, the whole thing fell flat. People suggested I give more detail, explain the background, flesh out the character of my wife. Now I'm lost and depressed. It's my life! I can't change it that much. What can I do to make this thing work?

Dear Playwright:

You sound really depressed, poor baby. Don't despair. You may have low serotonin levels, or you might just have forgotten the basics. A performance piece about your life is really a play about your life – with **you** as the central character. For the moment (or more likely for the two years it will take you to develop the thing,) forget that this is the story of your life, and look at the piece you're preparing as a play that needs a structural overhaul. Go back to the checklist to diagnose the structure of a Well-Made Play:

1. *Does the Central Character have a choice or decision (a conflict of desire or intention) or a dilemma to workout?* This is your life, sure, but as interesting as it is to you (goes without saying,) it's still got to engage other people (much, much trickier.) How to achieve it? Look back over your life and find the place where you (the Central Character) had to make a life-altering choice. What two paths presented themselves to you? Were the two roads you were considering mutually exclusive? Put another way, did you passionately want/intend two different things at the same time -- but you could only have one, never both? Were the two paths/desires about equivalent in terms of importance to your life, happiness, future?

Think of the two paths as magnets drawing you in two opposite directions. Were the magnets of equal power? Begin your story by describing how you were drawn first to one, then to the other – torn, anguished and tormented as you tried to choose between them. “When I was thirteen, I realized that I had to choose between killing myself and finding out why I had always felt like a woman in a man's body.” (That's ambivalence, folks.)

2. Was your conflict both internal and represented by an external conflict with another character? Did your spouse, for example, want you to devote your life to organizing tenants against their landlords? But your mother owned slum housing, which made her – and you – very rich, well-fed, well-educated and arrogant? What stratagems did your spouse and your mother use to draw you into their opposing camps? And what did you want? What internal considerations explained why you cared very deeply about both sides?

3. And what was really going on in your life at that time which could explain to the audience why you chose the path you did? What social, economic, political, racial, historical, religious or other factor of **significance** was driving you to make your eventual choice between the two paths? Is your spouse of another race? In picking her, were you using her culture and race to rebel against your mother's narrow Inuit world view? Had you been coddled and supported, and now your mother needed you to support her, because she was:

- a. Running for the U.S. Senate on a stop the war in Iraq platform (political significance)
- b. Engaged in smuggling illegal immigrants from Nicaragua (criminal and economic significance)
- c. A naturopath who believed your spouse was leading you into a life of antibiotics (health significance)
- d. An Egyptian incarcerated without the right to counsel or a hearing because of a perception that she was a terrorist (political, historical, ethnic, religious, legal significance)

4. How did you change in the course of making the choice/decision or working out the dilemma? You certainly could not have stood still through the course of your decision-making. You had to change – in empathy, understanding, guilt, duty, sense of loss, independence, hopefulness, or willingness to sacrifice for others. You had to learn from the experience -- become a more entrenched control freak or a total slob. But move, if only by one baby step.

5. Do you introduce the past only to advance your choice/decision or to work out your dilemma? Do you avoid historical narration, rants, and lamentation? Or do you manage to bring in the past in a moment of conflict that elucidates the two paths tugging at you?

6. Have you done a reality check? You must be sure that your recollection of your life has grown so faulty that the audience will say – “That couldn't possibly have happened!” Fiction, including playwriting, even a performance piece based on your life or someone else's, is fundamentally a lie well told. If you screw up the lie, you lose your audience. They won't stay **engaged**. Take, for example, your anecdote about the day Kennedy died. Your brother called you on your cell phone to break the horrifying news. WRONG! NO CELL PHONES IN THE 1960s! PRINCESS PHONES, YES! CELL PHONES, NO, YOU JERK! You broke the compact with the audience, screwed up your lie, lost them never to return. **(I'm breaking our engagement! You can have your school ring back with the filthy smelly melted wax inside!)**

7. Remember to tell it in the present. What you want to avoid at all costs is jawing on about what happened in the past – an historical rendition – without presenting a current decision for you to make. That's often degenerates into complaining, not dramatic writing. Put yourself back into the past and tell the story as though the choice were new and fresh, still in front of you. That way, you can take your audience along with you for the ride. (And what a ride it is!)

Within the arc of that basic structure, you have freedom to tell your story in all its gory and glorious detail.

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In late March, I traveled to Prague, where I saw a quartet of productions that have lingered with me for months, tugging at my unconscious like recurring dreams. Ever since, I've been reflecting on what combination of image and sound have given them such staying power.

My initial visit to the State Opera was partly by happenstance. The venerable institution was only a few minutes' walk from my pension, and there was a cheap single ticket available just before the show. Instead of my expected perch in the balcony, I was blown away – \$18 put me in a royal box only rows from the stage, in the rococo splendor of the 19th century auditorium. That was my first (but not last) experience with how heavily Prague values and subsidizes its main cultural institutions. Bargains abound at all the major houses, which makes the arts accessible to anyone -- standing room at the National Theatre for all performances of its world-class series of opera, ballet, & theatre runs about \$1.15, the price of two beers.



The Prague State Opera *

A new production of *Carmen* was playing – a traditional rendering, but very beautifully-sung -- with opulent costumes, revolving set, and an excellent company of flamenco-inspired dancers. I was hooked, and returned the next night for Verdi's *Nabucco*. That production had enough vocal power to blast out the back wall. There was a chorus of 85 (!), which made the cries of the Hebrew slaves for freedom almost unbearably thrilling and poignant. In the showy role of Abigaille, the barrel-shaped Russian soprano Irina Bozhedomova had a shimmering coloratura with dramatic mezzo heft in her bottom notes. Ulrich Hüstebeck's simple, bold design featured huge single pieces – a hanging Menorah, a Babylonian statue, a massive wall of prison bars.

Next was the National Theatre for two incredible productions. Having done my own adaptation, I know *Cyrano de Bergerac* intimately, so I was curious to see it done in Czech. It was sublime, where acting, directing, and design merged in indelible images. *Cyrano* dressed scarecrow-like, a young Bohemian with a floppy hat and ragged clothes, his poetry flowing out of him in whispers rather than declamations. Rageneau's pastry shop, his wife and her lover having furtive sex against a corner wall, while sleepy, flour-covered children nestled like puppies. The bunker at the front morphing into a fourth act war memorial – where a bitter, one-armed LeBret tosses out withered funeral wreaths into the orchestra pit.

Director Hana Buresová's production of Verdi's *Rigoletto* was a revelation. Her continued use of two added silent characters – an adoring father and a little girl in a white dress, who rides a carousel horse topped by a jester mask – immediately grounded the production in a haunting image. Interspersed by scenes of orgies where men in carnival masks pawed near-naked women – very *Eyes Wide Shut* -- it returned you to the central paradox of the implacable tragedy: a man's impossible desire to protect his beloved daughter from the cruelties of patriarchy, whose crimes he participates in. Unforgettable.

(Originally published in *angle: a magazine of arts + culture*, June 2004).

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In the irreverent 1960 musical *The Fantasticks*, by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones (no, not that Tom Jones), we meet a down-on-their-luck, totally unscrupulous team of travelling players: a worn-out Shakespearean actor reminiscent of Henry Irving, and his sidekick. If you look at the dramatis personae, each of these characters is named for their stock role (“The Boy” “The Girl” “The Villain,” etc.): the sidekick is “The Man Who Dies.” He’s an actor, and he performs only death scenes, but is a stage legend, or so he claims. Why, across the ages of theatre’s history, has the stage representation of death and the dead been so... provocative? To investigate this question, the University of Wales, Aberystwyth Department of Theatre, Film, and Television Studies put together a one-day free symposium, held on 1 May. According to the TFTS press release, the symposium will inaugurate a research project, curated by Karoline Gritzner and Professor David Ian Rabey, and “affiliated to UW Aberystwyth CREAM (Centre for Research into Extreme and Alternative Media).” CREAM intends to hold an international conference on the subject at UWA in 2006, and to publish the results of research on this topic.

At the symposium, theory and practice were engagingly woven together. Some papers discussed plays the authors have seen or encountered through textual evidence; in other presentations, theatre artists discussed their own work; and the day concluded with the second performance of the premiere production of playwright and Rabey’s twinned one-acts *Lovefuries*.

As a playwright, I found the symposium topic intriguing, especially as one of my plays begins and ends with a protagonist observing the autopsy of her own abandoned body, unnerving the tormented doctor who may or may not have been indirectly responsible for the suicide of that character, the object of said doctor’s sublimated desire. If one forgets the dialogue, this scenario looks stolen from Richard III’s seduction of Lady Anne across her husband’s coffin, though I never noticed that until seeing it blocked. That said, CREAM’s field of study is new to me, so please bear in mind that this report represents my attempts to piece together my sketchy mere appreciator’s notes. I expect that CREAM would be happy to provide the speakers’ contact information if anyone wants more detailed information about any of the material, and to clarify anything I may have misunderstood.

S/M, GRAND-GUIGNOL, AND SHAKESPEARE

Peter Hands, author of *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror*, lectured on “Hugo, Mirbeau, Grand Guignol and Parisian Theatre.” In a discussion on the Theatre in Wales forum in 2003, someone compared the Grand-Guignol to ‘snuff’ films, provoking one of the site’s characteristically animated and irreverent debates. Hands outlined some of the contexts and conventions of this movement. When the Eiffel Tower was newly constructed, Hands showed, rabidly misogynistic Parisian editorial cartoonists and other commentators became obsessed with the city’s alleged exploitation by (irrationally, not of) its huge number of female prostitutes. These women and Paris’s reputation as the sex tourism capitol of Europe were held to threaten the city’s men, economy, and fame. In their critics’ nightmares, the boundaries of the city, its social systems, and its citizens’ bodies become frighteningly permeable. In this culture’s literature, the perambulations of the archetypal flâneur, or wanderer, take him into the sewers. In such a climate, it is no wonder that the Grand-Guignol, with its combination of sacred and profane traditions, flourished semi-underground. The scripts prescribe spectacles of sadistic violence, usually but not exclusively directed against women, strung together by bare sketches of narrative. However, the performances were highly ritualistic, and often incorporated religious imagery and scenarios, while the theatre building itself was a former chapel. While the ‘snuff theatre’ label isn’t entirely inaccurate, it seems the Grand-Guignol also questioned which rituals, values, icons and institutions really defined Parisian culture.

In “Dying for Love: The Tragicomedy of Shakespeare’s *Cleopatra*,” Robert Wilcher gave a close reading of the cross-signification of morbid and erotic imagery in the conclusion of *Antony and Cleopatra*, focusing on the moment between Cleopatra’s capture and her suicide. In these ill-starred lovers’ world, love can be communicated and experienced only through brushes with death, mourning, and death itself. Wilcher discusses Cleopatra’s negotiations with Caesar and Antony and her reactions to the death of Antony’s wife Fulvia, whom he dismisses as a romantic interest by mourning inadequately. He contextualizes Antony and Cleopatra’s deadly language of love with parallel examples of eroticized death and double-entendre in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. The alternate meaning of the word ‘death’ in Renaissance English has long been understood: *Much Ado About Nothing*’s Benedick makes it clear in his wish to “die in” Beatrice’s “lap.” In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, death itself, rather than the word ‘death’, functions as a dangerous signifier, with results that might be described as horrifically comic and extremely absurd.

In “Visions of Xs: Experiencing La Fura’s *XXX* and Ron Athey’s *Solar Anus*,” Roberta Mock, artistic director of Lusty Juventus Theatre Company, discussed the reception of two these two pieces of sado-masochistic performance erotica. (The first is the 2003 variation on the Marquis de Sade’s *Philosophy of the Bedroom* by the Spanish company La Fura del Baus ‘The Furies from the Sewer’.) Mock’s research explored the widely varying ways in which these performances have been “experienced” interpreted, and categorised by critics of various genres and, in the case of Athey’s piece, in its live and

screen versions. Mock argued that tabloid journalists were unafraid to identify XXX as erotic spectacle for its own sake, and to voice visceral reactions to it. The established theatre critics of the broadsheet papers, on the other hand, proffered vague debates about whether XXX was ‘art’, misinterpreted de Sade’s ideas, and only pretended to have read his Philosophy. Also interesting was the idea that Solar Anus can be understood as Athey’s painful and ecstatic transformation of his body into a human “printing press”—the message becomes the medium.

PLAYWRIGHTS ON DEATH AND EROTICISM

When we represent death or corpses onstage, is it actually death we want to explore? Not necessarily. According to Josette Feral (2002), as Helen Iball quoted in her presentation, “Theatricality as Eroticism, and Recent Attempts on its Life,” theatricality may be defined as ‘the result of a series of cleavages, inscribed by the artist and recognised by the spectator, aimed at making a disjunction of systems of signification, in order to substitute more fluid ones.’ Feral’s theatricality defines the plays of Lucy Gough, Dic Edwards, and Howard Barker, as they revealed in their presentations. Their protagonists, respectively, have included would-be re-animators of the dead, “living corpses”, and an ecstatic necrophiliac. While all of these playwrights confront death as reality as well as metaphor, they argued that their morbid characters and scenarios also become powerfully surreal signifiers of their most vital recurring themes.

For the “living corpses” of Edwards’s *Casanova Undone*, *Utah Blue*, and, most recently, *The Pimp: A Life of Baudelaire*, meta-theatrical attempts at love and other activities usually result in impotence, variously defined. Walking, breathing, talking corpses try to love and act, and fail. Edwards’s studies of this condition enable surreally stylised spectacle as well as incisive studies of deadly and latently necrophiliac ideologies. In “The Dramatic Paradoxes of Sex in the Living Corpse,” Edwards declared that “the living corpse is possible in drama because death can be investigated.” In life, it can’t. By investigating death, the “transformative” art of theatre reflects (upon) itself, given that “the ultimate transformation is death.” Gough’s depictions of death onstage paradoxically communicate a life-force. Like those Native Americans who believe that completing a circle in visual art is blasphemous and asking for trouble, the representation of death onstage can paradoxically resist finality. In “Is There Beauty in the Raggedness of Theatrical Deaths?” Gough revealed that she often uses the image of lovers of the dead to explore struggles for survival. In many of these plays, re-animation or even grief expresses resilience or hope. This theme, Gough showed, runs through her radio and stage dramas, including *The Raft* (of the Medusa), *The Furnace* (after the life and imagination of Charlotte Bronte), *Gryf/Head*, and *Our Lady of the Shadows*. To illustrate her recollections, Gough shared some scenes from her work, on recordings and stage-read by two actors.

Finally, Barker (*Victory*, *Brutopia*, *The Twelfth Battle of Isonzo*) argued that, prior to his *Gertrude/The Cry*, no canonical drama had represented what he considered the ultimate taboo: a character depicted in orgasm with a corpse, as suggested by the facial expression depicted in the Renaissance sculptor Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Barker argued that, in this sculpture, spectacles of extreme ‘passion’ in the dying and living figures are paralleled and combined. It is an ideal tragedy, if a static one, because tragedy, when effective, “brings us closer to death than society wishes us to come.” This is why tragedy, though older than social realism, remains more radical and rare. Barker aimed to achieve Bernini’s effect in *Gertrude*, having found it in no existing tragedy. I wasn’t convinced that *Gertrude* is the only tragedy of necrophiliac spectacle in the English-language canon. Juliet’s last soliloquy in *Romeo and Juliet* fits that description, as I pointed out to Barker and he conceded in a letter kindly written a few days after the symposium.

LOVEFURIES

That evening, in the first play of *Lovefuries*, titled *The Contracting Sea*, the fiancée (Antoinette Walsh) of a just-shipwrecked sailor splits schizophrenically into two characters: the distraught, Gothically maudlin, self-repressed Morgana and the Maenad-like Elisheba, siren-like sexy personification of the seductive and homicidal sea, which, we find, “contracts” in two senses of the word. This takes place on a seaside promontory in the actress’s native Ireland, but the time setting is unidentifiable. Rabey’s romanticised language places this fantasy in the world of Yeats’ plays—but without Yeats’s nationalist allegories, or some of the early works of Brian Friel. I kept hearing parallels with the suicidal Grace Hardy’s monologue in Friel’s shocking and lyrical *Faith Healer* (1981). However, I felt that in Rabey’s play, some archetypes (or stereotypes) remained types, and never burst into a full-fledged character or unpredictable story. These include bride/madwoman; life-instinct/death-instinct; and, in the costumes, the biblical binary of drab, veiled female masochist and crimson-corseted sadistic dancer/harlot. I’m not trying to impose p.c. upon Rabey’s avowedly a-ideologically (not that this is really possible) work, but to note that stock types are predictable and predictability can become boring. Nevertheless, *The Contracting Sea* was mesmerisingly acted and beautifully designed, with an original jazz score by Paula Gardiner.

The second play, *The Hanging Judge*, was more conflict-driven and original. As in the first play, the character, played by Gareth Potter, has just been traumatised by a lover’s death and is deliberating suicide. By deconstructing a Lewis Carroll

rhyme, he figuratively resurrects the ghost of his horrid mother and the men whose abuse of her child she enabled. If this sounds fatalist and whingeing, it's not. The title involves a really neat prismatic double-entendre, which I can't explain without giving away the big secrets. The character's struggle is fierce, suspenseful, and genuinely surprising in its outcome. The set, made of scaffolding and a great deal of real dirt, was interesting but unnecessary, as Rabey's words create their own atmosphere, and could have been performed just as effectively in extremely minimalist settings.

There was something very unnerving about spending an entire day listening to dialogue and monologues concerning the theatrics of death and eroticism, especially when outside the Parry-Williams building the newspapers were carrying photos of the torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi POWs, some of which have since been found to be ineptly staged optical illusions.

The symposium was a great success, and I will be thinking about the issues raised for some time to come. In any case, I've decided to be less apologetic about the play with the avenging spirit at the autopsy. Its living/corpse character seems to have a lot of inspiring company.

(This article first appeared in Theatre in Wales, at www.theatre-wales.co.uk)

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PARIS INTERVIEW:
CANADIAN PLAYWRIGHT FLORENCE GIBSON – by Elena Kaufman

June 25, 2004

Last month in Paris, I had the pleasure of meeting the playwright Florence Gibson. We sat in a window table at cafe Panis and feasted our eyes on Notre Dame Cathedral, looming up in front of us. Our discussion meandered over the English theatre scene in Paris and Toronto, and the promotion of Canadian plays in Europe.

EK: *Describe your path into playwriting.*

FG: I was living in the East African bush, no running water, no electricity, and by the light of a hurricane lamp I spent my evenings writing. I have always written, but while I was there, it became a Joan of Arc thing: I heard voices, i.e. dialogue. That was what excited me most, not prose, or narrative, but the spark and crackle that occurs when two or more people speak. So I just followed my instincts and stuck to dialogue and, realizing that this is the voice of theatre, I began to teach myself about plays. I had no experience or training in theatre, or the arts, so it was a long road, one which took me a long time to both feel and find acceptance. When I came back to Canada, I started sending plays to, and getting them roundly rejected by, Toronto theatres. It was Dennis Sweeting at the Kawartha Summer Theatre in Lindsay Ontario in the late eighties who first took a one act of mine and did a workshop-reading for a week. It was my first step; it felt like walking on air.

Since then, all my work has premiered in Toronto, in small companies and the Fringe to begin with, and later at Factory Theatre, where I am now playwright in residence.

EK: *The themes in your work deal with displacement, and cross-cultural identity crises which draw on inherently women's issues such as, the black women's right to vote in America and the adoption trade of Roma babies in post-Communist Romania. What draws you to these particular themes?*

FG: I think everything I write comes from a core of unresolved conflicts, things I want to work out for myself. **Belle** arose out of my need to understand the complex race politics that were crippling the two women's health centres where I was working, here in Toronto in the late nineties. I read bell hooks' **Ain't I a Woman?** and found a time and place in American history that illuminated the intersection of racism and sexism from a black woman's perspective. With **Home is My Road**, the core goes back even further. I had a friend who gave birth to a very sick baby. The baby was whisked away to a far-off children's hospital for surgery, and she had to bind her breasts and not feed or touch her child for several weeks in its sterilized incubator. I gave birth to my first daughter a month later, and spent my entire post-partum depression weeping for my friend, because I could not conceive of not holding my child in my arms. That was over twenty years ago. When I look

at the cultural genocide that occurs with the Roma (Gypsy) people through the practice of international adoption, I have to ask, why should a woman give up her child for culturally imposed, race, economic and political reasons? It strikes at the heart and soul of female culture.

EK: *Your first produced play **Belle** was an enormous hit at the famed Factory Theatre in Toronto, having a run in 2000 and a remount in 2001. Then it went on to the National Arts Centre to rave reviews, and was picked up by The Gate Theatre in London in 2001. How did it get the foreign attention?*

FG: Joanne MacInnes, a Canadian actor living in London at the time, brought **Belle** to the attention of the artistic director at The Gate.

EK: *Do you feel that your voice as a Canadian playwright becomes more 'distinctive' when taken out of the country? Did you get feedback from these directors that suggests that your work has a Canadian flavour, so to speak?*

FG: I think an aspect that did not travel 'across the pond' was not so much Canadian context as a knowledge of slave experience. The Factory production and remount was comfortable with exploring it, but England is not in touch with that aspect of its cultural history, and that made it a tough sell. Conversely, I think Toronto audiences and critics were unable to accept well known Canadian actors playing the parts of Roma in **Home is My Road**. It suffered from the Thompson Highway experience; p.c. in theatres has gone to extreme lengths in Canada. The needs of plays and productions that look at the cross-cultural experience are enormously complex.

EK: *What is your motivation for marketing your work in Europe? How was the response to a female writer from Canada and was there ever an issue of: why did you cross the border with your work?*

FG: My reason for looking to Europe for productions of **Home is My Road** is to find Roma actors and directors. The issue of 'cultural appropriation' is often raised- very politely, usually by white people! But even they are getting more comfortable with the exploration of cultural interface, and I know one of the best ways to do this is through the female cultural perspective. The feminine has always transcended patriarchal socioeconomic and political boundaries; we make it hard for them to justify atrocities and oppression, to think simplistically.

My plays are complex, requiring that you enter moment to moment on many levels. People can challenge themselves to think pluralistically, but it takes time. I don't think of it as a female way of thinking; it implies men can't do it, and they can. And it implies women do, and lots don't. Moving my plays is like anything else, one step at a time. I send a query letter, arrange a meeting, go to the meeting prepared and deliver my pitch. Ninety-five percent of this is rejection, or coming to a halt on the road, i.e. "Loved your play, but it's not for us. Do keep sending us your work." So I do. But you can't take it personally, that's the road to self-annihilation.

EK: *What was your experience communicating in another language with Tony Gatlif while in France. Are you bilingual?*

FG: I'm not bilingual, so I talked to Roma film director Tony Gatlif through a translator. I cannot tell you how I longed to be bilingual, just to speak to a man whose work I admire so much! He said he would arrange for a translation of **Home is My Road** into French, so I am waiting on that, but also exploring a connection through the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris.

EK: *You mentioned the importance of authentic casting, in wanting Roma actors to play in **Home is My Road**. Do you suppose this specific playability will limit, or enhance your work when marketing it abroad?*

FG: I think first productions in a new country are pivotal, you can't market poor reviews. But you can't control productions either. I have learned, you can't sweat it. I have other plays to write.

EK: *On the business side of things, what have you learned from your experience face-to-face with producers in London and Paris?*

FG: Theatre struggles everywhere. It is one of the most difficult art forms to master, the writing, the collaborative process, the ephemeral nature of each and every production- all the reasons I am in it in the first place!

EK: *Did your visits to these two cities spark any ideas for new plays?*

FG: Traveling to London and Paris, cultural hubs full of icons and deities, is always inspirational, and I never know what subterranean streams will begin to flow as a result. To revisit Notre Dame and see those gargoyles again, hurling their abuse: the church is full of hell, it was reassuring to see that.

(Note: this interview was conducted by email, after her return to Canada.)

Elena Kaufman, Paris, FRANCE
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FLORENCE GIBSON- PRODUCTIONS:

- 1991 Elevator: Toronto and Edmonton Fringe Festivals, 1991; Winnipeg Fringe, 1995; Theatreworks, Victoria, BC, 1997, The Curtain Club, Toronto, 2002.
- 1993 Take Care of Me: Poor Alex Theatre, Toronto.
- 1997 Augury: Nightwood Groundswell Festival; International Women Playwrights Conference, Ireland.
- 1999 A Man Like Me: feature film, screen play.
- 2000 Belle: Factory Theatre, Toronto; Gate Theatre, London, England, 2001; Factory Theatre/NAC, Ottawa, 2002; Juilliard School, New York, 2004.
- 2001 Missing You, (Love): CBC Radio drama.
- 2002 Stout, a novel.(in progress)
- 2002 A Recipe for Tomato Butter: Sept. 11th CBC Radio Drama.
- 2003 Home is My Road: Factory Theatre, Toronto.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS, ACTIVITIES, GRANTS:

- *Playwrights Guild, Writers Guild and Writers Union of Canada.
- *Playwrights Canada Press, founding member, 2001.
- *Play Creation Group, Canadian Stage, 1994, 1997, 1999.
- *OAC Playwright Recommendor funding: Nightwood Theatre; Cahoots Theatre Projects; Blyth Festival; Canadian Stage; Tarragon Theatre.
- *Canada Council Grants: Belle and Emily Stowe, 1996; Home Is My Road and Missing, 2002.
- *Playwright in Residence, Tarragon Theatre, 1996 - 1997; Bluewater Summer Playhouse, 2001; Factory Theatre, 2001 - 2004.
- *Toronto Arts Council Award, 2000, Home Is My Road.

PUBLICATIONS:

- *Taking the Stage; Selections from Plays by Canadian Women, Playwrights Canada Press, 1994.
- *Another Perfect Piece: Monologues from Canadian Plays, Playwrights Canada Press, 1995.
- *Belle, Playwrights Canada Press, 2000.
- *Home is My Road, Playwrights Canada Press, 2003.
- *She Speaks; Monologues by Canadian Women, ed. Judith Thompson, Playwrights Canada Press, 2004.

AWARDS:

- *First Prize, 11th Annual Short Grain Contest, 1999, Dramatic Monologue, Riding the Roller Coaster; Shortlist, Lamia Ink, N.Y.
- *Shortlist, British Council New International Playwriting Awards, 1996, Belle.
- *Runner up, Praxis Screenwriting Awards 1999, A Man Like Me.
- *Dora Nomination, Outstanding New Play, 2000, Belle.
- *Chalmers Award, Outstanding New Play, 2001, Belle.
- *Canadian Authors Association Award, 2004, Home is My Road.

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DIRECTING MY PLAY(S) – Miriam F. d’Amato



Miriam D’Amato

[Photographer: Robert Kipp, Marblehead, Mass.]

The Play:

“The Table for Two,” a one-act with two scenes, was part of the Playwrights’ Platform Festival of New Plays and was produced on June 3, 4, 5 in Boston. It is set in Brandon House, a retirement living facility, and has the following cast:

- Joan Belsen (70+, single, resident of Brandon House, lively and attractive);
- Helen Reardon (50s, manager of Brandon House, business-like);
- Bill Collins (70+, widower, new resident of Brandon House, brusque);
- Ruth Danson (70+, resident of Brandon House, wife of Eliot, quiet, pretty);
- Eliot Danson (70+, resident of Brandon House, husband of Ruth, suave).

Casting:

Joan, Ruth, and Helen were easily cast; none of them were 70+, but they all volunteered to make up for the performance. But male actors over 70—or willing to play the part of a man over 70? Some responses:

“No time. I’m working two jobs.”

“I couldn’t learn the lines in the time we’ve got.”

“I live in X (30 miles from Boston) and have no car.”

“I just took a new job that keeps me busy on weekends.”

“I’ll be in California.”

“I don’t look old enough.”

No return call(s).

An emergency notice on *Theatre Mirror* website was answered by a wonderful Bill, and a friend called to recommend an Eliot as “golden,” which he was. We had three weeks for rehearsal. Our time was limited because I teach two evenings a week and Ruth was in another play that was just finishing its run. The only director I knew and trusted was playing Joan, so I decided to direct myself. After all, I knew the script, it was well-cast, and it was only one act. Also, I had worked with actors for a reading of this one. So what could be so difficult?

Directing:

First rehearsal: Eliot was out of town, only one cast member was sure of the lines, Ruth announced that she couldn’t be at the second rehearsal, Bill said he couldn’t make the tech, and I found out I didn’t know how to direct a play.

The only ideas I had were that the women’s conversations should click along while the men’s negotiations should be more deliberate, and that the final picture should be the women on one side, the men on the other, before their final coming together at the end. Other than that, I didn’t have a clue. I didn’t know enough to ask what each actor thought about the character, and I hesitated to interrupt speeches or movements. Once in a while, I moved people around. I tried to answer the cast members’ questions about the weight of certain points, the effectiveness of particular stage business, the timing of lines. “You wrote it, so you must know,” Joan said.

I learned that directing is not holding a script and making sure no actor blocks another. Directing is finding out more about what the play says. It’s watching, listening, and asking. It’s communicating your vision to the cast while allowing their interpretations to contribute. It’s trust and respect.

I found out that when a play goes into rehearsal, the playwright needs time to revise, even when the play has been given a reading. Fortunately, my cast comprised professional, hard-working actors. Eliot needed to cover a long walk across a wide stage with no lines, so we changed a movement; Helen suggested crying instead of losing her temper on page 16, so I rewrote page 5 to set it up; Joan added comedic touches, such as making Bill a magnet for her attention, I hadn’t known enough to ask for; Ruth suggested (rightly) that her gentle protest in one scene would be better expressed by silence than a line I had written; Bill invented business and rephrased his conversations to emphasize key points.

Our rehearsal space was small, which cramped stage business and confused the timing, but by the second rehearsal, just before Memorial Day weekend, the actors were more certain of their lines and characters. They volunteered to rehearse on the Monday of the holiday weekend, and Bill found us a real stage. We built a play.

The three performances went very well. We were tied for audience choice of best play.

Afterwards:

The week before the “Table” performance, I was notified that my 12-minute play, “The Recital,” had been chosen to be part of “Short Takes,” a festival sponsored by the Arlington Friends of the Drama. New cast, new play, and I decided to direct again. Joan had suggested I get Alan Ayckbourn’s *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, which I bought and read in one evening. Two usable points (so far): (1) Don’t give the actors too much at once, and (2) A choice made by the actor is worth five imposed by the director (an idea I had already formulated).

Despite a short rehearsal time (evidently a part of festivals!), and despite a key character’s absence at the first rehearsal (evidently a part of last-minute planning), we took the time to talk. An advantage was that with the 12-minute play, we got a lot more done in two or three hours than with the 30-minute one act.

“The Recital” had been given two readings, so my vision was clear. But instead of imposing it on the actors, I listened first, then presented a few (very few) ideas. They read it. Instead of telling the young wife to “say it this way,” I asked her why she thought the character would say it. I rejected some suggestions and accepted others. I asked for advice about some dialogue and changed lines. I let them go again, we talked, and they did it a third time. At the second rehearsal (with the full cast), they were “into it.” The young husband, trying to comfort his wife, suggested he kneel by her chair when he reassured her, which was sweet and tender; the elderly man sank heavily and gratefully into his chair at just the right point (his choice) after he spent his energy on an impassioned speech. Our performance is June 25 and 26, and I know it will be moving and wonderful.

Doing these plays taught me much about playwrighting. “You wrote it, so you must know,” an actor had said. But sometimes I didn’t, and I had to find out. Building a scene, using conversation *and* movement (or no movement), giving actors physical freedom (to kneel, to stand, to quiver, to freeze) to express the characters and their interrelationships—these require the playwright to know.

I’ll keep writing plays—better ones, I think—and I may even direct another one some day.

Miriam F. d’Amato, Winthrop, Massachusetts, USA
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Miriam F. d’Amato has been a writer for over 40 years, an English teacher for 33, an editor for 20, and a playwright for 5. Her first produced play, “A Noodle Kugel for Company,” a senior citizens’ love story, was part of the Playwrights’ Platform Summer Festival 1999, was named first runner-up in the 2003 Eileen Heckart Drama for Seniors Competition, and is currently being performed in Seattle. Her one-act “The Table for Two,” was part of the 2004 Playwrights’ Platform Summer Festival on June 4,5,6, and was tied for audience choice of best play for that weekend. Her 12-minute play “The Recital,” the story of one pianist beginning his career and another facing the end of his, was part of the Arlington Friends of the Drama 1st Annual Short Play Festival, “Short Takes,” on June 25 and 26, 2004.

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FIRST READINGS OF A WORK – Kim Kelly



“THE PLAYWRIGHT’S PROCESS”

Staged reading of plays-in-progress by 10 playwrights, members of DFW Playwrights’ Alliance. Sponsored by Ground Zero Theatre Company. Pictured left to right-Carol Rice, Kathleen Vaught, James Venhaus, Barbara Macchia, Don Barbee, Gary Swaim, Isabella Russell-Ides, Kim Kelly

One of the most feared and yet beneficial stages a work must pass through is that first (or maybe many) readings. Here in Dallas it is now en vogue to stage or semi-stage a play. Usually with only two or three read-throughs. This puts enormous pressure on the actors and the director. Be warned, if a director chooses to go that direction and because of actor-driven characterization, it may be difficult for the audience to give accurate feedback to you on the WORDS. First readings, to be most beneficial for the playwright should be table readings.

If that is what you want, be very clear about it. If it’s just to hear the words, this type of reading gives the audience no choice but to glean theme, plot and relationships totally from your words.,

The moderated discussion after a reading has taken place will give you tons of good information. Luckily, I was tutored by a playwriting teacher who had led this kind of discussion for years and advised me well. What he said was that the playwright is not there to answer questions. The audience is there to answer yours. It is best to inform the audience of this beforehand so that they are prepared and don't get belligerent if their questions aren't addressed. That can happen, but only after you have your answers.

In Dallas, the readings I have attended have placed the playwright and the director onstage and immediately encouraged the audience to ask questions of the playwright. It has been my observation that the playwright gets very little from this and the audience manages to mine the playwright's mind in order to tie the play to a "real" experience.

I have also found this feedback session most useful when the actors are not onstage. There are several reasons for this. Most of the actor-driven feedback I get while in rehearsal.

It is very valuable and happens "in the moment" when an actor says a line and then turns to me and asks: "what does that mean?" or "this doesn't feel right". That's when actor-driven adjustments are made. If the actors are onstage after a reading, they take focus instead of your questions taking focus. If you have the combination of a very good actor as protagonist, then the audience will focus on her most of the time. The rest of the actors have very little to say and I think it's a waste of their time. If they want to remain after and join the audience, then they also have the opportunity to answer your questions – from a different perspective.

I ask the director to moderate and ask the questions. He/she knows the piece and can also join in the discussion. I give the director a list of my questions and then we are onstage together. The session should last no more than 45 minutes or the audience get antsy. So 7-8 questions from you will spark enough thought and discussion to carry you to that time frame. Once you get YOUR questions answered, the audience may ask you questions, if you wish, but it's not necessary for this session to be very beneficial for you.

I like to approach my questions from a character-relationship perspective because I'm a character-driven writer. "Was the relationship between Jane and John believable?". If you are a situation-driven writer, then your questions would reflect that. Specific questions can also lead to a more general discussion. There is no right answer to a question but watch the auditor's body language. If most people nod agreement or audibly say "uh huh" then you have your answer. If they grimace or begin arguing with another audience member, pay attention – this is very useful information. It is wonderful when they forget you are there and begin discussing the play amongst themselves. Then you can watch and take notes. By the way, it's good to take notes even though you may be taping the session, which I highly recommend. No matter how seasoned you are, you will learn things when you play it back.

This kind of moderated discussion has been very beneficial for me and leads me forward in the re-write or the finishing of the play. The audience can be made up of your friends but encourage them to bring someone you don't know – oftentimes they will give you some of the best information. Your friends don't want to hurt or offend you – strangers have no vested interest.

Be sure to thank the audience for their time and input into your project and invite them back for another reading. Everyone likes to be a part of a creation, even if it's not theirs.

Kim Kelly, Dallas, Texas, USA
(playwright@bigplanet.com)

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FROM STAGE PLAY TO NOVEL – Ludmilla Bollow

Once written, plays can take on varied lives. Some can be dissected into separate monologues, scenes lifted and made into short plays, and short plays made longer. But converting a stage play into a novel is a circuitous route, which I've recently undertaken.

Way back, in the late 70s -- height of the women's movement, I found an old medical book at a country sale, *PLAIN HOME TALK*, published in 1857. This was an all-encompassing medical book and the healing bible in many homes at that time. As I read, I found the contents so fascinating, so bizarre, yet so believable, there was a compelling force to communicate all these once-credible doctrines into a wonderful work of fiction. My primary mission was to recreate this special time in

medical history, record the stultifying attitudes toward women, while in the same process reveal the even more spectacular marvels taking place in the hearts of two dissimilar personalities. My forte was playwriting, and I set about to write a play incorporating all that was already mapped out in this book, with the doctor as a main character. One of his patients, Yana, a gypsy artist, would be the main/opposing character.

In August of 1979, while vacationing in Vermont, I began the first draft on a yellow pad -- "*DR. ZASTRO'S SANITARIUM-- For the Ailments of Women-- Mental, Physical & Sexual*". Six women, two men, one set, with insets. A year later I had a reading in my Wisconsin home, followed by encouraging comments. Upon sending the play to theatres, more good comments. But many were afraid to stage such a bizarre story of unorthodox medical treatment -- electricity and hypnotism. A Georgia theatre thought it too risqué. Yet, there was enough intrigue circulating to keep me working and reworking. Weren't they spouting -- "Theatres are looking for that out-of- the-ordinary play!"

The 1980 Aspen Playwright's Conference wrote: "an unusual play, we're keeping it for further study." In 1981 it won Honorable Mention in SouthEastern Theatre's New Play Contest. Then nothing more.

Here, I had this trunk full of research, material on medicine of that era, plus gypsies and women artists. Playwriting was lagging, and I thought, hmm, why not try a novel, which seemed a monumental task. But all the characters, the plot, the research were already there. I didn't have to begin from square one.

Writing a novel from a play was invigorating. I wasn't hemmed in by staging or sets. I could describe my characters in detail, and knew actors wouldn't change that perspective. But the biggest blessing was, I already had most of the dialogue. Yahoo! I worked on it, chapter by chapter. Switching viewpoints almost each chapter (viewpoint is not something you have to even consider when writing plays). I could go into detail about the love scenes, as explicit as I wished. The medical lectures were mostly lifted from the book, already in the language of that era. But when I got to the last scene of the play, I found I didn't want the story to end there anymore, I wanted it to go on. Plus, it didn't need to be limited to two stage hours or less. I didn't have to worry about sets, costumes or how many actors would need to be paid. It was a new freedom in writing.

I continued the ending into another realm for the story, a different kind of writing, because I had let go of the play and began taking these novel characters onto a whole other plane. I read it aloud, chapter by chapter, at my monthly meeting of my writers group. Feedback and much interest there. Even when finished -- it kept being rewritten, especially the beginning and the end, as important in novels as in plays.

My first query was to Knopf Publishers. Wow! Judith B. Jones, Editor, asked to see the whole novel -- I was on my way, or so I thought. "I think you've come up with an original premise for a novel, but--" I queried more agents, more publishers. Many had good comments, but that always conclusive,"but--". After awhile, I thought, why bother anymore. It was easier to write plays, get them put on, than to get a first time novel published. Cheaper also to send out play scripts than the complete 400 page novel (when asked) or even the first 50 pages. Well, at least the story wouldn't age.

I worked on the play once more, shortening the name and play. In 1999, Kings College in Nova Scotia was looking for a play with more women than men and performed "*DR. ZASTRO'S SANITARIUM*" as their main stage production. I had e-mail exchanges, a beautiful poster, program and varied reviews. That same year, the script had a staged reading at the Secret Rose Theatre, North Hollywood, CA, with varied comments. In 2000 it was a finalist in the New Harmony Project.

This year, 2004, when cleaning out things -- there sat the novel. All that work, I thought, and here it wastes away in the trunk. No one will ever read this fascinating story. I even thought of self-publishing, so I could put it behind me. It would be there for my family at least.

Earlier this year, Kristan Ryan of ICWP, mentioned she had a novel published. I ordered her book (great!) and wrote her how lucky she was to be published, as I had a first novel languishing for years. She recommended I query a new publisher, Behler Publications, which I did, expecting the usual rejection. The editor was impressed, asked to see the whole book-- and termed it "a beautifully written novel" and other words which swelled my heart.

The contract was signed and at this point, we are now working on the cover and the final edits. Edits -- novels are handled in a totally different manner than a play script. Plays have directors or actors who might make suggestions, ask for cuts or additions. But no one criticizes your grammar or punctuation, or asks you to use different words or phrases. Your characters might use bad grammar, but none permitted outside the dialogue. I had a wonderful editor, Karen Novak, a published novelist herself. Of course, we had differences of opinion, (our precious words), but I respected her suggestions, and it was a new experience, having your work gone over by an expert, word by word, page by page. I had to get rid of lots of adverbs.

Many exclamation points (they are like extra words in my play scripts). Repetition of words (even pages apart) were frowned on. My play script had all the southern dialect spelled out, so actors could easily pronounce them. Not in a novel - too difficult for the reader to sound out when reading, I was told. Spell them in plain English! But I know it is a much better piece of work, enhanced by two minds, seeking the ultimate in a story, and words to be read, not seen.

After signing with them, Behler put up on their web page "Behler signs noted playwright". Playwrights were termed notable? A first for me.

I can't wait to see the final product -- almost the same anticipation as awaiting the opening of a new play. Only, I won't be there among the audience, they will be reading it one by one. There will not be the theatre family at the opening. But it's a fitting turn in the road for this literary work. And the play can still be performed. Book readings held.

Now, as to the movie -- No, I don't think I want to begin writing movies, but then, never say "never" about the pathway of your plays.

Ludmilla Bollow, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA
(bollow@earthlink.net)

Ludmilla Bollow: "I live in Milwaukee Wisconsin, and have worked with various theatres in the area, the most recent, was Combat Theatre. I'm also a member of the Wisconsin Council for Writers and was a judge for a playwriting contest for the UW-Madison Union (Wisconsin) in Jan. 2004."

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THEATRE – Poile Sengupta

Much of what I say about my writing for the stage will sound like a complaint. I really do not want it to sound that way because I find drama fascinating. So fascinating that much of my everyday thinking is in terms of memorable dialogue and dramatic exits. Difficult for the family but I think they have gotten used to it and don't pay much attention to any Shakespearean moves from me. Alas! Poor Fool !

I write in English in a country that uses more languages and dialects than can be counted. English is read and spoken by only a small fraction of a population of over a billion people - though that itself makes for an enormous number. We in our immediate family speak about half a dozen languages between us. This linguistic richness is, I suppose, unique to us Indians and I feel very proud of it. Unfortunately, not many share this pride and especially if it concerns writing in English and writing drama! Damned! Damned! Damned! Thrice damned. (See I am doing it again. The drama.)

So I find I am not published and I have to be very, very humble when I want my plays staged. Then, when some sponsor comes up, I have to call up and actually invite people to see the play as if it were my wedding. If there is an audience, it usually grumbles about the traffic, the rain and the bad seats. And it never says anything good about the production if it can help it . The press tries very hard not to be anywhere about, so there is hardly any review of theatre.

I must confess that it isn't all that bad but pretty nearly so. I am not sure why a visit to the theatre is not a welcome feature in the life of the urban Indian. Reading does not seem to be important either. What audiences seem to like are dramatic shows that holler money and use huge gadgety backstage stuff or mammoth sets. For me drama is the power of the spoken word, the heard music and the interplay between action and stillness. A production is the coming together of many facets of human talent to create thoughts on stage. To me, theatre is the sparking of electricity between the cast, the crew and the audience, when speech and silence - the action and the stillness are fused into an unforgettable experience.

It happens. Even here. Even in English theatre in India. I have seen people come out after a play of mine asking: how did she know what happened to me? I have heard children singing the lyrics of my children's play in the washroom. I have heard the audience gasp. And that is probably the greatest tribute for a playwright.

But it is so little. So little for having written eight full length plays for adults and seven short pieces plus a full length play for children. Serious drama, a comedy, a murder mystery, a musical, a radio play... I have done them all.

I love the theatre. That is my only defence.

Poile Sengupta, New Delhi, INDIA (poile@vsnl.com)

FEMFEST! PLAYS BY WOMEN FOR EVERYONE – Hope McIntyre

Our second FemFest will run October 23rd – 30th, 2004 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Founded by Sarasvati Productions (named for the Indic Goddess of inspiration and great change), a Winnipeg-based theatre company, FemFest's goal is to showcase the work of women playwrights, both established and emerging artists from across Canada. The premiere of FemFest in June of 2004 was an overwhelming success. There was a lot to learn, being the first time organizing an event of this magnitude, but the response from the artists involved was positive and unilaterally in favor of continuing the event. This year we chose to expand by also presenting work from other companies in Canada and doing two readings of works in development. There seems to be a growing awareness of the continued disparity in Canadian theatre. A straw survey of last year's mainstage seasons revealed that women's work is averaging at about 17%. As a side note, I am currently chair of the Playwrights Guild of Canada Women's Caucus and we are in the early stages of organizing a new study into the Status of Women in Canadian Theatre in partnership with Nightwood Theatre (Canada's main feminist theatre company). In the midst of all this dialogue, FemFest seems like a way to celebrate rather than dwell on the dismal numbers. We hope that it will provide a network for the artists, showcase their work and lead to future productions, and get women artists into the consciousness of producers, media and audiences.

We began the process with an open call to playwrights across the country. One way that it would be nice to see the festival grow in the future is by including something from the international arena as well. We run things on a tight budget and with minimal technical/production elements. Funding is always a challenge. Canada is moving towards a dependency on sponsorship and corporate funding for theatre and believe me FemFest is not an easy sell to corporations where the majority of the Board of Directors and Executives continue to be male. We are fortunate though to have the support of the City of Winnipeg through the Winnipeg Arts Council, as well as some funding from the Winnipeg Foundation.

We are excited to see if the second year can bring in larger audiences and create a wave on a national scale. Maybe this year I won't have to answer the question: "Why do you need a festival for women?"

FemFest 2004 will include:

Martha in the Corner by Jessica Lychak (Calgary, AB): A powerful piece exploring a young girl's fixation on food and her body.

Recess by Corrina Hodgson (Guelph, ON): The gritty reality of the cruelty and emotional violence displayed by young girls.

It's All the Rage by Eufemia Fantetti (Vancouver, BC): Remember the Avon Lady, well Beatrice does and has modeled her life accordingly.

Gender Play by Christina Starr (Toronto, ON): Are male and female social constructions, do we know from birth or are we cast in to roles that we then must play?

The Story of Deborah by Sara Arenson (Winnipeg, MB): Sarah, A gung-ho psychology grad student, is determined to save Emma – "the world's most famous moron".

Les Ombres Chinoises by Lise Gaboury Diallo (Winnipeg, MB): Shadows of the past reflect the things that one does not want to admit. To be performed in French.

Produced by Natasha MacLellan

Deserving Treats by Natasha MacLellan (Halifax, NS): Hot chocolate and a fantasy about the guy at the next table, just a typical morning at the coffee shop.

Produced by Theatre Utopia

Put your money where your Mouth is by Dawn L. Ford (Calgary, AB): One woman's journey as she quests for the perfect lip color to represent her inner self, and tackles the biggest lipstick counter in the whole world!

As well as readings of:

Bond Night by Alison McLean (Winnipeg, MB): The male counterpart to last year's "Chick Night", what happens when the men all get together.

Life is Good Again by Robyn Read (Guelph, ON): A poetic exploration of how much control we exercise in our own lives.

In addition there will be dramaturgical sessions for playwrights, a workshop on body image and writing the body, a panel on self-producing and an Open Mic night.

Please feel free to contact us if you want more information.

Hope McIntyre, Winnipeg, Manitoba, CANADA
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REPORT FROM WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS INTERNATIONAL:
MANILA, NOVEMBER 2003 (PART ONE) – Monica Raymond

Thanks to the ICWP for a small grant which helped me to get to WPI Manila, to Amy Merrill who asked me for these articles and served as their editor. These articles originally appeared in the Marquee, the on-line journal of StageSource (www.stagesource.org.) a membership organization for New England theater makers.

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A fifteen year old girl receives a marriage proposal from the mayor's son, but she herself has no power to accept or refuse. It is up to her father, and while the marriage would bring great merit to the family, the young girl doesn't want it. As she protests to her grandmother, the old woman drifts into the past, confusing the young girl's possible engagement with her own forced marriage many years before.

A folk tale? A scene from a newly rediscovered Renaissance play? No, it's from Jehanne Mutin's contemporary play Kapanowkaw-tokaw. The title refers to one of the stages of the wedding engagement among the Maranao, a Muslim tribe in Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines. In the West we think of Islam as a latecomer, but in the Philippines, where Muslims arrived before Christians, the several different Muslim tribes seem to be viewed with other beleaguered indigenous tribes struggling to retain their culture. Kapanowkaw-tokaw was acted in Maranao (with English explanations), a language which even the other Filipinos at the conference did not know. The antique scenario was preceded by a state-of-the-art computer slide show about Moro (Moorish) culture in Mindanao, accompanied by a bouncy soundtrack of indigenous music.

It was my first day at the 6th conference of Women Playwrights International, an organization of women playwrights worldwide, in Manila. WPI has been meeting every three years since its first conference in 1988 in Buffalo, and a couple of the women I met--the British/Canadian playwright Margaret Hollingsworth, and Lynn Hughes, affiliated with WOW Cafe in New York, had been to every single one. This was WPI's first meeting in Asia, and a small grant from the International Center for Women Playwrights had helped me go. Mornings were devoted to speakers and workshops, while in afternoon sessions, women had an hour to present a bit of their work and take questions and comments.

I had already missed the morning speech by La Mama's Ellen Stewart trying to mail my manuscript to the Boston Marathon. Though it was reputed to be open till noon, the outdoor postal kiosk in the neighborhood by the hostel where I'd spent the night had shut down for the day when I got there. Not enough business, a man at a neighboring stall explained. So this breakout session in a carpeted windowless room of Manila's Trader's Hotel was my first taste of WPI. I'd chosen the session because the first piece was Sandra de Helen's *Witch*; de Helen's was one of the other ICWP attendees.

Witch turned out to be based on a true story: several years earlier lesbian-feminist scholar Rosemary Curb had been turned down for a deanship when the hiring university learned that she practiced wicca and sometimes staged rituals for her classes. De Helen added a daughter-in-law who imagines a satanic cult, and a son who's threatened with losing his job as well. Curb was there and, now a dean at the University of Wisconsin, she seemed to enjoy playing her own strait-laced supervisor. The room was full of an odd mix: feminist academics from Australia and the States, bulky and voluble; quieter professional Filipino women; and, in the back, a row of T'boli women in native dress, colorful striped handwoven vests over full skirts, with heavy chainlink belts jingling over their hips.

The middle piece of that first session was by Bebot Rodil, a slight, self-effacing Filipina who teaches literature at the University of Mindanao. Set in a displaced person's camp, her scene illustrated her experience helping release traumatic emotions through the body. In the West, Rodil said, people try to work through emotions through talking. "We don't have time for that." Her actors began reading in a stilted English and then switched to Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines (pronounced Ta-GAH-lug, with the accent on the second syllable, by the way, not like tag-a-long, the way it looks.) The difference was amazing; the acting became brighter, louder, more commanding, and the scene found its rhythm. And watching the actress who played a traumatized woman eventually release her grief in keening and shrieks was moving even if I didn't know exactly what was going on.

Then came Kapanowkaw-tokaw. A couple of Mutin's friends, fluent in Maranao, had been recruited to read. First, we had line-to-line translations into English. Then gradually, those subsided into brief English synopses before or after each scene, and somehow, that was a relief. What was happening was mysterious but had its own momentum. In the talk-back, Mutin, fluent in English and wearing black slacks, a white open-necked shirt, and no headscarf, explained "We want to keep what's good about our culture, and let the rest go." Happily, the play had ended with the heroine's father supporting his daughter to stay in school and become a doctor; he had turned down the mayor's son's proposal.

This play, (along with two T'boli ones on the final day of the conference) was the result of a project of Women Playwrights International Philippines. Experienced women theatre artists had gotten government support to go into indigenous communities and teach playwriting to women. While the Maranao and the T'boli have festivals that include dancing and horse-racing, neither has a tradition of scripted theater. So the plays we were hearing were not only the first women's plays in those cultures, but very possibly the first plays, period. And that definitely created a problem--it turned out none of the women's plays had been presented, or even received readings, in their own communities. But the women assured us with shy determination, that they would, soon.

Monica Raymond, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA
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Past and future Officers of WPI. Mumbi Kaigwa (Kenya), Miriam Kainy (Israel), Linda Parris-Bailey (US), Jhoti Mapsekar (India), Birgitta Hacham (Netherlands), Tammy Lee Anderson (Australia), Cornelia Hoogland (Canada), Malou Jacob (Philippines), Aafke Heuvink (Netherlands), Lia Karavia (Greece), Meena Natarajan (US), Karen Lawrence (Australia)

REPORT FROM WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS INTERNATIONAL:
MANILA, NOVEMBER 2003 (**PART TWO**) – Monica Raymond

"Don't write plays," Ellen Stewart told me. "Make shows! Who wants all those words anyway, that everyone is completely bored with, even if they don't tell you?"

We were sitting at lunch on the second day of the conference, at one of scores of linen-draped tables set up in the hotel ballroom. Stewart, the legendary founder of La Mama, was one of the reasons I had come to the conference. But I'd missed her introductory talk the first morning, which I'd heard had something to do with theater transcending barriers of language and culture.

Stewart's ancient basset hound eyes seemed to have known everything--well, all theatre, anyway. She was like a Zen master you have to follow, no matter how she insults you. So I shadowed her and wound up at playreadings by a series of Asian playwrights; Stewart, it turned out, had been consulting with Korean theatre artists for decades. After the reading of the first piece by Kumiko Shinohara from Japan, Stewart exhorted "Speak up, this is theatre! It should be dramatic--isn't that so?" She looked around at all of us, including the guilty folks who had mumbled through the weirdly postmodern take on Shakespeare in which Lady Macbeth (now a loving hostess) meets a resurrected Ophelia. Thanks to Stewart's intervention, the acting of the next piece by the Korean playwright Sung-hee Jang was far more daring and even I, who had volunteered for stage directions, read them out boldly.

Stewart had raved about a group of street children, some of them disabled, who were going to be dancing for us that evening. As I lined up for the buses to take us to their performance at Intramuros, a fort turned tourist site, I fell into conversation with Leanna Brodie, a thirty-something Canadian actress turned playwright. Being assigned scene work from Mamet in an acting class had started Brodie writing. She'd been paired with another woman. "Did you do it as two men?" "We didn't know what to do. So at first we did it--" here Brodie showed their early drag king attempts with big shoulders and deep voices. "And then eventually we let go of all that, and just did it as women." It had been a revelation. "I realized that women don't get scenes where they get to fight like that, that energy--" The result was Brodie's first play, *THE VIC*, where an all-female cast explores violence in women's relationships with each other--two sisters, one a former cult member; a famous film director and her black intern; two lesbian lovers.

The Canadian delegation had a formal mentoring process, where playwrights' elders supported the writers they'd selected. Brodie's mentor was Margaret Hollingsworth, recently retired from teaching playwriting at the University of Victoria. Margaret was my roommate. And she thought Ellen Stewart was all wrong about theatre. Words, were what was important, necessary. Nuance, subtlety, space, relationships. She and I argued cheerfully about everything from Pinter to self defense to economic development. And we had both been appalled by the street children dancing for us in the dim light while we sat before buffets of heavy meats at Intramuros. The scene felt troubling, exploitative, the dances reminded me of old chorus numbers from the Ed Sullivan show. One boy had tripped during some acrobatic maneuver and fallen "On his head on the concrete! Did you see that?"

Originally from England, Margaret had relocated to Canada, where she'd been involved with theatre for over thirty years. "She became a hippie and a Canadian citizen at the same time," reads one bio. Her hippie origins well-concealed, she now looked like a demure senior citizen, except when she wagged her fingers mysteriously, energy healing me when I got sick on a long jeepney ride. I loved hearing her tales of travelling the world as a renowned playwright, being welcomed in Beijing with a white stretch limo. Actually, she'd been an intrepid traveller even before she was recognized, visiting Asia and the Middle East on her own as a young woman. Her tales--of Laos and Cambodia before there were minefields, of seeing the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan--were dispatches from a more intact, less hobbled world.

Margaret was not the only woman I met at the conference who was a traveller, living between several worlds. Sheila Langeberg, for example, a Tanzanian writer and solo actor, is now based in Australia. Her lithe body gave evidence of the African dance she performs and teaches. Her scheduling was pure 21st century. "I get an idea," she said. "I write it. If it takes more than a weekend to write, I don't do it!" Her repertoire consists of a play for adults, a play for high school students, and one for middle school students, a play for kindergartners--all solo shows based on her African heritage. That way she can go to one city and do several different gigs. "If I can't do it all myself, forget it!" Langeberg carries her set pieces with her, textiles and drums that serve as both sets and costumes. "You think this conference is a vacation for me? No, it's work!" said Langeberg, who, during the few days of the conference, had succeeded in getting bookings in India, Japan, and a return engagement to the Philippines. The play she did that evening, *MAIJA OF CHAGGALAND*, was based on scenes from her mother's life. Langeberg played all the characters--her mother, her father, herself as a young girl, and the ominous ritual woman who performs clitoridectomies, travelling from house to house with her "bowl of clitorises."

The delegation from the Netherlands was as far as you could get from Langeberg's "do-it-yourself" mentality. The three Dutch playwrights were accompanied by two producers. Not writers themselves, the producers had published an edition of plays by the delegates to the conference, had filmed high quality biographical videos of each of them, and sponsored a wine reception. Olive-skinned Birgitta Hacham stood out in the Dutch delegation. Part Algerian, part Swedish, now living in Holland, this single mother had just learned she was also part Jewish, and was looking forward to exploring that part of her heritage. She works teaching drama in afterschool programs with street kids, many non-white. Her play, *HOTEL SONJA*, is a grim allegory of the psycho-sexual roots of militarism. But her preferred form of solo performance was hip hop. "Hey, little boy/with your golden chain/you don't respect the womb/from where you came" she sang in her feminist rap, an endearing hybrid in her European English.

For some of mixed ancestry, though, one particular identification stands out. And some of the women I had the most fun with at the conference were the indigenous Australians, Andrea James and Tammy Lee Anderson. True, Andrea's part Polish, but she identifies as aboriginal, and her play, YANAGAI! YANAGAI! focuses on the legal struggle for official



Back (left to right) Mara McCann (US), Dijana Milosevic (Serbia), Meena Natarajan (US),
Front - Lene Teigen (Norway), Lia Karavia (Greece), Joni Cham (Philippines)

recognition of the lands of the Yorta Yorta tribe. When I heard what the it was about, I knew I'd be sympathetic to its politics. But it turned out I loved the play itself—a marvelously inventive mix of talking dingos, a young man trying to get his old uncle to testify at the land claims trial, an aboriginal goddess tossed out of the sky, the ghost of the colonialist Curr frozen in a perpetual teatime, a three hundred year old fish, and folks who insist on telling real stories as the gavel bangs down. The Yorta Yorta lost their land claims trial. But the play, with its shifts into their language, its characters who refuse to be crushed, its puppets and visions, seemed both an elegy for and a time capsule of the tribe's vital energies.

Which brings me back round to the place where I started—the indigenous Filipino delegates at the conference. It was amazing to realize that, on the island of Mindanao, indigenous communities still go about their business, never having been herded onto reservations. The T'boli women at the conference wore native dress, and spanned three generations. The young women, Jenita and Cinderella Eko, had written short plays as part of a project of Women Playwrights International in the Philippines. Myrna Pula, middle-aged, fluent in English, works for an NGO dedicated to the preservation of T'boli culture. She had brought examples for sale--rainsticks, fabric, belts, reed mats woven in intricate psychedelic black and cream patterns. (The reed mats auctioned off the last day of the conference, I was told, went for the price of three T'boli houses.) Myrna's private project is taping, transcribing, and translating the works of elder epic singers. And one of them, Mendung Sabal, was there at the conference. Elderly, diminutive, with thick gray bangs over a doll-like face, Mendung knew only two English phrases "Thank you. I love you." She said them at the end of each performance of her piercing and powerful chants. At once bright and guttural, they seemed to carve new pathways through the surrounding air. Then would come the demure, almost girlish voice. "Thank you. I love you."

Was it that simple, then? The theatre that Ellen Stewart was searching for, that would somehow transcend language and culture—was it music? Certainly at the open mikes we had for several nights at the conference, it seemed so--the Indian women singing lullabies and love songs, Leanna remembering a sea chanty, Andrea's cousin, who'd come to act in her play, singing in some Australian language--Yorta Yorta? And eventually Linda Parris-Bailey, a large African American woman who runs a theatre in Knoxville, would lead us in the call and response of the song she had taught us: We are going/Heaven knows where we are going/But we know within./We will get there/Heaven knows how we will get there/But we know we will./It will be hard we know/and the road will/be muddy and rough/But we'll get there/Heaven knows how we will get there/But we know we will.

"Don't write a play, make a show," Ellen Stewart had said. But what some of us were doing was so different from what others did--a show where actors became characters on a stage and people paid; a script read in a workshop that was a document of village life, the first play ever in its language; Boal exercises with village women; collaborative creations that were mostly dance; others that relied on having read certain books; a play that held the remaining song fragments of an almost obliterated language. It was miraculous, sometimes, to think, that what we all called what we were doing by the same name--theater.

Monica Raymond, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA
(mraymond@postmark.net)

[Photographer: Lene Teigen of Norway]

HOT TOPIC – SUBMISSION FEES (TO PAY OR NOT TO PAY)

This has been a frequently discussed issue on the list-serve over the last months. Whether you agree, disagree, or want more information, please take the time to read Carolyn's message and the instructions below. If you are interested in signing the letter you can download it (instructions below), email Carolyn or Rebecca for more information, and/or circulate the letter amongst theatre professionals to generate discussion and awareness. To review the thread on submission fees, check out the online archives.

Message from Carolyn:

(Please note that the petition was co-drafted by Carolyn Gage and Rebecca Nesvet with input from several playwrights.)

“Some folks feel that low fees are acceptable, some feel that none are acceptable, some signed the letter and still occasionally submit with fees, and some feel that all fees are just fine and tend to screen out inferior scripts -- although there are many on the list who have refuted this with some heat... myself included. And some boycott everything with fees.”

Instructions from Rebecca on how to download the letter:

1. Go to this website: http://www.geocities.com/upstart_crow2
2. Scroll down, and click the black banner that says: "READING FEES = ECONOMIC CENSORSHIP."
3. Download the file (it's virus free). The letter will appear as a printer-ready HTM file.
4. Copy it to word, add your name and details, and fwd. it to Carolyn Gage, who regularly sends me updated copies when significant numbers of new signers inscribe it.

THE LETTER – as of June 22, 2004

Dear Artistic Director,

We the undersigned are writing to you, because we are concerned about the growing trend on the part of theatres to charge fees for script submissions. The Dramatists Guild discourages the practice as discriminatory, and many of the members, in solidarity with them, boycott fee-submission competitions.

This fee, in addition to the \$15 in photocopy and postage fees per script, is a tremendous burden to low-income artists. \$30 represents five hours of work at the current minimum wage, a substantial investment.

The result of the fees is the field of submissions becomes top-heavy with middle-class, white, able-bodied playwrights. As members of a women playwrights' listserve, we are well-aware of the economic discrimination practiced against women that results in our disproportionately lower wages at every level of employment. Furthermore, the charging of a fee will privilege middle-class women at the expense of single and working-class women, and especially those struggling to raise children on single income. At a time when the need to hear the voices of the politically and economically marginalized has never been greater it is ironic that live theatre would be taking an action that so actively promotes the existing monoculture.

Finally, the disturbing rise of fee-charging by the theatre industry as a whole promises dreadful consequences not only for contemporary theatre audiences, but for generations to come. Only the arts can show a culture to itself, unmediated by numbers and academic or journalistic forms. Under the current system, the reflections of a vast number of people and their vital views of our cultures will be lost, just as the voices of women, workers, and other traditionally marginalized groups have been lost in the past. Direct political suppression of art is not the only means of censorship, and economic censorship can prove just as damaging. We sincerely hope that you will reconsider your complicity in it.

Sincerely,

Signatories follow -

R.L. Nesvet, Literary Director of ICWP, member of Dramatists Guild, Aberystwyth, Wales, UK

Carolyn Gage, member of Dramatists Guild, Portland, ME
 Adrienne Perry, member of ICWP, Tucson, AZ
 Allison Williams, President and Board of Trustees for International Centre for
 Women Playwrights, member of the Dramatists' Guild, Kalamazoo, MI.
 Anne Lower-Shirey, Member, member of ICWP, Edmond, OK
 Barb Lhota
 Betty L. McLane-Iles, Kirksville, Missouri
 Bobbi Ausubel, San Francisco
 Caitlin Hicks, member of ICWP, Roberts Creek, British Columbia
 Carol Schlanger, member ICWP, WGA
 Carole Clement, member of Dramatists Guild, former president ICWP Mentor, OH
 Cristina Lipp, Clearwater, FL.
 Cynthia Davies, Write Angle Productions, Board member of the Rocky Mountain
 Theater Association, Denver, CO
 Diana Fox, member of Dramatist Guild, ICWP, and Author's Guild, Kalamazoo MI
 Diane Grant
 DW Gregory, member of Dramatists Guild, Washington, D.C.
 Ellen Margolis, ICWP member and member of Dramatists Guild, Portland, Oregon
 E.Y. Jones, member of Dramatists Guild, Kittery, ME
 Geralyn Horton, member of Dramatists Guild, Newton, MA
 Ginny Cerrella, Writers Guild Of America (WGA), Dramatist Guild and Author's Guild
 Member, Santa Fe, NM.
 Ginny Foster, Member ICWP, Portland, OR
 Heidi Decker, member of Dramatists Guild, Seattle, WA
 Jane Prendergast, member of ICWP, Englewood, NJ
 Janice Liddell, member of ICWP, Atlanta, GA
 Jean Klein, member of Dramatists Guild, Virginia Beach, VA.
 Joanne Conger, member of ICWP, Everett WA
 Jo J. Adamson, member of Dramatists Guide, member of ICWP, Maple Valley, WA
 Judith Pratt, member of Dramatists Guild, member of ICWP, Ithaca NY
 Judy Alexander, Burlington, VT.
 Judy GeBauer, member of ICWP, Dramatists Guild, and PEN West U.S.A, Denver, CO.
 Kari Ann Owen, Chico, CA
 Kathy Coudle King, Grand Forks, ND
 Kim Kelly, member of ICWP and Dramatists Guild, Dallas, TX
 Laura Henry, member of Dramatists Guild, NYC.
 Luiza Carol, member of ICWP, Kiriat-Yam, ISRAEL
 Madelyn Sergel, Gurnee, IL
 Margaret Varra, member of Dramatists Guild, Seattle, WA.
 Michele Forsten, member of ICWP and Dramatists Guild, New York City, NY
 Molly Best Tinsley, member of ICWP, Ashland, OR
 Nancy Gall-Clayton, member of Dramatists Guild, Louisville, KY
 Paddy Gillard-Bentley, Board of Trustees ICWP, Associate member Playwrights
 Guild of Canada. Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.
 Robin Rice Lichtig, member of ICWP, member of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of
 the Americas, member of Dramatists Guild, NYC.
 Sandra de Helen, member ICWP and Dramatists Guild, Portland, OR
 Sandra Dempsey, ICWP, Playwrights Guild of Canada
 Shareen Knight, ICWP, British Columbia
 Sharon Barnett, NY
 Shirley King, member of Dramatists Guild and ICWP, Benicia, CA
 Suzanne Thomson, member of ICWP, Tulsa, OK
 Tira Palmquist, Irvine, CA
 Vanda, member of Dramatists Guild, member of ICWP, NYC
 Yvonne Hudson, board member of ICWP, Pittsburgh, PA

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ICWP WARMLY WELCOMES THE FOLLOWING NEW MEMBERS SINCE MARCH 2004

Trish Sugarek, TEXAS USA
Judy GeBauer, COLORADO USA
Carol Lynn Pearson, CALIFORNIA USA
Anna Fay Williams, TEXAS USA
Kelly Hollenbaugh, MARYLAND USA
Ellena Schoop, MINNESOTA USA

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BOARD UPDATE

At a recent Special Meeting, the Board of Trustees voted to approve Amended Articles of Incorporation. The new articles fall into line with the legal requirements for not-for-profit organisations seeking registration for purposes of obtaining a 501-c-3 classification for tax purposes with the IRS in the United States of America.

The Board has been guided by Andrew McFarland of Washington Lawyers for the Arts., a lawyer providing pro-bono services to member arts organizations.

Members in good standing of ICWP will be asked to vote on the new articles in the near future.

After the membership votes on the new articles, the Board will be able to call the next Annual Meeting, which has had to be delayed due to the need to re-incorporate with the Amended Articles.

If you would like to contribute an article to the next newsletter - Autumn 2004, please email the secretary Margaret McSeveney margaret@benhar.screaming.net

Join ICWP now! The online membership form is at <http://www.netspace.org/~icwp/memform.html>