

Performing Gender and Violence in Contemporary Transnational Contexts

Edited by Maria Anita Stefanelli

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Cover image:

Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes (1623-1625).
Detroit Institute of Art; oil on canvas.

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PREFACE

Spectacular Violence

The cover of this book shows Artemisia Gentileschi's painting *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* in which Judith is portrayed having just decapitated Holofernes and about to flee the crime scene with her maid/accomplice. Various visual artists had tackled this subject before Gentileschi: it can be found in the illuminated manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it was also a favored theme of many later great artists. Botticelli, Mantegna, Giorgione, Michelangelo, Titian, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Vasari, and Veronese all portrayed Judith. Caravaggio, whose red drapes above the grisly scene provide a theatrical cue for Gentileschi's later version, also portrayed this archetypal Biblical female warrior being assisted by her maid, hinting at the women's sisterly alliance in thwarting a man's violence and latent savagery. Other artists have represented the scene, from Rubens, Goya and Doré, whose engraving of Judith and Holofernes brings us to Victorian times, to Klimt and von Stuck in the last century. These variations on the episode all evidence the artists' concern to measure up to their predecessors and, indeed, to their own selves.

While staging one or more of the many possible worlds generated by our culture, artists grappling with such elemental expressions of violence can lead us to spaces yet undiscovered. This was their goal, and it is a goal shared by the scholars who contributed to this book. Our purpose was to explore and critique the works of our chosen playwrights in the hope that more space might be made available to readers, spectators, and lovers of theatre for them to acknowledge the performance of the feminine in the spectacle of violence across nations. This is how the episode is narrated in the Book of Judith:

Judith fell upon her face, and put ashes upon her head, and uncovered the sackcloth wherewith she was clothed; and about the time that the incense of that evening was offered in Jerusalem in the house of the Lord. Judith cried with a loud voice, and said, O Lord God of my father Simeon, to whom thou gavest a sword to take vengeance of the strangers, who loosened the girdle of a maid to defile her, and discovered the thigh to her shame, and polluted her virginity to her reproach; for thou saidst, It shall not be so; and yet they did so (Judith 9:1-2).¹

In the words of Robin Gallaher Branch, Judith is a “formidable literary character”, whose status can be ascribed to her long genealogy. In the Bible she invokes God before resolving to kill Holofernes (the chief captain of Nabuchodonosor who has Bethulia under siege) so that the city and its people can be saved. She recalls the offense and the humiliation suffered by Jacob’s daughter Dinah, raped by Schachem, a stranger from a different tribe, and her brothers’ subsequent vengeance through tricking its rulers, with whom they made a pact. Judith’s plan of action is shaped by her courage, vigor, energy, masculine strength, forcefulness, and cold bloodedness – all elements that enhance her devout and compassionate, but also proud, shrewd, and imperturbable character. Fully armed with these attributes, she exploits her natural beauty and uses her female powers of seduction. She visits Holofernes in his tent, and effortlessly reduces him to a brute, senseless and insensible creature before embarking on her plan, which she executes with two blows from his own sword. She then leaves with her maid, who hides the head in a food sack, so that they can get away from the Assyrians unnoticed.

The research of Elizabeth S. Cohen, published in a special edition of *The Sixteenth Century Journal* devoted to “Gender in Early Modern Europe”², offers a thorough historical interpretation of the

¹ Judith 9:1-2. The ‘Book of Judith’ is part of the *Apocrypha*, namely a selection of books which were published in the original 1611 *King James Bible*, but removed in 1885. The Book is regarded as non-canonical in the Jewish faith. Considered ‘deuterocanonical’ because it entered the canon later, it is part of the Catholic Bible (Old Testament) and is thus seen as God-inspired. The quotation here is taken from *The King’s Bible*. Web 2/10/2016 <<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Judith-Chapter-9/>>

² Elizabeth S. Cohen, “The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History”. *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31.1. Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe (Spring, 2000): 47-75.

available documents and presents the reader with a complex network of Biblical and personal references to Gentileschi's life.

As a gifted independent female artist with a painful past, that she strove to fully acknowledge, and, above all, to come to terms with, Gentileschi's painterly skills undoubtedly helped to heal her wounds. With the basic principles and mechanisms of spatial arrangement that she had to acquire in order to become a painter, she might also have absorbed, from Judith, the strength that she needed to maintain the struggle. Indeed, she did activate those principles and mechanisms of spatial arrangement; she did obtain the power to overcome the violence that she had experienced; she did become a model for other women: a model, if not *the* model. A woman who tried hard, at her own expense, not to be overcome by circumstances – and to live, if not happily ever after, then at least with her personal dignity intact.

Here are a few scenes from around the world:

Women between the ages 15-44 are more likely to be maimed or killed by male violence than by war, cancer, malaria, and traffic accidents combined. More women have been killed by neglect and violence in the last 50 years than men have by all the wars of the twentieth century.

Isobel Coleman (2010) "The Better Half. Helping Women Help the World". *Foreign Affairs*. January/February. 127
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2010-01-01/better-half>

In 1984, such terms as "battered women", "sexual harassment", "female human rights", even "feminism" itself, were still considered suspect coinages of radical feminists; today they have attained respectability, appearing in UN resolutions, policy documents, academic treatises.

Robin Morgan (1996) "Preface", *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. New York: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York. xii.

Afghanistan: 'No-one listens to us and no-one treats us as human beings.' Justice is denied to women.

The rights and status of women in Afghanistan became an issue of global concern prior to the military intervention by a United States-led coalition that brought about the end of the Taleban regime in November 2001. The international community, including members of the coalition, made repeated undertakings that their intervention would support women in realizing their rights. However, two years after the ending of the Taleban regime, the international community and Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) led by President Hamid Karzai have proved unable to protect women. The criminal justice system is at present unable to do so and prosecution for violence against women is virtually absent.

Amnesty International (5 October 2003) London, UK.
<<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/023/2003/en/>>

Canada: Executive summary: Out of Sight, out of Mind: Gender, Indigenous rights, and energy development in northeast British Columbia

Northeast British Columbia, Canada, is rich in energy resources, but while some people enjoy enormous benefits, others are further marginalized and impoverished. The model of resource development is both fuelling violence and increasing vulnerability to violence. Government has failed to allocate sufficient resources to services necessary to meet the needs. Indigenous peoples whose lands and resources provide the basis for the wealth generated in the region, are excluded from a meaningful role in decision-making and bear a greater burden, including disproportionately high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Amnesty International (3 November 2016) London, UK. <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/>>

Georgia: Homophobic violence mars Tbilisi Pride event

Police in the Georgian capital Tbilisi failed to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists as thousands of people violently attacked a Pride event today in what Amnesty International said was an ineffective response to organized and violent homophobia. Georgian LGBTI activists were assembling in the capital's Pushkin park for a peaceful rally to mark the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) when the event was cut short by a throng of angry counter-protesters reported to number in the thousands. The ensuing violence resulted in 17 people being injured – 12 of whom were hospitalized, including three policemen and a journalist.

Amnesty International (17 May 2013) London, UK.
<<https://www.amnesty.org/en/>>

Two out of three of the world's illiterates are now women, and while the general illiteracy rate is falling, the female illiteracy rate is rising. One third of all families in the world are headed by women. In the developing countries, almost half of all single women over age fifteen are mothers. Only one third of the world's women have any access to contraceptive information or devices, and more than one half have no access to trained help during pregnancy and childbirth.

Robin Morgan (1996) "Introduction: Planetary Feminism: the Politics of the 21st Century", *Sisterhood is Global*. New York: The Feminist Press of the City University of New York. 1-2.

1.5 million women and 834,700 men are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner annually in the United States. Because women are also more likely to be injured by intimate partners, research aimed at understanding and preventing partner violence against women should be stressed.

Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes (November 1998) "Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women Survey. Issues and Findings", *National Institute of Justice*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2.
<<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/172837.pdf>>

Georgia: Thousands Suffering in Silence: Violence against Women in the Family

Amnesty International is concerned about the widespread impunity of perpetrators of domestic violence in Georgia; insufficient measures and services to protect the victims of domestic violence; the absence of a functioning cross-referral system with regard to domestic violence cases between different agencies; the lack of mandatory government training programmes for police, procurators, judges and medical staff; and the failure to date by key players and the courts to record cases of domestic violence in a systematic manner and to create reliable and comprehensive statistics disaggregated by sex and indicating the relationship between victim and perpetrator.

Amnesty International (24 September 2006) London, UK. <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/>>

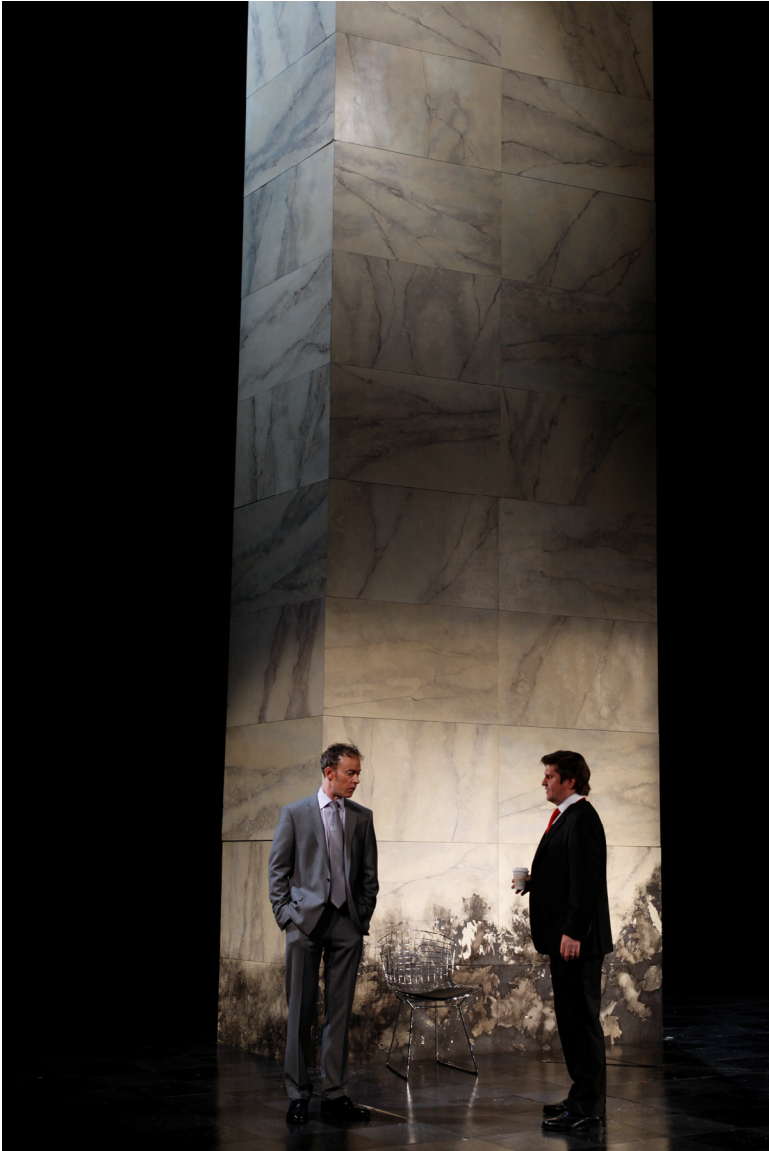
Perhaps due to the phenomenon of watching Australia's first female prime minister forced, position notwithstanding, to suffer the sexist indignity so familiar to Australia's working women, local feminist commentators have found a ripe readership for their opinions. Ripe enough, in fact, that many of the old mastheads are now commissioning from a pool of what used to be marginal activity. Discussions of rape culture, slut-shaming, abortion wars, the gender pay gap and sex discrimination are happening not in dingy ex-broom-closets in university union buildings or in photocopied newsletters mailed out irregularly from an underfunded women's centre, but across the mainstream media – and every day.

Van Badham (2 December 2013) "Van Badham battles the Brosphere: On women, trolls and the Australian media in 2013", *Women's Agenda* <<http://www.womensagenda.com.au/talking-about/opinions/item/3287-van-badham-battles-the-brosphere-on-women-trolls-and-the-australian-media-in-2013>>

Irish public want expanded access to abortion to be a political priority for incoming government

People in Ireland have made clear that the incoming government must make expanding access to abortion a priority, Amnesty International said today as it published the results of an opinion poll on attitudes to abortion in Ireland. The poll, carried out by RED C Research and Marketing, shows that a considerable majority of people in Ireland (63%) believe that Irish politicians should show leadership and deal proactively with widening access to abortion in Ireland.

Amnesty International (4 March 2016) London, UK. <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/03/irish-public-want-expanded-access-to-abortion-to-be-a-political-priority-for-incoming-government/>>



Peter Hanly as Ben and Stuart McQuarrie as Art
in *Marble* by Marina Carr, Abbey Theatre, Abbey Stage, Dublin, Ireland, 2009.
Photo by Colm Hogan.

MAKING VISIBLE

Theatrical Form as Metaphor: Marina Carr and Caryl Churchill

by Cathy Leeney

In this moment of feminism and post-feminism, one is conscious that women and men, globally, occupy vastly different realms of experience, different possibilities of becoming a person, and what that might mean. The contest for equal human rights for women and men is complicated in our contemporary moment by urgent issues of environment, economy and technology. As the planet toils under the weight of our demands as a species, inequalities between genders, classes and races occupy a shared context of profound changes in human expectations and behaviour caused by the impact of technology and the material prosperity of the favoured few. Gender and violence ground these situations of inequality while the relatively privileged struggle to understand and undo their entrapment in the power structures of globalization, information communication technology, and overweening materialism. Women and men are kept in place in a whirligig of consumption of both goods and information.

While playwrights Caryl Churchill and Marina Carr have written important work exploring women's struggle, as Portia Coughlan puts it, 'to enter the world and stay in it' (255), and the price that is paid for such a chance, both women are also visionaries in our present time, creating theatre that captures a quality of experience that feels at once accurate, and yet surprising, sometimes shocking and destabilizing. This aspect of their work affirms them as key figures in contemporary theatre. Recent plays from both authors have certain elements that overlap, that draw their work into relation,

not as a question of likeness, but in their ability to expose the unexamined assumptions that ground how we live, what hurts us, and what we long for. Both have, more recently, created plays that are coolly passionate, that are emotionally urgent and yet still a catalyst for reflection and recognition: Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* (2012) and Marina Carr's *Marble* (2009).

I will argue that a crucial aspect of the meanings of the plays arises through their form, rather than through the more conventional categories of character and thematic dialogue, although in both cases character and narrative operate powerfully in support. In this sense both plays experiment with dramaturgy in order to disrupt audience expectations, to unpick easy judgements and strip away accretions of cliché. These experiments in form lead, in Heidegger's word, to 'deconcealing' (38); theatrical transformation occurs at the level of the framework of the play, as opposed to at the level of an individual character or group.

The philosopher of science Robert Crease has applied the concept of 'performance' to what he calls the theatre of scientific discovery. By doing so he connects science with theatre through the notion of performance: scientific experiment is a kind of performance. He defines scientific experiments as "unique events in the world undertaken for the purpose of allowing something to be *seen*. What comes to be seen is not something unique and peculiar to that event, but something that can also be seen in similar performances in other contexts..." (Crease 96). In relation to theatrical performance then, Crease's idea emphasizes how the play as a structure, as an event viewed by the audience, uncovers something and allows it to be examined. By drawing this parallel between the artist and the scientist, Crease argues for a re-conception of what scientific enquiry is, but if we reverse the relationship, and link the procedures of experimentation in the sciences back into the arts through the idea of performance as an experimental method, Crease also offers us a refreshed aspect of theatrical performance. I would like to extend this reversal of his idea so that the qualities he finds common to the procedures of art and science are reflected back onto theatre art, to see how the theatre of scientific experiment illuminates (again) the play and its performance for audiences.

Crease defines performance as a presentation of an action, an action related to a representation (using a semiotic system, text, scenic space, scenography). It has the power "to coax into being

something which has not previously appeared [...] it is action at the limit of the already controlled and understood; it is risk". The audience perhaps "recognises new phenomena in it" (100). Bert O. States observes that while scientists find experimental methods, artists find metaphors to test their ideas (23). Where the scientist employs laboratory equipment for experimentation, the maker of theatre uses the machinery of representation on stage and the metaphorical and metonymic relationships between representational elements to test and define. I am using States's notion of metaphor in its broadest theatrical definition, to include metaphorical images in the language, as well as how actions and exchanges on stage may present a metaphorical image of social or emotional states of being.

Experiments and performances require observers and Crease comments on the role of the scientific audience: "properly preparing and viewing performances requires a detached attitude, one interested in seeing what is happening for its own sake rather than for some practical end". Crease continues, saying that this detachment allows for "a deepened and enriched understanding of the world and our engagement with it" (96). So Crease suggests that, in the theatre, disengagement is valuable, creating perhaps a dynamic energy that counters empathy.

In Irish theatre tradition, W.B. Yeats was interested in how a theatre audience moves from emotional involvement, absorption, trance or empathy with the performance, to detachment, reflection, and meditation. Richard Kearney, following Ricoeur, talks about the same element, describing it as "aesthetic distance from which to view the events unfolding, thereby discerning 'the hidden cause of things'". Kearney notes how "this curious conflation of empathy and detachment produces in us [...] the double vision necessary for a journey beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being" (12-13). I am emphasizing this idea of detachment as a way of considering the cool quality of the plays I will briefly discuss. The dramaturgies in both *Marble* and *Love and Information* collapse ends into means, as the structures of the plays work to disturb and interrupt audience empathy.

The philosopher's approach integrates the audience, the receptive community, into the whole process, of performance, of transformation through creative perception, valuing a detached attitude in the proceedings, emphasizing how performance makes visible new phenomena (as opposed to reflecting 'reality' – a vexed, reductive

and contentious function). The making visible also implies that the phenomena, although pre-existing, has been masked, inaccessible, or disguised. The paradox here is that the phenomenon made visible is at the same time immediately identified (“one recognizes the phenomenon for what it is” [Crease 110]) and yet new, a revelation, a disturbance and a ground for transformation.

The idea of metaphor as an experimental method for the theatre invites ways of understanding a play through its structure and images, rather than through narrative and character only. In vastly different ways, and employing vastly contrasting theatrical strategies, Carr and Churchill make visible phenomena of contemporary experience that, once exposed, are immediately identifiable and also a revelation. As audiences, the plays move us from recognition, empathy and emotional response, to estrangement, surprise and deep reflection.

Carr’s and Churchill’s work occupies the paradox mentioned earlier, of being, in performance, precisely of its immediate moment, while it carries forward the work of human enquiry into and understanding of its own condition, past connecting into present and future; past sundered from present and with future foreboding. The structural metaphor shared by both playwrights across these two plays is the conversation between two people. The dramatic space of the plays is different too – gone is the geographical space of earlier works like Carr’s *The Mai* (1994) or *Portia Coughlan* (1996), or Churchill’s *Fen* (1983) – it is replaced by conceptual space that’s shifting and tricky, a space rather than a place.

First performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in September 2012, *Love and Information* presents seven untitled sections, each one made up of a series of titled scenes; all except three of these are between two people¹. Each of the three exceptions involve only three people. In the Royal Court production, sixteen performers played more than one hundred characters. This long succession of short scenes seems to deal with aspects of information, how people deal with it, what it means, how it impacts on behaviour and relationship, how people manipulate it, ignore or resist it; how it helps and how it hurts. Each section might be said to focus its scenes

¹ The play was first produced at London’s Royal Court Jerwood Theatre, directed by James Macdonald, designed by Miriam Beuther (setting) and Laura Hopkins (costumes). It should be noted that my reading of the play is based on the staging created by Macdonald in collaboration with Churchill.

as follows (these are my titles for each section):

1 – Craving Information; 2 – Information Kills; 3 – Lies and Illusions; 4 – Memory; 5 – What’s it Meant to Mean?; 6 – Failure to Respond; 7 - How Information Makes you Feel.

The structure of the proceedings is further destabilized by Churchill’s note that the conversations can be played in any order within each section, and furthermore, sections can be interrupted at any point by random scenes, which are given at the end of the script. These include optional scenes, but also a series of scenes called ‘Depression’ where a silent depressed person does not respond to questions or suggestions made by another. Churchill directs that the Depression scenes are ‘an essential part of the play’ (74).

Without assigning any character names, gender, or roles to the lines on the page, part of the pleasure of reading the text is in understanding the dialogues at once through the scene titles and the clarity of the writing alone. The author directs that the characters are different in every scene, except perhaps the Depression scenes. (Churchill 2)

The effect of these choices is that audience reliance on character as a source of empathy is impossible. Churchill replaces sustained character with discourse and situation that is sometimes funny, sometimes uplifting, sometimes painful, sometimes sinister; and as one section of scenes follows another, the conversations multiply in number while the mode of exchange repeats and repeats, reduced to individual encounters. The relentless series of one duologue after another stresses the ironic isolation within which the performers communicate so actively. The scenes with three voices take on a dialectical significance which is often negative. Examples are ‘Recluse’ in Section 3 in which two people are afraid to open the door to an intrusive journalist (26) or ‘Stone’ which is a duologue between two bullies who gang up to attack a third person (66).

Love and Information’s vast array of ideas, themes, conversations and persons runs the risk of appearing chaotic to the point of incoherence, although the multiple roles for each performer provide a theatrical counterpoint to the complex and sometimes aleatory elements at play, offering the audience an opportunity to enjoy the virtuosity of performance as a unifying factor. But how is the audience to understand a through line in this anti-structure as it shines light on the unseen connections between disparate experiences? States points out a sequence of dis-similarity, ‘inspired by Wittgen-

stein's theory of games', (and adapted by Umberto Eco for another purpose) through this graphic form:

abc bcd cde def

From left to right, similarity features less and less, until, between far left and far right, no similarity is present. Yet, as States says, 'there remains, by a sort of illusory transitivity, a family resemblance between'. Thus, the structure of *Love and Information*, the tension between repetitious form (duologues occasionally interrupted by threesomes) and the 'family resemblances' between scenes and Sections, allows the audience to move fluently from 'one manifestation of the phenomenon to another' (States, 3). Churchill extends the metaphorical structure to reveal life reduced to individual interface, as against the counter-metaphor of excess and chaos experienced through the ubiquitous circulation of information mediated by technology.

The play materializes and makes visible contemporary embodied experience of information, its multiplicity, spin, sophistication, its capacity to inspire wonder, how mere humans try to manage it: how we need it, are addicted to it; overwhelmed by the quantity of it; seduced and enraptured, manipulated by it; hurt, damaged and endangered by it, lost in it; bewildered by it. The phenomenon, one may say, is not unfamiliar or new, but how it is currently experienced in the developed world and increasingly everywhere, is new. The increased quantity of information circulating, its intensity, the power of digital media to watch, listen, record, and possibly control every aspect of life, its function in the hands of the state, the massive imposition it makes on each life – this is new in a new context of the massive and potentially catastrophic success of our species; how do we deal with this as sentient emotional, social and physical beings? It is the way we live now and who can stay outside it?

Marina Carr's *Marble* was first produced at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in Feb. 2009 (directed by Jeremy Herrin and designed by Robert Innes Hopkins). This play marks a new phase in Carr's work, and yet as I try to identify the qualities of this phase, each aspect turns out to have been, in some form, already present before: the uneasy spaces of the earlier plays, part-realist, part-conceptual, the disturbance of theatrical form, wrought with such force as to reconceive the places of the plays in the minds of audiences as within,

yet at odds with, the canon of Irish playwriting, and of classical tragedy.

In *Marble*, Catherine and Ben, and Art and Anne are two married couples. The men work together and are friends. Art confesses to Ben that he has dreamt erotically about Catherine (Ben's wife): 'It was fantastic [...] It was just a bed, a room, marble somewhere, yeah marble, the floor, the windows' (11). Ben then discovers that Catherine shares this dream with Art. The dream overtakes first Catherine's, then Art's waking lives, revealing their daily concerns as dross; it splits the careless friendship between the two men, and threatens the complacent and deadening materialism within which all four operate.

The surface imagery of the play is of successful, bourgeois, urban family life: work, convenience food, indulgence, inertia, daily routine, shopping for 'digestive biscuits and washing up liquid' (Anne; 36). Contrastingly the imagery of the dream that Catherine and Art share is of: 'classical proportions, pillars, columns, statues that are not copies'. (Art; 33) The atmosphere of the dream – present from the beginning in the Abbey production, gradually bleeds out into the rest of the play. Underlying the action are questions of waking and sleeping as parallel with conscious and unconscious states and desires. This is made visible through the dialogue, and crucially through the space of performance:

ANNE: People do the strangest things.
ART: In their thoughts maybe, but the waking world is different.
ANNE: I don't find it so different. Recently I find the daylight strange, distorted, shadowy, where all was clear before.
(25)

Until in Act I, Scene 6 Catherine says 'Being awake is no longer important' (32). By the end of that scene, a gender aspect of Catherine's paradoxical awakening in her dreams is suggested when Ben says he wishes she would return to her dreamless sleeps:

CATHERINE: You like me catatonic.
BEN: I like you to think about me.

By the end of Act I, Scene 9 Catherine has 'crossed some line or other without realizing it. And it's fantastic [...] something is happening to me' (40).

In Act II the language takes on a different register; it is expressive, imagistic, and abandons the domestic points of reference that apparently anchor the first act: ‘This is the age of ice, an era when men’s and women’s hearts were frozen ...’ (42) and later ‘My reptilian brain is on the ascent and I’m on a descent, a descent away from some marble room that cannot be reached ...’ (60). Gradually the dreamed image of the marble room and intense sexual encounter changes, so that it begins to represent more than an overblown romantic fantasy:

CATHERINE: ... maybe [Art] is just a signal, a beacon, not important in himself, but a sign that has brought me to a different place (58).

Carr’s stage world revolves, or morphs from one dimension into another, the metaphor of one-to-one conversation sustaining a powerful sense of isolation, vulnerability and uncertainty in Art, Ben and Catherine. *Marble* owes something to Strindberg’s chamber plays, which explore relationships, often triangular, in a single confined setting, for example *Creditors* (1887), and even *Miss Julie* (1888). However, *Marble* also reworks a theme that absorbed Ibsen’s dramatic imagination at the end of his playwrighting life. Ibsen’s imagery for an unattainable ideal of artistic and spiritual achievement involved mountain tops, snows and avalanches.

In *When We Dead Wake* (1899), his last play, Rubek, a sculptor who has created statues in marble, begins to understand that his marriage to Maia, a much younger woman, has been a travesty which has stymied his creative life (Ibsen 290). He meets his first love and muse Irina, and in Act III, set on “*a wild jagged mountainside, with sheer precipices falling away at the back. Snow-covered peaks rise to the right, and lose themselves in high drifting mist*”. (279), he and Irina make a promise:

RUBEK: Then let us two dead things live life for once to the full – before we go down to our graves again. (p. 289)

They move up to pass through the mists, and “then right up to the topmost peak gleaming in the sunrise!” (290). The idea of a living death, and the call of an absolute and overwhelming vision is common to both plays. Carr re-conceives the theme in a new context, where the imagery of nature has become despoiled and corrupted

through human agency. In the story of his life that Art tells Anne in the last scene, he describes how fishing, once his only refuge from “distraction”, has been destroyed. “Now what’s left ...” he wonders (64-5).

Carr creates a different image of the absolute, of spiritual and aesthetic absorption, the desire to escape the limits of self, and to achieve the sense of fusion that art may offer, that Art offers to Catherine’s imagination; their shared image of marble reveals how a Eurocentric, classical image of antique authenticity has colonized their imaginations, while it retains its power to shake Catherine into terrifying life. *Marble* makes visible the limits of how one-to-one relationships are another form of isolation, how consumerism eats away at the soul. The space of the play opens up a further metaphorical meaning related to the colonization of human imaginations in conceiving freedom. The visual and spatial quality for the performance is specifically denoted by Carr in her text. A note on the set states “There should be an emptiness to the set which can take on great beauty at times. De Chirico’s ‘Mystery and Melancholy of a Street’ is the mood and landscape I would like to catch: the near absence of people, the dream shadows, yet full of vibrant colour and intrigue” (8).

Giorgio De Chirico was an Italian symbolist and surrealist painter. His ‘strange, oneiric cityscapes’ as described by Robert Hughes, brought him to the attention of painters and poets such as Picasso and Paul Éluard. Hughes writes that De Chirico’s city ‘has been one of the capitals of the modernist imagination [...] a state of mind, signifying alienation, dreaming and loss’ (Hughes 161). Distorting the surface Renaissance forms and dimensions depicted in many of De Chirico’s paintings is an unstable space with multiple vanishing points, a space of illusion and contradiction, its irrationality belying its architectural volume.

Carr has previously used references to paintings in her plays – for example, in *Woman and Scarecrow*, woman describes the impact of Caravaggio’s ‘The Death of the Virgin’. In this case, however, de Chirico is invoked as a visual source for the atmosphere and design for the play. In the Abbey production, designed by Robert Innes Hopkins, the realistic (although sparse) furniture was suspended in a monumental space, empty and lit to emphasize the shadowy peripheries, and the uncertain boundaries demarcating the relationships between characters, and between sleep and waking. Hopkins

made De Chirico's presence explicit by naming the bar where Ben and Art meet in Scene 1, 'De Chirico's'.

The space at first seems to represent a public space and a domestic space. However, reflecting the disintegration of daylight reality as the play proceeds, the space quickly becomes unreliable, shifting and fluid, a source of anxiety and disorientation. In Act I, Scene 3, Art and Ben speak to each other on their phones, sharing and not sharing the space. The stage direction '*they look at one another without seeing*' (22) emphasizes how the space from the audience point of view is an imagined or psychological arena while it is also concrete.

The domestic space is occupied alternately by each couple, as if it were an abstract representation of a living room. Gradually in this production, the divisions between the scenes begin to break down, and between Scenes 7 and 8, the dialogue continues although the space is split between work and home as Anne speaks to Art on the phone. In Scene 9, when Ben enters, Catherine is on stage but invisible at first. She emerges from the shadow. Art loiters in the shadow of the stage right column, as Ben enters and establishes himself in the light. Then Art follows him out of the shade. At the end of the Abbey production, all characters gather around the column stage right, as it lifts out of the floor, revealing its filthy root and a gaping grave. Space itself is unreliable, and becomes an image of human unease in the world. The final image of the Abbey production makes visible in a shocking way the journey towards the grave that lies beneath the surface individualities that are the basis of consumer capitalism's promise of fulfilment.

In conclusion, to describe both Churchill and Carr as feminist playwrights is at once an important recognition and a way of coralling their work that can operate reductively in recognizing their mastery in addressing central aspects of the current human condition. Churchill's concern with history and its tenacious hold on current lived experience, as well as its role in understanding the present, has informed many of her dramas. Carr's creative engagement with myth, Irish and Greek, empowers her work to resonate with epic theatrical tropes and to raise contemporary figures in her work to (anti)-heroic status. Both playwrights though, I hope I have argued, open ways into our present historical moment, creating metaphors through theatrical form whereby the lived experience of the audience is mapped in complex emotional detail, its depths heaved up for in-

spection, its moral ambiguity exposed. Through the use of duologue – the repeated image of two people alone together, through the surrender of space and its replacement with the amoebic formation that digital technology has made it, these writers re-create theatre to identify and name how some of us live.

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OBSCENE TRANSFORMATIONS

Violence, Women and Theatre in Sarah Kane and Marina Carr

by Melissa Sibra

In 1984 Hélène Cixous expressed the violent death of self she experienced every time she went to the theatre which was “like going to my own funeral”, where “the horror of the murder scene” repeated and intensified “[w]ith even more violence than fiction [...] It is always necessary for a woman to die before the play can begin” (546). Cixous’s memory is a powerful articulation of the annihilation of women as subjective human beings within dramatic representation, authorship and history. In considering approaches to violence in the work of Sarah Kane and Marina Carr I will explore the relationship between theatre and violence in broader terms as a way to consider theatre-practice itself as an act of ontological violence upon women. Violence and gender-politics are synonymous in the Western dramatic tradition which officially excluded women as speaking subjects from the double-frame of playwright and actor since the first makeshift theatre of Dionysus in 500 BC and at other key periods such as the Renaissance. Elizabeth Grosz observes that the overwhelming phallogocentricity of historically privileged discourses is not merely ‘an oversight’, but an action of “strategic amnesia [which] serves to ensure the patriarchal foundations of knowledges” (40). The prohibition of women from performing upon and writing for the stage, as well as the tenacious elision of plays written by women from official theatre-histories and mainstream production is an act of symbolic violence with material effect which continues to this day.

In my research and teaching in the field of feminism and women in theatre over the past twenty years I have come to identify a

number of ingrained patriarchal fictions of oppression – that is, sexist assumptions which have become naturalised by society and, more problematically, internalised by women. In Ireland the general consensus was that up until the early 1990s ‘women did not write plays’. This is untrue as current feminist theatre research and historiography now demonstrates. When women are acknowledged as playwrights it is generally considered that they do not address ‘universal’ themes which are of relevance to humanity as a whole. Having said that, theatre in Ireland is currently experiencing a major revolutionary moment with the emergence of the grassroots movement #WakingTheFeminists which began in a storm of protest on social-media at the end of October 2015 against the 90% male program ‘Waking The Nation’ at The Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre. This 1916 commemoration program states proudly, ‘We consider our stage to be a platform for freedom of expression. We believe our artists can tell the story of who we are and who we might become’¹. Yet in the centenary program of the 1916 Easter Rising rebellion against British rule, The Abbey Theatre excluded women playwrights from both of its stages with only one short monologue-play by a woman for its Outreach and Education Program for young audiences to be performed in schools². Due to the deep male-bias of the 90% exclusion of 50% of Irish citizens by the tax-funded national theatre, #WakingTheFeminists was borne. Theatre-maker and feminist activist Lian Bell began the ball rolling with her anger and sheer disbelief and the twitter hashtag #WTFeminists soon went viral garnering international support from Meryl Streep amongst others. There have been two public meetings so far as well as interactions with directors, programmers, policy-makers in theatre and the Irish government in terms of implementing and sustaining gender-equality.

Countering the marginalisation of women in Irish theatre practice and history #WakingTheFeminists is now heralded as the real response the 1916 Rising and fight for independence and the most important revolution to have occurred in Irish theatre history.

¹ ‘Waking the Nation 2016 at The Abbey Theatre’ Centenary Program. Web. May 2, 2016. <<https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/waking-the-nation-2016-at-the-abbey-theatre/>>.

² Ali White, ‘*Me, Mollser*’; a monologue for young audiences, which was not listed in the season on the centenary program.

Yet still, the patriarchal fictions of oppression of which I refer above are endemic. At the second public meeting of #WakingTheFeminists to mark International Women's Day on 8th March 2016, Michael Colgan, long-term Director and Board Member of The Gate Theatre, Dublin – Ireland's other main-stage, stated,

Each theatre has a different ethos. The Gate is a theatre principally devoted to the Classics. What do I mean by that? By Classical theatre I mean those plays that have endured time, scrutiny and different cultures. I am thinking of Shakespeare, Friel, Beckett, Wilde, Miller. Plays that will always be performed and have been translated into many languages. The harsh reality is that there are few Classic plays written by women.³

The ingrained patriarchal definition of what constitutes a 'classical' play must be interrogated at root level in order to shift the overwhelming imbalance of naturalised patriarchal authority within mainstream culture. Colgan's insinuation is typical of the self-determining patriarchal value-systems which continue to subjugate women. Commonly-held opinion constitutes that women are in general concerned with more trivial subject-matter than men, focussing on the 'private' or 'domestic life', the family, children and motherhood (mothers and daughters) – themes which do not equate to so-called 'Classic' or 'universal' subject-matter. This violent assumption incorporates a clever 'double-oppression' where not only is woman's capacity for artistic representation gravely limited to areas of 'niche interest', these interests are insidiously quantified as inherently less meaningful to humanity as a whole. If "Women's Theatre" is both marked and relegated to a sub-category of 'Theatre', women themselves become a 'minority' and their work marked as a 'genre'. Patriarchal fictions of oppression insidiously feminise the site of home and the family simultaneously oppressing men in terms of defining heteronormative hegemonic masculinity as being extrinsic to the domestic sphere. While everyday sexist attitudes imply that women are inherently less interested in 'universal' subject-matter the theatre of Kane and Carr centres upon questions of politics, philosophy and the interrogation of structures of power in terms of class,

³ Michael Colgan, speaker at #WakingTheFeminists public meeting, Liberty Hall, 8th March 2016. The full speeches of both meetings can be heard on www.WakingTheFeminists.org and at twitter #WTFIWD.

government, race, sovereignty, religious and medical institutionalised practice and the geopolitical cause and effects of war and violence upon society at large, as well as within the family.

Marina Carr and Sarah Kane refute degrading concepts of “Women’s theatre” in complex, multifarious ways, literally and figuratively through both the form and content of their theatre. I will explore this by looking at their responses to the Classical myth of Phaedra – Kane’s second play *Phaedra’s Love*, which she directed at the Gate Theatre, London, in May 1996, and Carr’s 2011 play *Phaedra Backwards*, directed by Emily Mann at the McCarter Theatre, Princeton. In 1997, with only two plays produced – *Blasted* (1995) and *Phaedra’s Love* – Kane was asked about the challenging nature of her work by two female interviewers. In a book dedicated to expressing the ‘rage and reason’ of twenty ‘young women playwrights’, the interviewers’ question reveals and perhaps inadvertently perpetuates the female internalisation of the patriarchal fictions of oppression that I identify above. Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge ask Kane a gendered question that would not be asked to a male playwright: “Do you think that part of the storm that erupted over your work was because critics and audiences alike were in a state of disbelief that the issues of violence and war could be tackled by a woman?” (130). Tensions emerge in Kane’s answer which reveal how she felt beleaguered by gender expectations as a woman and indeed which challenge the very subtitle of their book *Women Playwrights on Playwriting*. Kane says, “I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don’t believe there’s such a thing. When people talk about me as a writer, that’s what I am, and that’s how I want my work to be judged – on its quality, not on the basis of my age, gender, class sexuality or race” (134). Carr is also frustrated for being labelled throughout her twenty year career as ‘Ireland’s leading woman playwright’,

[I]n all of the commentary around women’s writing, the assumption is that you are writing from the margins and I absolutely reject that. The whole ghettoization of women; the idea that there is “Literature” and “Women’s Literature” is offensive. It is very difficult in this climate because it is so condescending. You are left with no recourse; it is out there and that is the way you are judged. The insinuation is that you are something less than a playwright, which again is something that I absolutely reject. (Levy 25)

In attempting to situate Kane and Carr within a feminist theatre-practice there is a difference between playwriting that is polemically 'feminist' and 'issue-based' where the play serves as a political means to an end, and theatre-making which intrinsically challenges heteropatriarchy through the very nature of its form and content. Carr's and Kane's vision is the latter, where a feminist feeling and affect is intrinsic to their work. With this organic feminism in mind I would like to think about the ways in which Kane and Carr challenge patriarchal violence against women. It is crucial to identify the means by which dominant value-systems operate in order to interrogate and transform them. Canon-formation and notions of the so-called 'Classical' operate by mystifying the processes of their validation, offering standards that are naturalised to the point of 'always having been there', and of expressing universal values of human worth which have traditionally supported the dominant male point of view. This is evident in Michael Colgan's comments above. Notions of universality are of course a fiction – insidiously violent in their exclusionist dynamics and reflective of privileged social values. Gayle Austin has identified three stages of feminist retaliation to processes of canonicity in terms of 'questioning the underlying assumptions of an entire field of study, including canon formation' as:

1. Infiltrating the canon (assimilation within existing structures)
2. Re-writing the canon (adaptation of the classics)
3. Exploding the canon (refusal of the system all-together) (17)

Carr and Kane have certainly infiltrated the canon in that they are validated by the cultural elite – published, produced and translated all over the world, written about, and taught on university courses. Although due to the uncompromising content of their work there are commercial stages that have not yet produced their work. From this position of relative canonical centrality they stage complex cycles of the causes and effects of violence in self-reflexively politicised private and public spaces. In addition to the humour, love, tenderness, beauty and lyricism of their work, they depict murder, suicide, mutilation, rape, self-harm and alienation, alcoholism, drug use, incest, sexual abuse, torture, disembowelment, cannibalism, tribalism, militarism, monarchy, political corruption, questions of being and identity, language and authority within psychic recesses of the living and the dead.

The late Sarah Kane infamously exploded onto the theatre-scene in 1995 with *Blasted* – a theatrical disembowelment of

patriarchal form which pulled the guts out of realism. *Blasted* is now considered one of the key plays of the late 20th Century – a literal and figurative treatment of the act and effects of rape as an invasion of the private body and the public body-politic, where the form *is* the meaning, forcing the audience into an intense experiential relation with the action. As Kane observed: “The form and content attempt to be one – the form is the meaning. [...] The form is a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays – a traditional form is suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the characters and the play into a chaotic pit without logical explanation” (Stephenson & Langridge 130). The blasted hole in the wall is a meta-commentary on the penetration of war as figurative rape, where literal rape in the hotel room is a microcosm of everyday sexual violence as well as a comment on the act of rape as a mass weapon of war. Written in response to the genocide of the Bosnian war, the individual and the collective effects of war and/as rape thus powerfully collapse, like Cate’s fits and Ian’s seizures, into one another. While rape is both real and metonymic in *Blasted* a key characteristic of the power of Kane’s dramaturgy is her insistence on explicit depictions of violence in her work. Katie Mitchell’s 2016 critically acclaimed production of *Cleansed* at the Royal National Theatre approaches the violence head-on. In an interview with John Nathan she states:

Kane’s stage directions request literal violence. A tongue is cut off with a pair of scissors. Hands are cut off. So how do you do that in a way that is not symbolic? [...] You can’t sanitise the moment. You have to do justice to it. [...] If you do too much symbolism it makes the window to the ideas opaque. (Nathan)

In *Blasted* the mortar bomb shatters the realism/naturalism of the *mise-en-scène* as psycho-physical disintegration ensues. If, as Elin Diamond states, “one of Realism’s most common features [is] the erasure of the apparatus of representation” (7), then Kane incinerated the architecture of conservative form. Like canon-formation, realism is a narrative and does not passively reflect ‘universal’ values of humanity rather, “it *produces* ‘reality’ by positioning its spectator to recognise and verify its truths” and “more than any other form of theatre representation, mystifies the process of theatrical signification. Because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with

[patriarchal] ideology” (4). Imaginative spaces of ‘otherness’ and non-realism are at the heart of both Kane’s and Carr’s work and neither adhere fully to the Classical unities of time, place or action. Kane states: “Much more important than the content of the play is the form. All good art is subversive, either in form or content. And the best art is subversive in form *and* content. [...] I suspect that if *Blasted* had been a piece of social realism it wouldn’t have been so harshly received” (Stephenson & Langridge 130).

Kane and Carr profoundly challenge Aristotle’s monological vision of truthful representation as expounded in the *Poetics*. Of *Blasted*, Kane said: “In terms of Aristotle’s Unities, time and action are disrupted while the unity of place is retained [but shattered]. Which caused a great deal of offence because it implied a direct link between domestic violence in Britain and civil war in the former Yugoslavia. *Blasted* raised the question ‘What does a common rape in Leeds have to do with mass rape as a war weapon in Bosnia?’” (Stephenson & Langridge 130-31). Kane’s dramatic spaces are not domestic, rather, in *Blasted* ‘A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world’ – as site of global capitalism (*Blasted*; Kane 3); the political interior of ‘a royal palace’ (*Phaedra’s Love*; Kane 65); ‘Just inside the perimeter fence of a university’ (*Cleansed*; Kane 107) and the indeterminacy of interior psychic space (*Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*). Carr by contrast sets many of her earlier plays in rural Irish domestic interiors, inherently challenging cultural assumptions of femininity and motherhood with a strong emphasis on nature and landscape as a re-politicised site of female agency, history and creativity.

One of the most powerful qualities of feminist and queer theatre practice lies in its capacity to dis-unify the ‘universal’ and to confront prejudice through deconstructive performance strategies. Our image-saturated visual culture is antithetical to Classical Greek dramatic representation where violent acts such as murder were considered ‘obscene’ – a sanctity reserved for the *ob-scene* – meaning ‘off-stage’ and not permitted in performance. Today in everyday Western culture television, film, theatre and social-media obscenity is made explicit rather than non-visible. In breaking the rules of Classical representation and re-evaluating obscenity through their unflinching presentation of violence and death Carr and Kane force us to confront the reality of violence *in action* rather than its after-effects. Kane says, “I’ve chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to

descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future [...] It is crucial to commit to memory events never experienced – in order to avoid them happening” (Stephenson & Langridge 133). This counteracts the Western phenomenon of emotion-fatigue from over-exposure to explicit images in media and popular culture. Dispassionate apathy can be seen in *Phaedra’s Love* in the emotionally-detached Hippolytus – Kane’s masturbatory hyper-consumer and in *Phaedra Backwards* with the serial-womanisers Theseus and Hippolytus. Kane’s Hippolytus is,

sprawled on a sofa surrounded by expensive electronic toys, empty crisp and sweet packets, and a scattering of used socks and underwear. He is eating a hamburger, his eyes fixed on the flickering light of a Hollywood film [...] The film becomes particularly violent. Hippolytus watches impassively [...] He puts his penis into the sock and masturbates until he comes without a flicker of pleasure. [...] He begins another hamburger. (Phaedra’s Love; Kane 65)

The compassion-fatigue of contemporary Western culture is powerfully expressed in *Blasted* when Ian, a journalist, is reporting a brutal murder devoid of any feeling:

A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace, S-C-R-A-C-E, in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday new par. The bubbly nineteen year old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs in an isolated New Zealand forest point new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point new par. (*Blasted*; Kane 12-13)

Kane’s stage-directions and images at times test the very limits of what may seem permissible or even possible in theatre, such as Ian’s disintegration in *Blasted* and she has been accused of staging violence for shock-value:

IAN *masturbating*

IAN cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt

Darkness

Light

IAN *strangling himself with his bare hands.*

Darkness

Light

IAN *shitting*

And then trying to clean it up with newspaper

Darkness

Light

IAN *laughing hysterically.*

Darkness

Light

IAN *having a nightmare*

Darkness

Light [...]

IAN *tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby's body out.*

He eats the baby. (Blasted, Kane 59-60)

Ironically it was Kane's deeply ethical commitment to visualising suffering and human degradation in *Blasted* that caused more outrage in the media than the actual atrocities of genocide that were taking place at the time in Bosnia.

Marina Carr depicts violence with on-stage infanticide, suicide, murder and torture in her loose adaptation of Euripides's *Medea - By the Bog of Cats ...*, *Ariel* (Aeschylus's *Oresteia*) and *Phaedra's Love*, and death in *Woman and Scarecrow* and *16 Possible Glimpses*. However the most controversially received of her plays, *On Raftery's Hill*, which is about rape and incest in the home does not stage the act of rape. In *On Raftery's Hill* the father violently attacks his daughter in the kitchen, cutting her clothes off with a knife and goes to black-out the very moment before he rapes her:

Grabs her suddenly and holds her in a vice grip. Sorrel struggles pointlessly against the strength of him ... (cutting the clothes off her with the knife) First ya skin the hare ... I've allas been too soft on you and look where ud's goh me. [...] Red continues cutting the clothes off her. Sorrel gesticulates and struggles pathetically. Her voice has betrayed her. We hear the odd animal moan or sbriek. Now Red has her down to her slip. He pauses, looks in satisfaction at his work. And you all the time prancin' round like the Virgin Mary. (He pushes her across the table, cuts the straps of her slip). Now, this is how ya gut a hare. (Stabs knife in table). (On Raftery's Hill; Carr 34-35)

While this dramaturgy is classically Greek in its ‘ob-scenity’, audiences found the content disturbing. Whereas Carr’s graphic violent depictions of *on-stage* suicide and infanticide in *By the Bog of Cats...* were not negatively critiqued for their representations of violence and questions of form as well as content arise in terms of how a work is received. Carr’s on-stage depiction of child-killing in *By the Bog of Cats ...* is contextualised to an extent by its Classical Greek origin-story as a canonical version of *Medea* where the myth offers a distancing-mechanism through which to mediate the violence. While the sense of rage is no less in either play the Greek source-text offers an unconscious permissibility.

In addition to their re-workings of Greek plays both Carr and Kane refigure realism in various ways orchestrating multiplicit spaces of otherness and strategic disintegration. The construct of time is often a symbolic co-ordinate of ontology in performance and the Western concept of linear time offers a privilege of chronology which is synonymous with scientific Rationalism. In dramatic form linearity is synonymous with Realism and a phallogocentric logic which is forward-moving, progressive and non-lateral symbolically resembling male sexuality in terms of climax. Women’s creative expression has, on the other hand, been conceived as contiguous, more open-ended, circular – in a state of becoming rather than definitive closure, which has been likened by some feminist critics to a poetics of female sexuality. Sue Ellen Case identifies this ‘new poetics’ as “a working in-between – it can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear and interrupted rather than complete. This [contiguity] exists within the text and at its borders; the feminine form seems to be without a sense of formal closure – in fact it operates as anti-closure” (129). Contemporary plays by women challenge climax and closure in their representational apparatus posing the question of whether a realist play can ever be a feminist play. Kane and Carr play with and at times discard linear time in their work. Carr says, “I believe we are of time, but also beyond it. [...] that [we] are both within it *and* outside of it. [...] I have never believed that time is linear ...” (Jordan, Chambers & Fitzgibbon 57). Carr’s staging of ‘Eternal Time’ in *Phaedra Backwards* opens up a radical space – something which is beyond the capacity of the forward trajectory. In Carr’s re-telling of the Phaedra myth the idea of going ‘backwards’ is central just as repetition and circularity are key to Carr’s dramaturgy as a whole. At the beginning of *Phaedra*

Backwards 'time titles' were projected onto a back screen and the first thing we see are the stage-directions: 'Time: Now and Then. Then and Now. Always' (Carr 2011 i). This fades and is followed immediately by: 'The End'⁴. Phaedra then enters for the Prologue and stands before us as evocative film footage from her childhood is played out on the screen behind her. Shot on location we see childhood moments of Phaedra, her sister Ariadne and their half-brother the young Minotaur (these children later appear on-stage). Subtle perspex lines cross the screen – enabling a shifting, sliding effect, which Jill Dolan, who viewed the production, called 'multiplicit perceptual fields' – and can be read in feminist terms as a refusal of the hegemony of linearity⁵.

In *Phaedra Backwards* Carr reconceives the classical tragedy in a number of ways. Firstly in her renegotiation of the unities of time and place, secondly in her revision of the myth of Phaedra and thirdly in her reconceptualization of the figure of the half-bull, half-human Minotaur. Carr locates the action in a non-determined space – an elemental stone precipice on the cusp of infinity, unlike her earlier Classical Greek adaptations which are located in the rural Irish Midlands. The opening of *Phaedra Backwards* reveals,

*A terrace. A stone terrace. A stone floor.
The bay and the mountains surrounding this terrace.
The ever-changing light.
The sound of the sea a constant score.
Two other scores inhabit the place. Phaedra's score and the Minotaur's.
The light is magical, from some dark fairytale.*
(*Phaedra Backwards*; Carr 2011 i)

This is an eternal magic realm. The double-score of Phaedra and the Minotaur is important giving the drama an inherent duality where their two planes shift and slide about one another. This sense of mutually-informing realms manifests in all of Carr's plays with ghosts and other mystical figures who co-mingle easily with the everyday. The Minotaur is the imagination itself – a visceral embodiment of intrinsic otherness. He cannot be reduced to the literal and thus poses the greatest challenge to logic and authority, ostracised to the

⁴ Projected onto back screen in production.

⁵ Jill Dolan in Conversation with Melissa Sihra. Unpublished. McCarter Theatre. Princeton, 15 October 2011.

unfathomable recesses of the Labyrinth and finally slain by Theseus – the upholder of patriarchy.

The Labyrinth is a fecund site of unknowability expressing queer and feminist possibilities. Echoing Sue-Ellen Case the labyrinth is contiguous, circular, elliptical and without closure. Carr has spoken throughout her career about the tragedy of the death of the imagination, of the danger of shutting-down the non-rational life and of our need for mystery. “No one talks about the soul anymore” she said at the Abbey Theatre⁶. “*Phaedra Backwards* is about dealing with mystery. It is about encountering things that are not comprehensible, and allowing them entry into your life”⁷. The dominant interpretation of the Phaedra myth conveys the slaying of the Minotaur as a progressive moment – the beginning of human civilisation through an annihilation of the monstrous. For Carr it is “the beginning of the end”, the start of patriarchal oppression and barbaric inhumanity⁸. Carr’s adaptation of the original Phaedra myth is further feminist in her reversal of the sexual politics of desire where it is now the young Hippolytus who is consumed by unrequited lust for his step-mother radically altering the origin-tale and its underlying misogyny.

Carr’s position, like that of Kane’s *vis à vis* the canon opens up useful ambivalences – namely, that they both admire Classical Greek theatre and the tragic sensibility which is a traditionally regarded as a patriarchal form of representation. How can we reconcile their admiration for the canon with a feminist refusal of the violent exclusion of women from the canon? Both Carr and Kane tear apart the ‘patriarchal fictions of oppression’ in all aspects of the content of their work; however they are published by prestigious international houses – Faber & Faber and Methuen, and produced on main-stages. Carr is placed alongside Samuel Beckett and Brian Friel in the ‘Contemporary Classics’ series, and Kane, in the ‘Contemporary Dramatists’ series. If the third category of Austin’s suggestions – ‘Exploding the Canon’, is perhaps the most challenging, I think that it *is* possible to plant a bomb from within and that this is what Carr

⁶ ‘Meet the Makers; Marina Carr in Conversation with Melissa Sibra’. Public Talk on *16 Possible Glimpses*, The Abbey Theatre, Dublin (September 2011).

⁷ Marina Carr, Program Note for *Phaedra Backwards*.

⁸ Marina Carr, Program Note for *Phaedra Backwards*.

and Kane achieve. Production on national and main-stages does not compromise the radical nature of their work. Rather than preaching to the converted in alternative fringe, feminist and queer spaces an effective strategy is to preach to the disconcerted in conservative and traditional spaces. An example of this is when *On Raftery's Hill* toured to the major 'Island: Arts for Ireland Festival' in Washington DC in 2000. Many people walked out of the show or did not applaud at the interval (Sihra 2005 188). This is an example of exploding the canon from within; not assimilating patriarchal values or 'passing' in order to fit-in but radically challenging the cultural, aesthetic and moral value-system. Neither Carr nor Kane adapt classical Greek theatre, nor infiltrate the canon; they transform it. Herein marks the transition from Cixous's anger at the violent annihilation of women endemic to Western theatre and cultural discourse to Carr and Kane's inhabiting and remoulding of dramatic space and storytelling. Now Woman is self-represented and violence is re-directed in order to challenge society rather than to silence half of the human population.

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CAN THE SUBALTERN DREAM?

Epistemic Violence, Oneiric Awakenings and the Quest for Subjective Duality in Marina Carr's *Marble*

by Valentina Rapetti

Over the last four decades, Irish citizens have adopted increasingly liberal views and lifestyles that are symptomatic of a more secular, tolerant and inclusive society. As the Republic of Ireland underwent a troubled process of transition from a postcolonial to a globalized status, a series of major changes occurred within the borders of the nation-state. To date, these include a larger participation of women in the paid workforce, a later age for marriage and the birth of the first child, and consequently a smaller family size. Concomitant with this extensive demographic transformation, legislative adjustments have taken place. The wave of crucial political reforms in labour and family law began in 1973 with the removal of the marriage bar in the public service¹ and culminated in the 2015 Referendum, which made Ireland the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote. The landslide yes victory² resulted in the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution, that is, the provision of an additional clause to Article 41 to state that “Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex” (Constitution of Ireland 166). Besides expanding the frontiers of equality and civil rights to LGBT citizens, this momentous

¹ The 1932 marriage bar required National School women teachers to retire when they married; this was eventually extended to the entire Civil Service in the early 1930s. Banks and many private companies also operated a similar policy. On 31 July 1973, the Civil Service (Employment of Married Women) Act ended the marriage bar.

² The Referendum held on May 22, 2015 gave the yes vote 62% and the no vote 38%.

amendment has reinvigorated the debate³ over the discriminatory language used in the same Article as regards women and how their role is defined in the private as well as the public sphere:

41.2.1° In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

41.2.2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

Strikingly, the sexist wording of Article 41 has remained unaltered since 1937, the year De Valera's Catholic-inspired Constitution formally came into force as an institutional response to the post-colonial call to codify a common national identity. The document had its origins in a public debate in which the mutually reinforcing discursive forces of Catholicism and Nationalism were constantly at work, pitting essential notions of "Irishness" against colonial assumptions and stereotypes. However independent from overseas influence, autochthonous discourses on gender entailed significant continuity with those previously formulated by the English oppressors. There continued to be an insistence on the "hysterization of women's bodies" as a "strategic unity which formed specific mechanisms of [...] power centering on sex" (Foucault 85, 86).

If – as Spivak puts it with regards to female subaltern subjects in colonial contexts – Irish women were "more deeply in shadow" (287) than their male counterparts under British rule, their active contribution as drivers for change was soon to be forgotten when Ireland finally won its independence in the early 1920s, and their rights as citizens became subordinate to those of their fathers, brothers, and sons. All this despite the fact that the 1916 Easter Proclamation, solemnly addressed to both Irishmen and Irishwomen, had expressed a resolve to "guarantee religious and civil liberty, equal

³ The specific reference to women's role in the home in Article 41.2 has given rise to criticism, both during the drafting process of the Constitution itself and more recently in debates on the need for constitutional reform. Although the issue of the position of women in the Irish Constitution has been addressed by the Constitutional Convention, it has never been put to the public in a referendum. For further information, see National Women's Council of Ireland [2012 and 2013].

rights and equal opportunities of all its citizens, [...] to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally”⁴. To sum up, in both colonial and postcolonial terms, the Irish woman has been treated as a territory to be possessed, with her body conceptualized and positioned in discourse as a fertile terrain that ensures the material reproduction as well as the moral integrity of the body politic.

Following Foucault’s insights into the effects of power generated by the deployment of sexuality, and bearing in mind the specific position assigned to women in the Irish Constitution, it can be argued that sexual discourse was – and still is – highly institutionalized in the Republic of Ireland, where:

the feminine body was [...] qualified and disqualified as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; [...] whereby, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologicomoral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children’s education). (Foucault 86)

The overlapping of womanhood, wifehood and motherhood, bolstered by male dominated religious and institutional hierarchies within postcolonial discursive practices, has imposed ideological and symbolic constraints on Irish women, the effects of which are still palpable. Today as in the past, epistemic violence can be found in Ireland, not only because female citizens are constitutionally denied the right to abort⁵, but also insofar as many of those who have moved out of the domestic sphere “[find] themselves still shaped by public discourse about a woman’s place and value” (Conrad 6). Recent sociological research has shown that, despite the widespread participation of women among the paid workforce and the greater acceptance of their role outside the home, gender role attitudes continue to be inflected by conservative ideological forces. The majority of the Irish population still believe in traditional male support and protection, and that being a wife and mother is the most fulfilling

⁴ Web. 15 Feb 2015 <<http://www.nli.ie/1916/pdf/1.intro.pdf>>. National Library of Ireland website.

⁵ In Ireland, abortion has been prohibited by law since 1861.

role any woman could desire (Fine-Davis). According to Fine-Davis, these responses mirror “basic needs and beliefs which are not changing to any great degree as a result of social changes in gender roles” (215). The sexual division of labour thus remains a key feature of both paid and unpaid work in Ireland. As a matter of fact, women in the workforce still experience different forms of discrimination, while men are recalcitrant to engage in caring work due to their enduring attachment to traditional breadwinner/homemaker roles (O’ Sullivan; Fine-Davis). Despite the emergence of alternative models of masculinity and fatherhood, women end up retaining primary responsibility for the home and childcare, irrespective of whether or not they are employed (McGinnity and Russell), while “many men in senior positions [are] freed up to participate in the long-hours working culture by the support offered by stay-at-home partners” (O’ Sullivan 381).

All of the above facts and factors are indicative of a society heavily marked by “affective inequality”, a phenomenon that, according to Kathleen Lynch, “occurs when the burdens and pleasures of care and love work are unequally distributed in society, between women and men particularly, [...] when people are not recognized economically, politically and/or culturally [...] for their love and care work and when [this] work is trivialized by omission from public discourse” (177).

The Irish situation is rather atypical in this respect. On the one hand, women are assigned a highly visible position in the founding text of the Republic; on the other, the burdensome work they are summoned to do within the home is a duty they are bound to observe, regardless of individual aspirations and/or professional occupations. This particular order of discourse revolving around representational ties and double standards, is largely due to the exceptionally complex overlapping of public and private spheres embedded in the Irish Constitution, where the family figures as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society”, as a “moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law” (Article 41.1.1°), and as “the necessary basis of social order [...] indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State” (Article 41.2°).

The Irish “family cell”, to put it in Foucauldian terms, is “the interchange of sexuality and alliance”, a social, economic, and political system that enables power to “anchor sexuality and provide

it with a permanent support” (Foucault 88, 89). It is both “an agency of control and a point of sexual saturation” that “has become an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love” (Foucault 99; 89).

Bearing these preliminary remarks in mind, we can now move on to the play *Marble* (2009), to see how Marina Carr throws the standards of normative conjugal and parental relations into question by shining a spotlight on the material and affective inequalities that occur within marriage, the constitutionally enshrined foundation of the Irish family. Carr exposes the deep-rooted epistemic violence embedded in a “conservative discourse [that] likes to identify the family with social and national stability” (Wills 38) and to convey a traditional image of woman as a “self-sacrificing mother whose world [i]s bound by the confines of her home” (Valiulis 178). She also shows different ways in which human beings yield to or resist these discursive practices that “penetrate and control everyday pleasure [...] to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior” and even “scarcely perceivable forms of desire” (Foucault 14). In *Marble*, a craving for sex coupled with a yearning for self, begin to surface through a series of intense erotic dreams that are deemed outrageous within the familial and social context of the play, especially if the dreamer is a woman, a wife, and a mother. This accounts for a partial rethinking of Spivak’s famous question, which I reworded as the title for the present essay, given its focus on issues of desire, subjectivity, and self-determination in relation to both male privilege and female subalternity in post Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Marina Carr’s writing career began in the mid-1980s, a time marked by great political and economic instability in the Republic of Ireland, as well as by overt and covert discrimination against women in all fields, including the theatre. To date, she occupies a prominent role in the male-dominated literary canon of her native country, and her work has spread throughout mainstream national and international theatre circuits. Since her professional debut with the absurdist play *Low in the Dark* (1989), Carr has never ceased to disrupt stereotypical representations of women and challenge androcentric notions of motherhood and family, thus introducing different perspectives and female characters of unprecedented force to Irish drama. With Carr’s women, most notably those at the core of the Midlands plays⁶, there is a sense of domestic restraint and con-

⁶ Amongst Carr’s body of work, the most renowned and internationally

finement⁷. Nevertheless, they are animated by an impulse for self-recognition and self-assertion that is achieved through a variety of strategies, ranging from physical and emotional withdrawal to suicide.

Turning to *Marble*, Carr's ninth full-length play, those accustomed to her work enter a territory that is both familiar and strange. When it opened at the Abbey Theatre in February 2009, this two act play for four actors presented the audience with themes and tropes recurrent in Carr's *oeuvre*: alienation, lack of communication, a pervasive sense of longing and absence, and a ruinous fascination with death. However, it also appeared as a striking departure from the past, coupling as it did Carr's usual criticism of what Luce Irigaray termed a "monosubjective culture", with an original exploration of "subjective duality", that is "a new type of civility [...] in which the duality of the genders will become, thanks to their differences, culturally fertile, and not only naturally fertile" (Irigaray 27). In fact, while Carr's previous works revolve around strong female characters who pit themselves against a phallogocentric discursive and social order, *Marble* hinges on the detrimental effects of female subalternity on both women and men, thus suggesting, as Irigaray states, that "what can assist the woman in becoming subject is the discovery of the other, the masculine, as horizontally transcendent, and not vertically transcendent, to her", and that "[t]his cultural becoming of the woman will be able to help the man to become man, and not only master and father of the world, as he has too often been in History" (27).

A further, important element of this break with the past is the setting. While most of Carr's earlier plays are rooted in rural landscapes with tribal overtones, *Marble* is set in an anonymous, consumerist, status-obsessed city lacking beauty, denying solace, and suffocated by concrete buildings. It tells the story of an "impending catastrophe" (Carr 31)⁸ affecting the destinies of two adult couples

acclaimed works include *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats ...* (1998) and *On Raftery's Hill* (2000). This cycle is usually referred to by critics and scholars as the "Midlands Plays", given the extensive use of Hiberno-English and the rural, boggy setting where the action takes place.

⁷ On the home as a place of claustrophobia in Carr's work, see Sihra [2007 and 2005].

⁸ Hereafter, all parenthetical citations by page number in which author's name is not mentioned refer to Carr's *Marble*.

whose apparently stable, though narcoleptic marriages are endowed with all the material comforts and requirements of a bourgeois lifestyle. Art and Ben, the men, are long-standing friends as well as work colleagues. Every morning, they leave their suburban domestic microcosms behind, head to the city centre, engage in full-time professional activities to fulfil their families' economic needs and then indulge in collateral, after-work activities involving goliardic conversation and heavy drinking. Anne and Catherine, the women, spend their days indoors, weaving shrouds out of their household chores and boredom, struggling to find comfort in wine and compulsive shopping (Anne), or dyeing their hair (Catherine). They await the return of their husbands and then deliver monotonous accounts of a nightmarish routine consisting of crying children, cheap novels and insurmountable fatigue. The pattern of family life that emerges from the very first lines of the play is clearly one based on the sexual division of labour implied by the male breadwinner/female homemaker paradigm, whereby men are exclusively in charge of productive activities, while women are fully responsible for reproductive and care-related work, that is childbearing, childrearing and housekeeping. In this respect, the two single earner households in *Marble* are reminiscent of those scrutinized by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), since both Catherine's and Anne's lives are patterned according to their biological function. In a culture that glorifies women in their female role – as sexed beings defined by their reproductive capacity – it is not surprising that men – ignoring their own mortality – overtly reject their soon to be abject, ageing wives, as Ben does in Act One, Scene Two:

BEN: Auld ones dying don't interest me. Women who've stopped ovulating should die offstage. Who cares? [...]

CATHERINE: Someday I'll be old, if I'm lucky.

BEN: (*Examining her hair*) You need to do your roots again.

CATHERINE: Why can't you bear me getting old?

BEN: Women aren't allowed to get old. I mean of course you're allowed but it's not mannerly. It's somehow not appropriate. Old women interfere with my sense of myself.

CATHERINE: And what about old men?

BEN: Ah, men don't matter. Can't stand them. It's never about men.

CATHERINE: You're wrong as usual. It's all about men, always has been, we're not even allowed to grow old without your disdain. (19, 20)

However, one step from a disgusting future is an alarming present, since the scorn Ben pours on postmenopausal women ("those gangs of hags who go to flower show" [20]) is coupled with a pervasive indifference towards the embodied experiences of women in general, and with a constant minimization – if not a complete denial – of their active contribution to both family well-being and social welfare. Art's claim that "women [...] sit around doing nothing, complaining about never having a minute" (14) signals that Anne and Catherine's care-related work lacks, *de facto*, the acknowledgment and respect it deserves. The invisibility of their doings parallels the invisibility of their beings, as Ben's following lines suggest:

ART: [...] I can't remember the last time I saw Catherine, spoke to her, I can't visualize her, she's blonde, right? Sandy blonde, darker in winter, blue eyes, is it? Or grey?

BEN: I don't know.

ART: You don't know the colour of your wife's eyes?

BEN: They keep changing. Last night they were brown. [...] She's just a woman like any other. I can't see the individual in her, the space that defines her, that makes her who she is. I suppose I haven't thought about her in a long time and now, when I'm forced to look at her, she's not there, she's so strange all of a sudden. (34)

Ben's failure to remember the colour of Catherine's eyes is indicative of a permanent lack of eye contact and genuine communication between them. In fact, both Ben and Art are so absorbed in their work and afterwork activities that not only is any form of care and other unpaid work alien to them, but they are also largely oblivious to both their wives' and children's lives. While Art ignores how his "moody wagon" (13) spends her time and even gets his "young fella's" (12) First Communion mixed up with Confirmation, Ben, who claims to be "a good husband and father" (14), is unaware of his children's habits, whims, and fears, as his clueless attitude during a

typical late evening exchange reveals:

Enter Catherine in nightdress with glass of wine and a child's story-book. A child cries offstage.

CATHERINE: Go to sleep now – good boy – I'll be up in a minute. (*Under her breath*) Oh Christ, give me a break! (*Enter Ben*).

BEN: What's wrong with him?

CATHERINE: He just won't settle. I've read him three stories.

BEN: I'll go up.

CATHERINE: Give him a minute, he might drop off.

BEN: Does he cry every night?

CATHERINE: Most nights, yes.

BEN: It's pitiful.

CATHERINE: After seventeen years of crying children you get pretty immune.

BEN: Why is he crying?

CATHERINE: Because he wants a chocolate bar and I wouldn't give him one, then he wanted me to cut my hair off and leave it on the pillow which I cruelly refused to do and then he wanted to paint his nails pink. But he's really crying because he can't make sense of this world and neither can his mother. (29)

If, on the one hand, men are estranged from both domesticity and affectivity, women – by virtue of their sex – are “assigned a destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations” (Foucault 100) that keeps them in a lethargic, almost larval, state. Both Catherine and Anne wander around fully equipped kitchens and luxurious living rooms, in slippers, bathrobe or nightdress, struggling to “write the day off like any yesterdays and all the tomorrows” (64), and “waiting for it all to end” (26). To borrow Friedan's words, they are confined to a “comfortable concentration camp” (Friedan 307). However, as Catherine points out to her husband, “there is always regret for the life you didn't lead”, because “the life not lived is what kills” (17).

The lingering poison that is killing the characters' vital force, numbing desire and eroding their marriages from the inside, is a dull routine made of “the stuff the drones take care of” (55): cooking, cleaning, washing, minding children, paying bills and taxes, and the

like. In brief, all those paid and unpaid activities that, in Anne and Ben's views respectively, are necessary for family life "to run smoothly, without event or upset" (55), and to "rear our young until they can survive without us" (57). However tedious for both men and women, this routine has gender-specific implications that are particularly unfavorable to those whose lifetime and energies are devoted primarily to care-related tasks. As Simone de Beauvoir famously pointed out in *The Second Sex* (1949), homemakers who lack an individual interest, purpose, or future plan are doomed to stagnancy by the very repetition of their chores, the humdrum setting they are confined to, and the isolation and fatal lack of stimulation they experience on an everyday basis, while breadwinners, "as worker[s] and citizen[s] transcending toward the universal, can savor contingent pleasures prior to marriage and outside of married life" (de Beauvoir 517). In such a gender-biased framework, women have "no choice but to build a stable life where the present, prolonging the past, escapes the threats of tomorrow" (de Beauvoir 535). The survival strategy developed by Anne – whose professed motto is "keep the head down, stay out of trouble, hold fast to those you need and who need you" (55) – is also along these lines:

ANNE: I live by ritual, repetition. This old machine thrives on cappuccinos and emptying the dishwasher and polishing my white marble tiles in the hall. [...] And every morning I decide what time I'll go to bed at. Before I get up I'll say to myself, okay, tonight bedtime is at ten for you, missus, or nine or eleven. It's a matter of light policing of myself, not engaging because I've long figured out there's nothing there to engage with. Just a simple police state. At the appointed hour I do this or that and so time does not encroach on me or weigh me down or disturb me in any way. (51, 52)

Anne's escape into noncommitment⁹ anchors her to "a gilded mediocrity with neither passion nor ambition", made of "days leading nowhere, repeating themselves indefinitely, a life that slips toward death without looking for answers" (de Beauvoir 534).

That deadly grind comprising stasis and repetition begins to crumble when Catherine and Art start dreaming the same erotic

⁹ On noncommitment as a strategy to evade individual growth, see Anghal [1953].

dreams: they make love, overwhelmed by an all-absorbing passion, in a dazzling marble room of classic proportions, a metaphor of both unattainable beauty and inescapable mortality. Art's first smug confession to Ben occurs during a male *tête-à-tête* over cigars and brandies, and is soon followed by Catherine's ecstatic account of an identical dream permeated with "wild pleasure" (18). What initially appears to be an exceptional coincidence turns very soon into "an escape of sorts, a co-ordinated escape while staying put" (19). As the play unfolds, the erotic dreams intensify, while Catherine grows increasingly dependent on them. For her, dreaming sex not only counters the "grey nightmare" of reality "with its ridiculous rules and its lack of primary colours" (60), but it is also the only way to access and cherish her innermost, long-forgotten self. As Friedan points out, "for the woman who lives through the feminine mystique, there is no road to achievement, or status, or identity, except the sexual one" (Friedan 266), which partially accounts for Catherine's retreat into her oneiric world. There, she becomes a "sex-seeker, [...] one who seeks her self in sex" (Friedan 333) and in so doing she follows – in Foucauldian terms – the subtlest dictates of the deployment of sexuality:

It is through sex [...] that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility [...], to the whole of his body [...], to his identity [...] By creating the imaginary element that is "sex", the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex – the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted "sex" itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected – the dark shimmer of sex. (Foucault 125-26)

However imbued with Foucauldian resonances, Catherine and Art's erotic dreams are more similar to an epiphany than a shimmering mirage, as they soon take on more than sexual connotations and become, in Catherine's words, "a signal, a beacon, not important in itself but a sign that has brought me to a different place" (58). In fact,

it is precisely while sleeping and dreaming that Catherine grasps the somnambulistic quality of her dreary existence, as the absolute pleasure she experiences during oneiric intercourse with Art contrasts with the appalling vacuum, the feeling of purposelessness, and the sense of futility that permeate both her conjugal and her parenting routine. As the dreams recur with increasing vividness and poignancy, their disruptive force escalates, until Catherine comes to the realisation that her “waking life is just pretence” (39). The more she sleeps, the more she wakes up to a painful longing for wholeness and self-fulfilment. The more she dreams, the more she breaks away from an abstract ideal feminine, passive and subservient, as a frustrated Ben reveals in Act Two, Scene Two:

ART: Is she improving?

BEN: Sleeps all day.

ART: So who’s looking after the kids?

BEN: No one. She sits like a statue at the kitchen table and they tiptoe round her. [...] I have a woman at home who sleeps twenty-four hours a day, she gets up in the middle of the night, eats crackers and hard-boiled eggs from their shells which she scatters around the carpets, the stairs. She hovers around windows, doorways, leans against the fence for an hour at a time, and then sinks back into her catatonic dream of you. I want my wife back. Look, I’m feeding and dressing a woman who no longer loves me and now I wonder if she ever has. I want her back. (47, 48)

Ben’s desperate need to bring his dysfunctional wife back within the parameters of social respectability and family obligations is diametrically opposed to Catherine’s eagerness to break through the inherent strictures and coercive implications of normative discursive practices, values, and attitudes.

Besides rejecting the constitutionally prescribed roles of devoted wife and committed mother, Catherine starts yearning for “the individual in her, the space that defines her, that makes her who she is” (34). In doing so, she goes beyond symbolic and actual thresholds to embrace subjectivity within difference, that is, through an intimate, horizontal encounter with the masculine – a new type of relation released from reproductive anxieties and animated by sheer pleasure. “I want to be that dream”, she says, “I want to live it. I want it to be my waking world” (42).

While Ben struggles to subject his wife's burning desire to the "codes, rules and contracts we must live by" (40), Art – through male solidarity and for the sake of his own marriage – strives to dismiss his and Catherine's ongoing dreams as irrelevant. Albeit different, their efforts are focused on a common goal, that is, the preservation of both sexual and family honour, two mutually reinforcing forms of symbolic capital that are closely interwoven with social status (Inglis and MacKeogh). However, when Catherine breaks the mould and casts off postures of loyalty and devotion, Ben is willing to transgress the unwritten code of sexual honour in order to restore the profaned sacredness of Irish motherhood and in an attempt to reassemble a fatally compromised union. Ben's dishonourable plea that his best friend and his wife should "puncture [their] wild fantasies" (46) and have an extramarital relationship, differs widely from Anne's intention to preserve the family unit, "the 'self-contained' unit in which the status quo is reproduced" (Conrad 134). When Catherine steps into her house to tell her about the dreams, she stubbornly refuses to engage in potentially subversive conversations:

ANNE: Other people's dreams don't interest me.

CATHERINE: Not even if they're about your husband?

ANNE: You dream about Art?

CATHERINE: I can't stop.

ANNE: Oh.

CATHERINE: Erotic dreams, like a drug.

ANNE: You can't have him.

CATHERINE: So you own him?

ANNE: I surely do.

CATHERINE: He's part of your police state?

ANNE: The chief superintendent. [...] Art belongs here. You can't have him. He is necessary for my life and my children's lives to run smoothly, without event or upset. (52-55)

Anne's pragmatism, as well as her claiming ownership over her husband, reveal a domineering attitude that, according to Friedan, is concomitant of both the feminine mystique and the homemaker role. While apparently running counter to female passivity, her possessive-

ness is a distinctive feature of what the psychiatrist Andras Angyal termed “vicarious living”, that is “a particularly structured dependence on another person, which [...] lack[s] all the essentials of genuine love – devotion, intuitive understanding, and delight in the being of the other person” (Angyal 358). In Anne’s view, Art’s presence is a functional element to the workings of the “empty fiction” that is their “great happy marriage” (66). As a self-confessed “housewife who does no housework” (53) and has lost “the energy for honesty” (25), alienated by the lack of personal commitment and social contacts, alcohol-dependent and “tired of living” (25), Anne needs to acquire status vicariously through her husband. Convinced as she is that “love [...] is about deals between strangers” (55), and that her life can revolve exclusively around her husband and children, she relies on Art, his work, and his money to compensate for her emptiness of self with both marital and material possession:

ANNE: I saw a red sofa today.

ART: Do we need another sofa?

ANNE: It’s just something to do. Order it. Pay for it. It won’t arrive for six months by which time we’ll have forgotten about it. I’d like to put it in the hall instead of that table.

ART: Then do.

ANNE: But where will I put the table?

ART: You know what, Anne? I don’t give a damn where you put the table. [...]

ANNE: It’s not even beautiful. I’m sick of it already. I bought it anyway.

ART: Then why ask my opinion?

ANNE: I want you to believe you are considered in the matter of sofas in your hall. (62-64)

Paradoxical as it may seem, Anne’s despotic attitude is a telltale sign of her subalternity, arising as it does from the inequalities ingrained in her marriage. In fact, while female homemakers are relegated to the domestic domain, male householders who have agency in the public sphere are often “in chains by their very sovereignty” (de Beauvoir 588). Estranged as they are from care work, men come to be seen as affectively ineffective beings, whose sole inescapable responsi-

bility is to earn money. A fatal lack of sympathy and mutual recognition marks their relationships with their wives, who end up merely considering them instrumental for material security, and annoying when it comes to sharing their space and time. In *Marble*, women's exasperation regarding men is an important theme that runs through the play. While Anne insistently enjoins Art to "go to work" and "eat out more" (63), Catherine admits to Ben that she envies widows, since once "they've buried their men" (20), they regain their "freedom" and "have a great time", with "no big man stomping round the kitchen rattling the knife drawer" (30). In Act One, Scene Eight, Anne turns down Art's attempt to have a "romantic conversation" (37) by refusing to tell him that she loves him; "I don't like to be coerced into those three words" – she says – "I'll tell you I love you if and when I feel like telling you" (37). Besides triggering a rising tide of resentment and hostility, this form of emotional tyranny reveals that, within a social and discursive order that denies women "the individual's rights and choices and responsibilities" (55) reducing their lives to "dreamless sleeps" (32), men are fellow victims, compelled to perform a stereotypical model of masculinity "made of steel and concrete to survive [...] the coldness of this world [...] the terrifying greyness that saturates" their "days and nights" (27, 44).

While Art wonders how to get from the dull "here" of his loveless marriage and lifeless routine to the promising "there" of the marble room, Catherine finally realizes that "there can be no change without change" (44). Thus, she decides to break through the family cell and head towards her "dream of marble", a radical gesture in which desire and the death instinct are deeply intertwined since "anything new – as she says – seems to imply [...] destruction", be it our ossified selves, preordained discourses, or codified gender roles. Just before slamming the door and leaving behind her "good life", "good man", and "beautiful children" (44), Catherine overtly discards her subalternity by asserting not only her right to speak, but, more importantly, her right to dream. She asks herself, and the astounded Ben:

CATHERINE: Why are we given such images, such sublime yearnings for things that are never there? A dream was given to me, inside me from birth, a dream of marble, a woman in a marble room with her lover. And all the waking world can do is thwart it and deny it, and say no, no, it

cannot be, childish, impossible, you must walk the grey paths with the rest of us, go down into the wet muck at the close. That's your lot. That's what you have to look forward to. Well, I refuse it, Ben, I refuse it. (44)

The act of dreaming allows human beings to access their innermost hopes and fears, as well as to envisage new existential possibilities and patterns of life; it also opens the way forward to transformative processes and risky ventures aimed at changing reality. In *Marble*, Art's strenuous resistance to the propulsive force of his dreams eventually weakens. His reluctance to yield to desire and to accept the painful awareness of his failed marriage, gives way to a blatant rejection of social conventions and family obligations. In line with the coolness that marks his conjugal relationship, he opts for a detached form of communication, drawing on storytelling, indirect speech and third person narrative in order to put Anne in the picture:

ART: The man got up and left the room, left his sleeping wife, his children, his sofas, his brandy, his expensive cigars, and he went and found the marble woman who lived not far. He went into her marble room and they lay down together and wept. That they should be so happy. That they should cause such suffering to the good-looking wife and the good husband and the healthy children and all the sofas. But even so they vowed to one another that they would stay in the marble room together forever. (65)

The word "together", uttered by Art to refer to his and Catherine's mutual commitment to share the joys and sorrows of their life-changing choice, is a poignant linguistic indicator that mirrors a significant shift in Carr's approach to gender dynamics and the relationship between the sexes. While her previous plays are centred upon memorable female characters who challenge the dictates of a "monosubjective culture" that is inhospitable to women, in *Marble* she explores the potentialities of what Luce Irigaray defined as "intersubjectivity", that is, "a philosophy [in which] we have to return behind or beyond all our discourses and knowledge, to keep silent to the speech of the other and [...] be capable of recognizing the other as other, to meet with him, or her" (Irigaray 3). It is worth pointing out that Catherine and Art's erotic encounters take place in the in-between space of their mutual dreams, "which belongs neither

to the one nor to the other, and which allows them to meet together”, while “maintaining the duality of subjectivities, and a space between them” (Irigaray 3). The crucial role that sexual pleasure plays in their oneiric awakenings is also noteworthy in this regard, since it is assigned a key function in Irigaray’s formulation of subjective duality:

[S]exual love could become the most specific meeting for our humanity if we succeed in remaining two in such an act and in making it the most total sharing between us. [...] [C]aressing would be an occasion or a way of remaining two, two different, and lead us to an awakening of a consciousness in part dormant or enslaved in our daily activities. Sexual relation could become a path to becoming more aware and attentive, above all to intersubjectivity, and to approaching each other instead of appropriating one another [...]. Thanks to sexual love we might become fecund, not only physically, but also subjectively, spiritually. (Irigaray 5)

Albeit made of “such stuff as dreams” (Shakespeare 254), the relationship between Catherine and Art is one in which individual pleasure opens the way forward to both self-awareness and mutual recognition. Once released from the economy of reproduction and from the mechanisms of knowledge and power that confine it within the family cell, sex can become a transcendental experience in which the basic, universal difference between “male and female” (13) that Art and Catherine perceive so clearly during their erotic dreams, serves as the “the basis of all relations, not only emotional, sexual or maternal” (Irigaray xiv). Furthermore, sexual difference might turn from a root cause of discrimination into the major premise of an authentically equal humanity, in which every person can “relate with the other not only at the level of instinct or drive in all its forms but at the level of breath, of love, of speaking-with and listening-to” (Irigaray xiv).

In writing on the legacy of androcentric symbolic and discursive practices on mainstream contemporary Irish theatre, Mary Trotter points out that “Irish female characters have embodied the nation, the land, the desires or responsibilities of male characters, but rarely have they been authentic, complex, autonomous women” (Trotter 164). In *Marble*, not only does Marina Carr counter what Eavan Boland defines as a “corrupt transaction between nationalism and literature which feminized the national and nationalized the feminine” (Boland 7), but she also shows that “even those who seem empowered within the system, are held hostage by it, trapped within

the family cell” (Conrad 4). At the end of the play, both Catherine and Art rebel against the epistemic violence ingrained in their “happy little nation” (62) and decide to break through their respective claustrophobic domesticity, leaving an enraged husband and a vengeful wife behind them. By doing so, they are “refusing to pay their respects to the state they are in and are thus redefining the politics and meanings of ‘Irishness’” (Smyth 205). Recalcitrant as they are at the prospect of “dying of an empty heart” (54), they embark on a transformative journey that implies a brave abdication of social, emotional and psychological security. Their transcendental longing for individual pleasure and mutual recognition triggers a joint quest for subjective duality that subverts patriarchal dogmas and adds new perspectives to long-standing *topoi*, thus creating a politically expressive and aesthetically powerful literary work that destabilizes conventionally accepted notions of femininity and masculinity, while opening up theatre to a less gender-blind and more complex representation of both women and men.

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Peter Hanly as Ben and Aisling O'Sullivan as Catherine in Marina Carr's *Marble*. Abbey Theatre (Dublin, Ireland), 2009. Photo by Colm Hogan.



Aisling O'Sullivan as Catherine and Derbhle Crotty as Anne in Marina Carr's *Marble*. Abbey Theatre (Dublin, Ireland), 2009. Photo by Colm Hogan.

Valentina Rapetti Interviews Marina Carr

MR Thinking about this interview and looking back at your career and achievements, I suddenly realized that you have been writing professionally for a quarter century now, which is impressive.

MC I am old!

VR I didn't mean to be rude, but I had to say it, because twenty five years is a considerable amount of time.

MC I have never had a proper job in my life.

VR What is it that keeps you going? How challenging is it to keep on going on such a long creative journey, to explore new narratives, structures, characters; to approach time and space in different ways and to constantly renew one's approach, one's perspective on things?

MC Well, I suppose having, as you said, been writing for a quarter of a century, I spend a lot of time now just trying to live – and avoid writing until I just can't put it off anymore. When you have written a lot, and there's something about getting older, and the more you have lived. I think Wilde said – and I am paraphrasing now – that when he was younger he sat and he wrote and he understood nothing and now that he understood everything he couldn't write. Now, I do not feel remotely like that, but I do think that the older you get the more you know, and it is almost as if it becomes shorthand. Things that you were passionate about when you were twenty-two, twenty-three you are not passionate about at thirty-two, thirty-three or forty-two, forty-three or forty-nine and a half. It is a completely different set of interests. Also, I think with time, there is a sense of accretion. You know, they say when you are putting on a

play you should always follow the seasons. I think I follow the seasons, in a way; this is certainly my intention. I write about things that I find disturbing and that I need to figure out. There are points in one's life, there are times of great confusion, when I think it is better not to write but just to try to figure out what it is. And read great books and drink great wine and try to be good with your children and your husband and all that sort of thing; and then I think there is a time to write. I don't know if that answered your question.

VR You started writing professionally in the late Eighties. Your first plays, *Ullaloo* and *Low in the Dark*, are usually referred to by critics as absurdist plays. Then came the so-called Midlands cycle which includes *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats*, *On Raftery's Hill* and *Ariel*. All of these plays are set in rural Ireland and have resonances with classical tragedies and myths. They are written in Hiberno-English and explore issues of both national and gender identity, memory, violence, death, the supernatural and the afterlife. More recently you have written three chamber plays: *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006), *The Cordelia Dream* (2008), and *Marble* (2009). In 2011, *16 Possible Glimpses*, a play based on the life of Anton Chekhov, premiered at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin. Then you moved back to Greek myth with *Phaedra Backwards*. Is there a central thread in your writing? Can you trace different phases in your work as most critics seem to do?

MC Well, the short answer is no. I leave that up to the critics, but I suppose there are themes that interest me. Not that I would ever think in terms of that, because I think when you are writing something, well, for me anyway, I have a very practical approach to writing. It is to get to the end of the page, to the end of the scene, it is trying to figure out. At its best, it's chasing your characters by the tail, almost at its best, and it does not happen very often. At best, I think, you generally do not know what it is that you have written until it is written. And it's almost as if someone else comes along and explains to you what you have written. I'm talking about a goal that happens maybe two, three times, maybe once in a decade. The rest of the time it is the job of writing, it is digging, it is excavation, it is rewriting. As for the themes thing, as you are aware, I am fascinated by the Greek stories. I am absolutely no expert, I am not a Greek scholar, I just love the stories: they are archetypal, huge, huge stories and I think

they are *there*. As Roberto Calasso says, at the beginning of *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, quoting Sallust: “These things never happened, but are always”. And I think what a wonderful definition for myth and all of these stories. They are there for all of us, I think, to take from and to keep reinventing, to use, to understand what it is to be here, to try and make sense – and for me being very practical and a magpie. And it is the job of a playwright. These stories are there to be reworked and used.

VR How long does it usually take you to write a play? Do you work at different things at the same time?

MC Yes, I would have a couple of things going on at the same time. The writing takes a minimum two years. For example, the play on Chekhov, *16 Possible Glimpses*, took about nine years, because I was just so dissatisfied with everything I wrote about him. I eventually figured out something, but that was unusually long. Generally about two years, four drafts. As a kind of rule of thumb, I would do four drafts, but I would finish a draft of one thing and then start another thing. In this kind of circular way.

VR How much are you typically involved in the staging process of your plays? Do you like being involved during rehearsals or do you just let the play go once it is written? Does the staging process affect your writing in any way? I mean, has it ever occurred to you to change a line or the structure of a scene after a rehearsal session, a reading with the actors or a conversation with the director?

MC Yes. If it is a new play I would be as involved as I am allowed. Sometimes it depends on your relationship with the director. If you can have a decent conversation, very often I have that privilege, but sometimes I have not got on so well with directors. Some directors, you know, they like their playwrights either dead or absent, so you know you are dealing with that, and then you have some directors who are open. I also believe there is a time when the writer has to withdraw from the rehearsal room. But I think particularly with the new work, because it is so untested and nobody really knows what it is about and what it means, I think that it is helpful if the writer is there some of the time, just for emphasis on certain things. And then I think once the play has had its first

production, you kind of have to let it go off into the world and wish it the best and bless it – and off it goes.

VR So, you don't keep working on it? Once it is over, it is over.

MC No, once it is done, it is done.

VR We are here today to discuss the place of gender and violence in contemporary theatre by women playwrights writing from different cultural contexts and perspectives. Could you tell us what place, and how much space, these two issues occupy in your work? The emphasis on certain female characters in some of your plays, the focus on the theme of violence itself, are these things intentional, or did they just happen to you during the creative process? In other words, where do you start from when you begin writing a new play? Do you start from a character, a situation, an image, a plot, a particular theme you want to explore?

MC Well, it is different every time. Seeing that this conference is on gender and violence I was looking at your questions over the last few days, and I was trying to think. I mean, in a sense this is a fantastic umbrella for a conference, because these issues are unavoidable. Gender is unavoidable and violence is unavoidable. So, you are covering all the bases, in a way. I do not intentionally set out to deal with gender or violence, but I think by their existence, by their definition, they just seem to be there. When I write absolutely normal scenes and then people come up afterwards and say, "That is really perverse" or "that is so far out there" I am always shocked and amazed at what they consider functionality or dysfunctionality, because I have to say I have yet to meet a functional person. I think we are all walking dysfunctionals and desperately trying to disguise and appear, and put our best foot forward. Of the ninety-five million voices in here we generally express the one that is simplest, and that we think is going to be the most acceptable. And generally that voice is the voice that people will actually like you for; if you speak and behave in a certain way, then you will have approval and this is the way we are all brought up. The whole idea of violence is fascinating. Language is violence. Language coming out of women's mouths has violence. That always fascinates me, because a woman saying something is threatening and this fear around the articulation of women I

think it's the balls, it is our defence. Because physically we are never going to be top of the heap we happen to be in – we do not have that strength – I think. Nothing happens where the wheel turns, as Eliot says, but I think this last couple of millennia have not been great for old women, not since the Bronze Age, but maybe it will come back around. But until then I think our great defence is our capacity to articulate very finely all the emotions, and this is threatening for a lot of people, not just for men. I think it is threatening for other women, it is threatening to ourselves. I think women are constantly policing themselves around violence, around gender, around language and around this whole discourse. I think it is almost impossible to have an honest conversation around these subjects; that is what I feel. Whenever you open your mouth you are going to annoy everybody and life is too short to be annoying everybody. I am constantly saying I am going to shut up, which I am going to do now!

VR Is reading an important part of your creative process? How much time do you devote to reading and how much time do you spend on writing in your daily routine?

MC Well, the last couple of months not so much because I have been teaching to make some money. When I am working, three hours in the morning would be the maximum if it is a new thing. I feel tired after three hours – that is as much as I will do. Even if I had the whole day to myself I would not spend it writing. I would read all day and all night – I often read myself blind: poetry, Shakespeare, fiction. Music is another huge influence; painting is a huge thing. Basically filling up all the senses and then you see a lot comes out. Harold Bloom said that all art is just misinterpretation of the art that has come before you. You take something, you try and copy it and you get it desperately wrong and this is called whatever.

VR What are, or have been, your recurrent sources of inspiration when it comes to books and authors? I dare say that Shakespeare and the Greeks have certainly been a constant point of reference in your work. Are there other writers you go back to with pleasure? And could you tell us something more about your fascination with Anton Chekhov, the man and the playwright, or the man first and then the playwright?

MC I was fascinated by him because, well, he was dead at forty-four, tuberculosis or consumption. Before penicillin that is what happened, everyone died – one of the good things about this century is that we have penicillin. What fascinated me about him was what he achieved in such a short time, but also the humanity of the man. I mean, writers are generally not people you would look up to for moral guidance, but I think he was an exception. I think he had a civic conscience, something that I certainly like. I think it is a civic responsibility, a civic conscience to actually have the capacity to think so largely outside one's self and one's own selfish concerns; I think he had that in spades. He built schools, hospitals, he was always saving people's lives, he wrote four hundred stories and he wrote between fifteen and twenty plays (I cannot remember how many). He looked after his family, he had all these passionate love affairs, he married Olga Knipper, though it was not a love marriage. He lost the great love of his life, Lika Mizinova. Just a fascinating life and then to realize, because he was a doctor, he would be taken out at forty four. He knew all of this and then his absolute denial of it: I am not sick, I am not sick, I am perfectly healthy. And I think that is what allowed him to live for so long, but he actually denied it. He travelled across Siberia, basically 3,000 miles, 6,000 miles across Russia, crossed Lake Baikal to this penal colony, Sakhalin, and he did a survey on all the convicts there, their families, their children. He wrote a 1,000-page book on it. He was a passionate fisherman, he loved his vodka, his dogs. Just the energy, the sheer love of life, the sheer exuberance. And part of why I wanted to write about him was, I don't know how Chekhov is presented over here, but at home he is portrayed like this fellow who is like a hundred and fifty five who never had an erotic thought in his life. And he kind of belongs to all these old men of letters in Ireland and England. When I wrote the play there were an awful lot of people who were really annoyed that I dared write about Chekhov. Who was I to even think about going near this icon who they turn into this whole fuddy-duddy, but I said no, actually he was not. Actually by the time the play finally got on, I was older than he was when he died. Think about the idea of dying that young and this whole thing, all of his life never wanting to be married and then finally he married a woman he did not love. Then this obsession towards the end of his life about having a child, when the great love of his life had a child with his best friend – and just did it to get back at him because he would not commit to her. You see all this kind of

madness going on in his life and then you have this anodyne presentation of him and I was just trying to stir that up a little bit. That is Chekhov. My other fascination is Virginia Woolf. I think she is one of the greatest prose stylists of the twentieth century. For me, she surpasses Joyce, Beckett, Pound, all of them. I know that is saying enough; there are enough people ready to say “How dare you say that?” But think about her wit, what she can carry in a sentence. She can carry six unspoken thoughts that apparently we can just about trace back. We say one thing when six things happened. She can carry all those in a sentence. Joyce cannot do that, Beckett cannot do that, Pound cannot do that. She can do it. She is hilarious, she is so quirky and fascinating, tortured, a tortured life. I mean you look outside before, you know, you look in. You know, to the Bloomsbury set and you think “Oh, what a privileged life”, and you start reading about her and her life and breaking down the life she had. You know her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the biographer, and all of that, and then that she wasn’t educated, well he educated her at home, but she wasn’t sent to school. Her brothers went to college and then there was this mother who was a martyr, out saving everybody’s life; no time for her children except for bossing them around. And the brothers and the abuse from her brothers, the marriage to Leonard Woolf and her extraordinary books. Just the most absolutely incredibly beautifully written prose I think that exists in the English language outside Shakespeare. She fascinates me, she always has, so that is my obsession of the minute.

VR One last question: what are you working on at the moment?

MC I finished a play on Hecuba for the Royal Shakespeare Company. It will not go on until next year. I finished a children’s play for The Ark, which is a children’s theatre in Dublin about a witch called *Beetlefang*, and I am about to start another play which I am ashamed not to have started yet. I keep pulling it off. The older you get, and the writers among you will know this, your entry point becomes a tougher and tougher decision. You become spoilt for choice. When I started writing I used to just sit down and write and I got to page sixty and I wrote the end. It was so liberating just to do that; now I ask myself “Where am I going to start?”

From:
Marble by Marina Carr

SCENE THREE

Sound of ANNE, off.

ANNE: Come in. Come in. Honestly. Once I answer the door I let people in.

CATHERINE: What a lovely hall.

ANNE: Of course I never have visitors.

CATHERINE: (*Entering, followed by Anne*) I don't either. I hope you don't think it odd of me just dropping in without calling first.

ANNE: It's very odd. You're lucky I wasn't napping.

CATHERINE: How are you?

ANNE: Keeping going, keeping going.

CATHERINE: Yes, I can see you're keeping going with that bright smile on your face.

ANNE: Is it bright, my smile? Well, it was the smile I was given or maybe I learned it along the way. Will I make tea? Wine? Coffee?

CATHERINE: I brought you these. (*Flowers*)

ANNE: No, keep them for yourself.

CATHERINE: Well, they're dead. I certainly don't want them. Why do people bring dead things to one another?

ANNE: Look, I've enough rubbish in my life. It's a lovely thought, though.

CATHERINE: I don't suppose you heard I've been – I don't know – not myself anyway.

ANNE: You look fine to me.

CATHERINE: But I'm not, despite the lipstick and the new shawl and

trousers – I'm very far from myself right now.

ANNE: Yes, Art told me. Ben is very worried about you.

CATHERINE: Feel I've been peeled like an onion. I'm down to the core and there's nothing there.

ANNE: There's breathing.

CATHERINE: Moss breathes. Cement breathes.

ANNE: As long as you're breathing there's something going on.

CATHERINE: But the mind, the heart, the soul, whatever it is that's me is just not there. Maybe it never was. I am far more than just breath.

ANNE: No, you're not. None of us are. You're smoke. A light breeze will blow you away.

CATHERINE: You're one of those old cynics.

ANNE: I just don't expect anything. I live by ritual, repetition. This old machine thrives on cappuccinos and emptying the dishwasher and polishing my white marble tiles in the hall. I'm in love with those tiles. I made Art import them.

CATHERINE: Yes, I noticed them.

ANNE: I love the sheen, the light, the texture and grain.

CATHERINE: And that's enough for you?

ANNE: I do have a few other things, of course, to disguise the journey.

CATHERINE: Like what?

ANNE: Am I boring you?

CATHERINE: No, tell me.

ANNE: Well, I have half a bottle of red wine in the evening. Every evening. I think I would murder someone if I couldn't have my three glasses of red wine in the evening. I measure them out. Generous measures. And I have a cigarette with each glass. I'm not a fascist about the cigarettes but I must have the wine. No one, but no one, can interfere with that.

CATHERINE: It's very – I don't know what.

ANNE: Yes, I refuse to panic.

- CATHERINE: What else do you do?
- ANNE: I read to the children.
- CATHERINE: Everyone does that. That's nothing to sustain you. Even I read to the children.
- ANNE: And something a lot of people don't realize and forget to do and become depressed or psychopaths, but I figured out years ago.
- CATHERINE: What?
- ANNE: I leave the lights on all day in winter, lamps, over-head lights, every light blazing in the house, all winter.
- CATHERINE: Your battle against the dark.
- ANNE: Pathetic I know but I need to. It keeps me – I suppose it keeps me here.
- CATHERINE: So you refuse darkness, you deny it. Do you sleep with the lights blazing?
- ANNE: Until Art comes to bed. Then I don't mind if they're off.
- CATHERINE: He's like a lamp, is he?
- ANNE: And every morning I decide what time I'll go to bed at. Before I get up I'll say to myself, okay, tonight bedtime is at ten for you, missus, or nine or eleven. It's a matter of light policing of myself, not engaging because I've long figured out there's nothing there to engage with. Just a simple police state. At the appointed hour I do this or that and so time does not encroach on me or weigh me down or disturb me in any way.
- CATHERINE: Is my visit disturbing you?
- ANNE: There is room for the unplanned, up to a point.
- CATHERINE: This is what Art is married to. What Art comes home to in the evening, kisses goodbye in the morning. This is what Art is so desperate to hold onto.
- ANNE: I'm past caring how I appear. As long as it keeps me off window ledges.
- CATHERINE: You like window ledges?
- ANNE: What woman doesn't? It's one of the big themes, isn't it?

- CATHERINE: So seductive to fly off one.
- ANNE: The will I, won't I, thrill of it.
- CATHERINE: And do you dream?
- ANNE: Why?
- CATHERINE: Because I do.
- ANNE: Other people's dreams don't interest me.
- CATHERINE: Not even if they're about your husband?
- ANNE: You dream about Art?
- CATHERINE: I can't stop.
- ANNE: Oh.
- CATHERINE: Erotic dreams, like a drug.
- ANNE: You can't have him.
- CATHERINE: So you own him?
- ANNE: I surely do.
- CATHERINE: He's part of your police state?
- ANNE: The chief superintendent. I'd rather you didn't dream about him.
- CATHERINE: So would everyone.
- ANNE: It's time for my wine. (*Pours*) Do you want a glass?
- CATHERINE: Only if it doesn't interfere with your quota.
- ANNE: I have cases of it. (*Hands her a glass of wine. Catherine takes it, wanders around. Anne lights a cigarette, watches her*) It's messy. There are cobwebs and I don't wash windows or floors, gave that up a few years ago. I'm a housewife who does no housework.
- CATHERINE: There are a lot of us. (*Photo*) Is that one of your sons?
- ANNE: That's Art. That's what he looked like when I met him. I took it. He'd just caught his first salmon of the season.
- CATHERINE: He's so beautiful.
- ANNE: (*Looks at photo*) Yeah – he was.
- CATHERINE: Can I have it?

- ANNE: Just because I give you a glass of wine doesn't mean you can bare your soul to me. I hate confessions. I can't stand them.
- CATHERINE: I would like this photograph. I could get a copy made and return it to you. And since I've lost all my pride asking you I think you should give it to me.
- ANNE: I don't like to see people without their pride – Take it then – as a loan.
- CATHERINE: Thank you. (*She puts it in her bag*)
- ANNE: Would you like a cigarette?
- CATHERINE: I don't smoke.
- ANNE: Is there anything else you want?
- CATHERINE: Your life. I'll just drink this and go.
- ANNE: What is it?
- CATHERINE: Oh, you don't want to know.
- ANNE: You came to tell me something.
- CATHERINE: Did I?
- ANNE: I thought you were a missionary at the door before I recognized you. You want to convert me to something.
- CATHERINE: I had something to say but it seems appalling now in front of your wholesome decency.
- ANNE: My wholesome decency?
- CATHERINE: I don't mean it as an insult, or maybe I do. I don't know anymore, but you've read the book on etiquette. You're too civilized for me.
- ANNE: What else is there?
- CATHERINE: There's more, believe me, there's more.
- ANNE: Like what?
- CATHERINE: No, you're too innocent, too decent. You've it all planned to your grave. I wish I had a grave plan, a scheme that would take me to the end without my noticing. I should congratulate you on the ingenious scaffolding you hang about yourself to evade time which is really just another name for emptiness. Oh the emptiness, the emptiness, to die of an empty heart must

surely be a crime. Here (*photo*), take this back. I don't know how I could've asked for it.

ANNE: Keep it. It's nothing.

CATHERINE: It's not nothing. It's your husband.

ANNE: That's not him. He's as dead to me in that photo as someone from the eleventh century.

CATHERINE: And is he alive for you now? As he is now?

ANNE: What an odd question.

CATHERINE: He is dreaming about me.

ANNE: So that's what's wrong with him. That's all. Thank God. I thought he had cancer and wasn't telling me.

CATHERINE: You don't believe in the finer things, do you? The subtle things that quicken the blood and quiver the knee?

ANNE: Oh, I believe in them, too much to ever mention them. My motto is keep the head down, stay out of trouble, hold fast to those you need and who need you.

CATHERINE: I used to be like that, too.

ANNE: I know it's not living on the edge but there isn't room on the edge for everyone. Countries have to be run, children fed, taxes paid, all the stuff the drones take care of while you lost little wisps have your crises. Art belongs here. You can't have him. He is necessary for my life and my children's lives to run smoothly, without event or upset.

CATHERINE: So you decide everything for Art.

ANNE: Always have. Is it not that way for everyone else?

CATHERINE: No, it's not.

ANNE: They just don't realize it yet.

CATHERINE: No, there's a percentage, dwindling yes, but a number nevertheless who believe in the individual and the individual's rights and choices and responsibilities.

ANNE: The only individuals I know are in mental hospitals or remote rural parts of the country which are really just open asylums. Do you want to end up there? Drugged to the eyeballs, weeping for having crossed the line?

- CATHERINE: Is that what you're afraid of?
- ANNE: Crossing the line? To be sure I am. And let me tell you something, Catherine, you can cross as many lines as you want but I won't let you take Art with you. You'd probably survive. He won't. Just what do you expect? For me to hand him to you on a platter?
- CATHERINE: Not quite, but I didn't expect such fierce holding on to someone you no longer love.
- ANNE: Leave love out of it. It's about deals. Deals between strangers. That's your definition of love. (*Pours wine*) You want another glass?
- CATHERINE: No, I'll go. Just another thing. Whatever I am, a blunderer, a fool, I am not heartless. You're the heartless one, talking about yourself and Art like that. You are people, you are here, you will never be again. How can you be so hard on him? How can you be so terrible to yourself?
- ANNE: And Ben?
- CATHERINE: Ben is none of your business. This has nothing to do with Ben. It was stupid of me to come.

And exit Catherine.

“THE HOUSE IS A BATTLEFIELD NOW”

War of the Sexes and Domestic Violence
in Van Badham’s *Kitchen*
and Warren Adler’s *The War of the Roses*

by Barbara Miceli

“It is commonly admitted – writes Germaine Greer – that there is a battle waging between the sexes but like most other facts which we dare not directly contemplate it is most commonly referred to facetiously” (Greer 242). The statements seem to be reflected in the two plays examined here. The battlefield, and also the point of contention, is the home. The war between the husband and the wife, struggling to destroy each other, although having a dramatic outcome, is represented by the authors with a grotesque and often comic tone.

The War of the Roses (2008) is the theatrical version of the novel written in 1981 by the American author Warren Adler. It was turned into an iconic movie starring Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas in 1989. The core of the story is the stormy divorce between Barbara and Jonathan Rose, an upper-middle class couple that engages in a war, which quotes the historical War of the Roses (Wagner)¹ in the title, to decide who should keep the house they both adore and claim as their own.

¹ The War of the Roses was a series of battles fought in England between the two rival branches of the House of the Plantagenet, the York and the Lancaster. It was named “War of the Roses” because the two royal houses heraldic badges were a white rose (York) and a red one (Lancaster). The battles began in 1455 and ended in 1487 with the victory of the Lancaster (Wagner). The historical event was probably used by Adler to symbolize the war for the possession of the house between two components of the same family.

Kitchen (2001)² is a play by the Australian playwright Van Badham. It depicts the battle within a young couple of human resources managers in their late twenties, Helene and Owen, who start fighting when he is fired from the company for which they both work and he is forced to find an alternative way to pay his share of the house mortgage.

Both the plays, besides the material aspect of the contention, deal with the war between the sexes, and they do it by displaying many gender stereotypes to show how, during a domestic war, they can all be subverted. Here, the violence, usually associated more with men than with women (Dutton and Nicholls 681)³ becomes totally ‘ungendered’ and reciprocal. The “potential war zone that characterizes heterosexual relationships” (Allegranti 41) loses its potentiality and becomes actual, allowing the characters to give “a performance of gender” (Miller 19), where many expectations about men and women fail to apply. Rather, the plays show a similar pattern in the way the war between husband and wife is led, with common features and a similar outcome.

The setting of the plays is the house, since, as Greer claims, “the real theatre of the sex war [...] is the domestic heart” (245). The house of *Kitchen* is defined as an “executive apartment” (*Kitchen* 1) that of a “two-income couple in which the woman as well as the man holds a fulfilling, high-income professional position” (Somerville and Grimshaw 604), while the house in *The War of the Roses* is described by Jonathan as “a spectacular house” (*The War of the Roses* 16)⁴. Both the homes define the high economic and social status of the couples.

The very heart of the house is the kitchen, where the whole play of Badham takes place, and the room of which Barbara Rose is most proud:

BARBARA: Not the kitchen. The kitchen is mine. He didn’t pay for the whole kitchen. He has no rights to the kitchen. (*The War of the Roses* 44)

² The text “Kitchen” by Van Badham was provided by the author, and is heretofore abbreviated as *Kitchen*.

³ Dutton and Nicholls argue that there exists a sort of unreliable “paradigm” in which “spouse assault was exclusively male perpetrated” and that “female intimate violence, to the extent that it existed at all, was defensive and inconsequential”.

⁴ Heretofore abbreviated as *The War of the Roses*.

Barbara's attachment to the kitchen is based on her aim to start a catering business, selling her pâté to the French Market, hence freeing herself from the label of housewife. Paradoxically, the place that was the symbol of her housewifery could, in her project, become the instrument enabling her to be a career woman.

The choice of such a setting, in both cases, is clearly a reference to the common belief that the kitchen is the female sanctuary *par excellence*, a place described by the suburban housewives "as if it were the Hall of mirrors" (Friedan 58), and hence the ideal setting to subvert the ancient principle "that women belong in the kitchen" (Lasch 4). Another stereotype the two plays deal with is that which sees men as "strong and free" (Vilar 25) and the only labor force. The principle is proved wrong by the fact that male weakness is what starts the war between the spouses.

In the first scene of *Kitchen*, Owen tries to kill himself putting his head in the oven because he has just lost his job. The way he chose to commit suicide reminds that of the American poet Sylvia Plath, who killed herself in 1963 putting her head in the oven of her London house (Middlebrook 211)⁵. But, differently from the poet, Owen's attempt is unsuccessful because, as Helene says when she comes back home from work, "you didn't even know how to turn on the gas" (*Kitchen* 5) reinforcing the cliché that sees men as unfit to carry out 'female' practices such as cooking or cleaning the house.

A moment of weakness also starts up the war between Barbara and Jonathan Rose. During a meeting in New York, where he works as a lawyer for a law firm, he feels an "excruciating" chest pain. Hospitalized for a presumed heart attack, and afraid to die, he is discharged with the diagnosis of hiatus hernia. It is probably not a coincidence that the author chose a disease linked with the digestive system, hence to food, on which his wife is building her career upon. Expecting to see Barbara there to comfort him, he comes back home just to find her busy admiring the objects with which she adorned the house. Called by the doctors, she had chosen not to go to the hospital because she had suddenly "savored the possibility of my freedom" (*The War of the Roses* 35).

Jonathan's reaction to his wife coldness displays another gender

⁵ Among the reasons of the poet's suicide, there seems to be her inability to conciliate the identity of poet and woman of letters with that of mother and housewife (Dickie 10).

stereotype, or rather gender expectation:

JONATHAN: I don't get it. *A wife is supposed to care*. I thought I was dying. So did they, at first. I was in pain. I am your husband. *A wife is supposed to care about what happens to her husband*. (*The War of the Roses* 34)

With the claim of what a wife “is supposed to do”, Jonathan seems to agree with Betty Friedan when she writes that a good suburban wife is “concerned only about her husband” (Friedan 13). So, the fact that Barbara does not fulfill her husband expectations, and generally what is expected from a wife, brings the first disruption of the gender related ‘norm’. Since gender identity, as Judith Butler claims, “is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction or taboo” (Butler 1988: 520), Barbara is virtually violating a rule related to her gender and her role. “Certain kinds of acts – as Butler maintains – are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity [...]. These acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way” (Butler 1988: 528) since “the characters themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignation” (Butler 2004: 27-28). This concept will be examined further later.

What connects both the couples is the obsession for their home. The core of their struggle becomes the material embodiment of “the human experiment in cooperation” which is “by nature’s standards so productive, so ambitious”, and the reason for human couples’ fights (Seabright 11). The attachment to the material aspects of the matrimonial contract does not depend on the lack of alternative housing, this being the reason most women accept for staying or returning to a violent marriage (Connell 11), but on what Friedan defines “the increasing emphasis on things” (Friedan 58). This emphasis may be found especially in the women of the two plays.

In *Kitchen*, Helene reacts to the suicide attempt by her husband noticing that he is using *her* pillow to lean his head in the oven, and stressing the possessive “my” (3). Further on, when she threatens to throw Owen out of the house, since now she is the only one with an income to pay the mortgage, he has to convince her with a declaration of love for it:

OWEN: Well. Phewww ... That was close. I like this apartment, Helene. Always have. I'd really miss it if I was forced to

leave, you know. I think I’m even beginning to get used to the view. It’s sort of pretty out there, I think. The pink smoke across the water, all those diagonal lines. And at night – those lights! (*Kitchen 25*)

Helene shows she is much more practical than her husband replying “Cut the fuckin’ poetry and cook the fuckin’ tea”.

Barbara displays a similar, if not greater, practical sense when, at the beginning of the play, she claims the ownership of the house:

BARBARA: I placed the pieces, coordinated the colors, arranged every nook and cranny. It was my infallible taste and eye that created that house.

JONATHAN: I made the money that made it all possible. My labor GAVE THAT HOUSE ITS LIFE.

BARBARA: And my sacrifice gave him the opportunity to earn the money for me to create the house! My dining room was beyond gorgeous. Everything was exquisite! When he showed people around, he puffed up like a singing canary.

JONATHAN: Why not? It defined who we were, that we had made it. (*The War of the Roses 17*)

The discussion shows how there really was a productive cooperation between the spouses (he put up the money to buy the house, she decorated it with her taste) which now serves as a weapon to gain the ownership of the outcome of this cooperation. Moreover, the last line gives the very reason they are struggling to stay in it: it defines who they are.

The consumerism of the American upper-middle class defined who the Americans were since the days of the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The suburban home had become an ideal of purely American style to oppose to the Soviet Communist model. In 1959, during the famous “kitchen debate” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, Nixon argued that the superiority of the American model lay “on the ideal of the suburban home complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members” (Tyler May 16). The roles Nixon referred to were well defined: the man was the breadwinner, the woman dealt with the house and the children, keeping an attractive appearance and adorning her environment with

“a wide array of consumer goods” (16). This represented the essence of American freedom (16).

The suburbs were dominated by the consumerism culture, regarding not only material goods, but also emotions and roles. As Stephanie Coontz writes, consumerism does not only concerns things, but also “our personal identities and most intimate relations”, so that “we experience a blurring of the distinction between illusion and reality, people and goods, image and identity, self and surroundings” (176).

Barbara and Jonathan are obsessed with things (her kitchen, his Ferrari, the house they both claim to own) because they truly believe these can show who they are more than everything else, and neither of them is willing to give up this surrogate identity.

Another crucial point in both the plays is the women’s rebellion against “the traditional arrangements that kept women at home and left men in control of the great world outside” (Lasch 94). Barbara and Helene are both “educated to the point of demanding and deserving the same kind of advancement as men” (Greer 251).

Helene is already a career woman. She is twenty-seven and she is a self-made woman, since “I worked hard to get where I am” (*Kitchen* 8). The gender identity seems to be, in a postcolonial milieu as the Australian one, still influenced by the Irish work ethic and gender roles. As Miriam Dixon states in her essay *The Real Mathilda: Woman and Identity in Australia, 1788 to the Present*, Australian women in the third millennium are experiencing what the author defines “the best of times and the worst of times” (Dixon 5), since they can advance in their careers, relying more on their knowledge than their property. Nonetheless, this advancement in their professional and material status is combined with an increasing of violence which reflects, “the Anglo-Saxon habit of differentiating the sexes to the point of parody” (12). This way of conceiving the gender differences implies the presence of an insensitive man paired with an almost colorless woman, denying “the human qualities which the sexes share” (12). Such rigid sex-role scheme is what Badham shows, although reverted, in Helene and Owen’s relationship. The fact that she becomes the breadwinner allows her to assume certain attitudes towards her husband which, once again, betray the gender expectations. For instance, she thinks that Owen wastes his time while she works “a ten hour day” (*Kitchen* 12) and frequently reminds him exactly which of them has the economic responsibility for the home, almost a reversal of what Jonathan does to Barbara:

- HELENE: Who pays your way, and feeds you?
OWEN: You earn too much for me to get the dole!
HELENE: Who does?!
OWEN: You do ... Helene.
HELENE: And what's keeping you alive?
OWEN: Your kindness and your generosity. (*Kitchen* 15)

Barbara, although older than Helene, is beginning to build her career as a caterer because until the moment she decided to leave Jonathan she was a typical housewife who “gave up my ambition and my youth for him” (*The War of the Roses* 16). What she wants is a real independence after that her shy attempts to share her professional goals with her husband were dismissed as a hobby (28). This is why she harbored a deep resentment for Jonathan and for the idea of marriage:

- BARBARA: I'm only fighting for my independence. Why should I have to live in an institution that doesn't let me breathe, with a man I don't want to live with anymore? Why must I be penalized for being honest? I've done my duty to my children. Soon, they'll fly from the nest entirely, which will leave me the rest of my life and I want to live it my way. Now, I want out of this marriage and I want you to vacate this house. That is my compensation for the sacrifice of my youth. (*The War of the Roses* 87).

The rebellion of the two women represent both a shift of the typical female role and a new form of partnership. Such elements “have created more options, but they also pose unprecedented conflicts and challenges” (Gerson 13), causing the disruption of the couples. This happens especially in *Kitchen*, where the core of the entire play is the subversion of the gender roles: since Owen can no longer pay his share of the house mortgage, Helene decides to recuperate what her husband owes her through his housework. The man hence becomes a housewife, showing that “there are multiple masculinities and femininities across situational contexts and social structural positions” (Gartner and McCarthy 21). The way Owen becomes good in the kitchen and with the cleaning of the house, gradually turns him into a prototypical housewife, who is scolded by the breadwinner, Helene, for wasting time doing nothing. As Vilar claims, there is a formula

according to which “it is masculine to work, feminine to do nothing” (25), and this is exactly what Helene accuses her husband of doing:

HELENE: So that’s what you’ve been doing with your time? No wonder the house is such a mess, Coffee Man.

OWEN: But I vacuum every day ...

HELENE: The laundry’s never done –

OWEN: There’s not much I can do if it rains!

HELENE: I do not work ten hour day for you to endear yourself to checkout chicks at the deli on my time! Where’s my bloody vodka?! (*Kitchen* 12)

This exchange shows how the roles are completely inverted, and how gender is no more than “the stylized repetition of acts through time” (Butler 1988: 520), such as cleaning the house, cooking, and all those tasks known as ‘female’.

The level of identification with the new gender role reaches the highest point when, during a fight, Helene hits Owen in the head with a pan and he faints. The woman looks at him and murmurs “Stupid cunt” (*Kitchen* 36). The word “cunt” is defined in the Collins Dictionary not only as the name of the female genitals, and the sexual intercourse with a woman, but also as “*a term of hostility and contempt*” towards a woman, and only secondly “*any unpleasant or contemptible person*”, meaning that Badham probably meant to stress the female nature of the insult.

Although in Adler’s play there is no trace of such a role shift in the character of Jonathan, in both *Kitchen* and *The War of the Roses*, men are humiliated through sex. Their wives refuse the sexual intercourse, so they ‘unman’ them through the closure to any physical contact.

Barbara, after Jonathan’s presumed heart attack, has her “epiphany” and tells him “I don’t relate to you anymore. I don’t even like you” (*The War of the Roses* 36) and from that moment on she decides to sleep alone in their bedroom and to forbid him to enter it.

Helene uses the same strategy, locking Owen out of the bedroom and showing contempt for him. During the fight that ends with Owen on the floor, she asks him to put back the gag on her mouth “At least I’ll have the satisfaction of knowing you can’t stick

your tongue in my mouth” (34). Later on, during the same fight, she changes her strategy and decides to take advantage of the sexual desire Owen still has for her to deceive him:

- HELENE: I know, I’m a dirty, dirty little slut. I’m a bad, dirty girl!
- OWEN: You’ve been asking for this!
- HELENE: I’m beggin’ ya for it, big boy! Hurt me now! Ohhh ... Oh! Oh! Ohhhhhh! Oh! Do it to me, Owen! God, break me! Break me! Ohhhh!
- OWEN: What’s the combination for the lock on the fridge?!
- HELENE: I’m not going to tell you – you’ll have to *fuck* the answer out of me!
- OWEN: I’ll what?!
- HELENE: Oh, Owen!
- OWEN: Helene?
- HELENE: Fuck me on my bed, Owen! Fuck me between those dirty sheets – I want filth all over me! Make me dirty! (*Kitchen* 36)

The strategy proves to be useful, and it demonstrates the fact that the man is in no way the strong pole of the couple. Even Helene’s language, vulgar and brutal, shows how she has become the ‘man’, performing the actions and uttering the words usually expected by the male component of the couple.

As we have already pointed out, both the couples rely on their material possessions to represent their social status and to say who they are. This is the reason why, after the verbal fights, it is the house itself with its objects that becomes an actual and physical battlefield. The war starts to involve the most precious possessions of the spouses, as if destroying their most cherished objects could be a way to wound the other.

The kitchen appliances are the first to be broken in scene five of *Kitchen*, and in a certain way they define who the protagonists are and how their roles have changed. Owen breaks the microwave oven with the aim of starving his wife, since she can only cook frozen food in the microwave, betraying the gender expectation of a woman who knows how to cook. In response to this action, Helene locks the fridge to prevent her husband taking the exquisite food he has bought, since he has become an experienced cook, hence with the

same aim to starve him. At the end of the scene, when they run after each other, the author concludes with a brief and laconic sentence: “Things smash” (32).

The Roses engage in a longer and more complex plan to destroy the most precious things they own. The one thing Barbara is most proud of is her pâté, which should be the core of her career as a caterer. Jonathan adds a lot of sugar in it, spoiling an entire container she aimed to sell to a Greek Ambassador (51). The action triggers a series of other actions by both: Barbara destroys the precious boxer figures his husband collects (55), he kills her Siamese cat (although claiming it was an accident) and she smashes his Ferrari. “The house is a battlefield now” (79), she tells her lawyer during a meeting, describing how they are destroying what they are fighting for (the house) with the only aim to use violence as “an expression of authority and power” in order to “ensure control and domination” (Browne-Miller 59).

It is a short step from the violence on the objects that represent the other person to the actual physical violence. The critical phase in the two plays is reached when the couples start to hurt each other.

The literature on domestic violence, as already mentioned, is dominated by the stereotype that it is mostly male (Gartner and McCarthy; Browne-Miller; Dutton and Nicholls). The idea that men are not traumatized by abuse depends on the difficulty to recognize it socially because “it implies the victimization of men as well” and “a male victim is inconceivable or a contradiction in terms in the patriarchal context, where men’s weaknesses are to hidden and unspoken of” (Browne-Miller 61). Although some scholars argue that “female violence is always self-defense, even when the woman uses severe violence and the man uses only mild violence” (Dutton and Nicholls 687), there is “a negative correlation between social structural factors empowering women and the frequency of wife assault” (684), and “the reality is that most often both partners engage in aggression” (683). This seems to be the message contained in the two plays: “divorce is war”, as Jonathan’s lawyer tells his client, (*The War of the Roses* 39), and the battle is equally conducted by men and women.

In *Kitchen*, scene 6 opens with the description of what followed the “smashed things”:

Later that day. Owen is whistling. He carries Helene, who is bound

and gagged with various household ropes and strapped onto a chair, into the kitchen.

Owen has a nasty gash on his head.

He slaps the chair, and Helene in it, onto the floor. (*Kitchen* 33)

At the beginning, it seems that Helene is the only victim of violence in the couple, because she is tied and gagged. But the presence of the "nasty gash" on Owen's head shows the reciprocity of it. The violence is equally balanced in this scene, since at the end of it, as it has already been noticed, Helene hits Owen with a pan calling him "stupid cunt" (36).

The physical violence between Barbara and Jonathan is longer and more articulated, but it remains, if it is possible, even more balanced. The first attempt to kill each other is made by Barbara, who shuts the door of the sauna while Jonathan is inside (59), and he is able to free himself only by smashing the door glass. Reflecting on this failed attempt to murder her husband with her lawyer, she considers the possibility of putting "rat poison in his wine" (79). But it is Jonathan who tries to kill Barbara by unhinging the railing of their staircase to make her fall down: an outcome that she avoids by jumping and holding on to the chandelier (93). This action produces what in the film was the most iconic scene: Barbara and Jonathan hanging on a giant chandelier which, eventually, crashes on the floor killing both of them (93). The fact that they both die, and nobody wins, the reason of their prolonged war, is proof of how Adler wanted to demonstrate the reciprocity of violence, despite all the gender expectations. It is a violence where nobody is the winner, because they die, and keep on fighting as a divinity welcomes them to the afterlife, both restating in front of him all the accusations and reproaches to each other. Of course, they again claim to be the real owner of the house, probably for eternity, meaning that the war of the sexes is eternal and unending.

Things are slightly different in *Kitchen*, where eventually there is a winner in the domestic war. In the last scene of the play, when Owen regains consciousness after the blow, the gender expectations seem to be fulfilled by the image of Helene "wearing an apron, cooking from the recipe book" (38). She claims to be cooking a roast while her husband tells her about a nightmare he had during the faint. The scene, which keeps the normalcy, or rather the expectation, of a woman cooking for her husband, changes completely in the final lines.

In *The War of the Roses*, Barbara's revenge passes through the kitchen when she kills Jonathan's dog Benny and makes a pâté out of it. She serves it to him and only after he ate it she tells what it was made of (88). In *Kitchen*, Badham goes even further in her kitchen revenge:

HELENE: You've been a very naughty boy, Owen, but I think you'll behave from now on.

OWEN: HELENE: – my legs! Where are my legs, Helene?
Helene slaps the roasting pan with Owen's legs in it onto the kitchen table. Her apron is covered with blood.

HELENE: THEY'RE – FOR – LUNCH! (*Kitchen* 39)

The grotesque and bloody revenge of the woman marks a different outcome in this war: there is a winner, and despite all the gender expectations regarding the domestic violence, it is the woman who gains the power, in a perfect housewifely fashion, through physical violence. Both the revenges involve again gender roles, and the long accepted fact that “women belong in the kitchen”, and it is precisely in the kitchen that Barbara and Helene can conceive their cruelest action.

The plays showed how “intimate domestic violence is not specific to men and cannot be explained on the basis of gender or gender roles” (Dutton and Nicholls 685), most of all because these two are anything but fixed and stable. We saw how certain gender stereotypes were applied in both the plays to the ‘wrong’ sex just to demonstrate how inconsistent the claim that sex and gender are the same thing is, and how a theory of ‘polar genders’ is equally unreliable in some domestic wars.

Drama, in a certain way, is the perfect means to highlight this condition. As Butler claims, “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” because “gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler 1988: 522-23).

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Christoph Maasch and Svenja Assman (performers) from Van Badham's *Kitchen*, directed by Christoph Maasch. Landungsbrücken Frankfurt, 2009.
Photo by Bodo Schickentanz.

Barbara Miceli Interviews Van Badham

BM In *Kitchen* you describe marriage as a metaphor for capitalism, a contract based on what the spouses can bring, economically speaking, to the couple. Is that what you think of marriage? Do you see it as a declining institution to fight?

VB I certainly see a contemporary manifestation of marriage that aspires to the traditions of bourgeois Western marriage as an apt metaphor for capitalist relations. The elucidating quote is from Marx's *Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeois sees his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women"¹.

As the contemporary politics of liberal feminism recruit women into the capitalist means of production, Marx's insight is degendered and marriage contains potential for contestations of bourgeois power because the assigned role of bourgeois and instrument is unstable. The cannibalism in *Kitchen* is the inevitability proposed by Marx in his *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*; social institutions – such as marriage – are modes of being alongside the political state; "they appear as the content, to which the political state has the relationship of organising form ... determining and limiting, now confirming, now denying".

So if the political state is a corporatocracy – which, arguably, the contemporary Western liberal democratic state has become – marriage as an institution replicates the values of its hegemonic organising form.

¹ Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto". *Karl Marx: A Reader*. Ed. Jon Elster. Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1986, 263.

In narrative terms, if Owen and Helene's marriage replicates these values, the end result can only be the feeding of the oppressed working class to whomever triumphs in the bourgeois role.

I don't see marriage as a declining institution; I agree with Marx, that marriage expresses the values of its containing political state. Feminist marriage is possible where there is a feminist state.

BM At the end of the play, the female main character, Helene, cooks her husband's legs while he is still alive to see it. Is that a sort of feminist revenge for patriarchal oppression and domestic violence upon women?

VB No, it's implicitly a critique of liberal feminism. My point with Helene's "triumph" is that by ascending a capitalist meritocracy, certainly she achieves some measure of liberation from a traditional western female gender role – but she replicates the worst values in capitalist construct of a masculine gender role; violence, cruelty, ruthlessness, dehumanisation of subject and object. The precise explanation of the scene is the last lines of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*:

"Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which".

Replace with "No question now what had happened to the face of the woman. The audience looked from woman to man, and from man to woman, and from woman to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which".

BM You set the play in Wollongong, a place you said you considered your "home", in what you defined as an "executive apartment". How much do you think that the external environment and the social status affected Helene and Owen's marriage?

VB Wollongong is a post-industrial Western city that perfectly exemplifies the social and material impact of decades of rapid, ruthless economic change. It's an idea location for a play because while it's an observable, detailed reality, it also substitutes in dramatic terms for a Cloudcuckooland – an avatar of many such places. There

are cities that have experienced the same transformations as Wollongong all around the world; when the play is staged overseas they find a ready local example and I don't mind them doing that; Milton Keynes was chosen for the UK. I think New Jersey was for a US production.

BM In *Kitchen*, and much more in *The Bull, the Moon and the Coronet of Stars*, there is a revival of Greek myths and themes. Is Greek theatre an inspiration for your work? What do you think contemporary playwrights can learn from the classics?

VB Yes, of course. Western theatre has its origin in the canon of Classical Greek theatre and every work created within its tradition is implicitly a reaction to its organising principles, consciously or unconsciously. I refer to the classical canon explicitly in my work to achieve a harmony of form and content; the narrative and other structures of Greek drama speak to the subject matter of its myths and legends as much as those myths and legends embody the cultural values external to its creation. My work explores contemporary cultural values by illuminating their adherence and divergence to the cultural onset models offered by the classics. That way I speak simultaneously to present and past, with harmony of content and form.

BM Do you think theatre can still be a means of revolution?

VB I believe that revolution has an ongoing cultural project. Lenin said "Art is a weapon" and in revolutionary battle, you grab the weapon that you can fire. Theatre is mine. I am an adherent of Rudi Dutschke; with every play I am making my "long march through the institutions" and I see my role as a revolutionary in the use of theatre to introduce the vocabulary and concepts of radicalism. Post-structuralist theatre suits me as a medium because my interest is in exposing the apparatus of artifice that constructs the oppressive institutions of society. *The Bull, the Moon and the Coronet of Stars* may ostensibly be a romantic comedy, but as a diegetic text that acknowledges from its outset its performative nature, it's a lesson in how language and narrative function within propaganda; to summon obvious false realities and yet convince of their tangibility.

BM About the change of your name, from Vanessa to Van, you

said: “The name gets more traction because you could be a man”, can you explain this statement?

VB I changed my professional name from my birth name of “Vanessa” to “Van” in 2002, as I grew suspicious that a failure to achieve recognition as a writer was due to the gendered associations of my particularly feminine name. I believed at the time there was a cognitive dissonance between a pretty, feminine name that carried the heritage of being that given to John Swift’s mistress, Vanessa Woolf and Vanessa Redgrave with the kind of guns, bombs, labour-relations and cannibalism plays I was creating. I stand by that decision as the pithier, harder epithet of “Van” achieved an overnight success in 2002 that had eluded me as “Vanessa”. *Kitchen* was rejected by theatre companies – including the company that commissioned it – when I was “Vanessa”, but once I was “Van” it was picked up all over the world the same year.

BM Your first novel, *Burnt Snow*, deals with the themes of adolescence and witchcraft. This is a shift from your usual themes. Is Sophie’s character autobiographical?

VB Obviously, writing about adolescence will replicate the experiences of how any author has experienced adolescence, and the details demanded by the novel form necessitate heavy harvesting from memory and recall. However, much to the disappointment of the book’s loyal fans, I do not have magic powers or second sight. A tragic shame.

BM You communicate very much through the social media, especially Twitter, and you wrote about the “trolls” phenomenon. Do you think they are a new frontier for gender violence?

VB Yes, absolutely. It’s a phenomenon of exposed silencing.

Badham largely commented on the trolling problem, the act of using the social media to insult people, in two online articles. Being a victim of trolling herself, the author examined this new tendency and concluded that it is a new frontier for gender discrimination. Women who write on the internet are the major target of the trolls, and Badham explained why it is a “gendered problem”. Women, who usually were in a marginalized position for what concerns the public

discourse or the information world in general, have started to occupy this usually male-dominated field. They even “dare” writing about traditionally male subjects such as sport, politics or economy, most of the time outnumbering men’s articles in likes and sharing, thus becoming a mainstream phenomenon and a very influential one.

A source of trolling, something that somehow seems to “legitimize” the insults, is the fact that male commentators often define their female counterparts with names such as “frightbat”, or their writing as “yelling” or “shrieking”, raising the trolls’ comments.

Although trolling might seem just an online problem with no consequence on real life, according to Badham it is just a new form of gender discrimination and abuse that is strictly connected with real life sexism².

² The complete text of Badham’s articles on trolling can be found at the link: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/02/when-they-call-us-frightbats-they-make-us-fair-game>> and <http://www.womensagenda.com.au/talking-about/opinions/van-badham-battles-the-brosphere-on-women-trolls-and-the-australian-media-in-2013/201312023287#.Vj_bfaLfeg4>.

From:
Kitchen by Van Badham

SCENE 2

Morning. Owen has a copy of the employment section of the Herald and is reading it.

Enter Helene, in a fantastically elegant dressing gown. She ignores Owen. While he speaks, she writes something out.

OWEN: Good morning.
Got the paper.
Plenty of jobs out there for people who want them.
I reckon I'll be able to take my pick. Guy like me.
Credentials. Downsized an entire operation once.
Everybody who worked in the plant. Liquidating non-
assets. They called me The Machete, remember? Remem-
ber? They – Helene – You want eggs for breakfast? I
went down and bought some eggs –

HELENE: Do I look like the kind of person who eats EGGS?

OWEN: I'm sorry, I –

HELENE: I'm surprised you haven't been out here frying up some
bacon – or maybe you just could have got a tub of lard
and smeared it all over my body!

OWEN: I just thought it might be nice to –

HELENE: Nice?! Now how did you get that impression?! How,
overnight, did I suddenly become the kind of person who
wants to wallow in fat of a morning? Who thinks that it's
nice to be turned into a lardball –!

OWEN: Helene –!

HELENE: Was it when I started expressing my love of looking out
the window to a manufacturing facility every day? Or was
it when I woke up as a single income with a spousal
dependent?! Is that when it became ... nice?!!

Helene goes back to her writing.

OWEN: I slept well. Sort of well. The spare bed was a little lumpy,
but it's okay in there. When you're ready to let me –

HELENE: Here.

She hands him the piece of paper.

OWEN: What's this?

HELENE: Debt repayment threshold. Statement of duties. Enterprise agreement.

OWEN: It's a bill.

HELENE: Ah, but not just a bill. It's a contract as well.

OWEN: Wishes to advise ... Debt accruing – Forty-eight thousand dollars? Helene – whatever you pay in the mortgage – I'll make it up to you – I'll pay what I owe, I honest will - but \$ 48,000 - what on earth for?

HELENE: That's for me.

OWEN: I can see that!

HELENE: Oh no – you can't. When you were in the spare room last night –

OWEN: You sent me there!

HELENE: Owen, I did some thinking. I'm twenty-seven, and I'm not getting any younger. I've worked hard to get where I am, and it's time that effort got taken into account.

OWEN: Baby – Baby, it's a short term situation. I've got the paper here - jobs all through it! Whatever you lend me now, I'll –

HELENE: Owen, in the stockexchange of life, you're a bear market - you're high risk, no return. Analysts remain bullish about the performance of my economic indicators because, Owen, I'm blue chip. I invested that sum you hold in your hands in value-adding my human capital – and the only reason you can exist within the appropriate economic relations which comprise both this apartment and my continuing financial support is in realising your burden of debt. Owen – it's time to pay up.

OWEN: I've been unemployed – for a day.

HELENE: A day that's already cost me 50% of my dividend, do you understand? Now, do you wish to work off the \$ 48,000 full-time or part-time?

OWEN: Work off?

HELENE: Part-time will, of course, attract a greater compound –

OWEN: Work?!

HELENE: Well, if you've got no capital, baby, the only thing that

you've got to offer me is labour. This domestic operation is long overdue for a regrowth. On a cost-benefit analysis, our professional relationships with domestic contractors is less advantageous than providing these services in-house.

OWEN: You want me to clean the house? Do the laundry – and the shopping?!

HELENE: Maintain the facility, manage the stock, yes.

OWEN: Helene – the papers are full of jobs - full! It's only going to be a matter of time before I –

HELENE: If you're asking me to rely on something as unstable as the labour market –

OWEN: And what if I say no?

HELENE: Then you can move out.

SERIAL KILLERS, SERIAL LOVERS

Raquel Almazan's *La Paloma Prisoner*

by Alessandro Clericuzio

Life and death, male and female, straight and gay, free and locked in, beautiful and plain, criminal and victim, strong and weak, real and fictional. These are only some of the virtually endless dualities dramatically presented by Raquel Almazan's play *La Paloma Prisoner*, recipient of the 2015 Arthur J. Harris Memorial Prize. Indeed, what is most intriguing, is that the play also investigates what is *between* all these opposites, what lies on the border between self and other, what does not belong to either extreme but in some deep way entails both.

The figure of a serial-killer who in turn kills sex criminals immediately looms large in the play, in more ways than one. For those who know the American television series *Dexter*, this is familiar ground. Still, like the playwright herself said, the fact that we have a woman committing violence against the abusers is a revolutionary concept. It is not as simple as it sounds, and we are not only witnessing a tale of revenge. The whole play is suffused with a karma-like feeling of energies being redirected in the universe. The dead "talk back" to the living and things never seem to be settled once and for all: issues stay open, problems are not easily or simplistically solved. Quite the opposite, some events keep occurring time and time again, giving the play a mythic dimension, which is also present in other plays by Almazan ("Time is not measured in hours, we must behave with nature's elements to tell us time. Each day has a spirit ..." *Café*)¹.

¹ For *Café*, see: <<http://raquelalmazan.com/cafe/>> Web December 2,

Interestingly enough, theatre seems to be the most effective genre for the denunciation of violence. Still today, so many centuries after the theories of catharsis were first applied to the violent emotions of performance by Aristotle, the stage turns into a microcosm of society and when the audience witnesses these acts they become aware of its presence in society at large. Furthermore, instead of freezing the denunciation into a single work of art, the mythic repetition reverberates it into a cosmic and timeless cycle, as well as into the here and now of our own experiences. This idea has a powerful dramatization when one of the convicts in *La Paloma* dies of childbirth and the other women give flowers to members of the audience, crashing the frontier between the act of denunciation and the world it speaks of. With this gesture one more boundary is trespassed and it is more revealing as it is a double “escape”: from the confinement of a jail – where the play takes place – and from the constrictions of a fictional work of art.

Life is therefore a matter of balancing between opposites, finding that delicate equilibrium that makes sense out of existence. Balancing and counterbalancing the evil is an open question around which the whole play revolves. *La Paloma* has superpowers, with which she kills men outside or even inside the jail – or so it seems. She’s in love with the youngest inmate, a girl aptly named Oro, personification of ancient princesses, embodiment of the City of Gold the *conquistadores* were looking for in the land of Colombia. Paloma is so strong that she can kill, but she also decides to love, and her love has the same strength, the same power, the same intensity that causes horrific deaths. It is just as strong and powerful. In the first scene she presents herself with the disturbing doubleness of love and death. “They call me Paloma because I’m gentle and I only want peace, flying to other dimensions”, she says. But she also warns: “I can destroy too”.

Destruction is also in the hands of Soliar, the FARC leader in love with her machine-gun, who dreams of her son and of a land free of the “Capitalist Gringo Control”. The political undercurrent of the

2015. In her blog, “Raquel Almazan”, she clarifies: “Performance of monologues from three plays in the *Latin is America* play cycle: ‘Café’, ‘La Paloma Prisoner’ and ‘La Negra’ create an interactive event where I create dialogue and engage audiences in the themes and social justice initiatives of the work”. Web May 2, 2016. <<http://raquelalmazan.com/latin-is-america/>>

play flows freely and vehemently through the voices of most characters, but it is stronger and clearer in Soliar's. She claims that she was honorable in her work, though she failed her task of killing the President of Colombia with a bomb. She applies what is one of the recurring approaches in the play, that of a double soul: compassion and cruelty, compassion towards the FARC captives, but, as Marilyn says, since she was one of them, "compassion of the devil kind!" Still, the almost naive ideal of political change is revealed by Soliar herself, who speaks of a dying hope, "the hope of ending five hundred years of brutal colonialism".

The play is mesmerizingly made up of the past and present stories of all the convicts, what brought them there, their dreams, their desires, their innermost thoughts and feelings turned into pure theatre, through props, sound and space relations (and choreographies, as Almazan makes abundant use of dance in her plays and maintains that "we must question the very logic of movement itself in its current form"). The first story Paloma tells, that of playing with bread dough when she was little, making female figures out of the paste, has strong sexual and sensual overtones, as the softness of the dough and its sweet taste remind Paloma of a woman's body and of her skin. Her relationship with Oro is marked by the sweetness of revelation for the younger woman, as the older one acquires protective and reassuring powers. These powers are not enough, though, to keep Oro alive. They only last for the fleeting time of the dramatized action, for tragedy strikes the inmates with the double death of mother and child.

Birth and death, as well as life and death are parallel features of the same life cycle and therefore are very strongly connected. After the death of Oro and of her baby, all the women together find new strength in a process of transition. "A continuation", reads the stage direction in Scene 14: "Music changes to salsa. The passage from death to rebirth". They respond to tragedy with the apparent superficiality of self-esteem provided by beauty. And with the mixture of holy and trash that is typical of some Latino cultures.

"AAAhh Colombia. You drag us down deeper. – And I put on a new dress", say the women. "You tell me I've wronged, and I paint my toenails. Ay Colombia, You take my life and I make a new life. I can still smile and laugh from the gut. And cry the names of children yet to be born in you Colombia".

Such a dedication to bodily exterior and outward appearance

proves only apparently shallow because the convicts' obsession with beauty is only a symptom of a wider sense of the self destined to constant metamorphoses. Metamorphosis is the answer to violence, but it is also the answer to life itself, with all its tricks and traps. As in ancient myth – but also as in modern popular comics or superhero films – bodily change and identity change are immediate, powerful and life-saving. Before being a bird-like superheroine, La Paloma was a little girl raped by her stepfather in the kitchen of the house where she lived with her mother. It is in response to this act of violent appropriation of her body and of her innocence that she metamorphoses into a powerful creature half woman, half dove. Animal imagery is center-stage. There's a dove and there's a she-wolf, both shifting back and forth from different species in the animal kingdom. These features are all related to Almazan's intention to de-colonialize the body. "In order to release and re-condition the body to a prior state, an organic, pure, original, unconditioned state", writes the playwright, she elaborates on the "influences of Butoh dance methodologies, which play a large part on how I physicalize the world in my plays. Language is not sufficient enough to de-colonialize when using the English and Spanish language. These are not the original voices of the indigenous, and if we are limited to the languages of those that enacted imperialistic dominance, language being a large tool of imperialistic control, then we must also include the body in an attempt to return to another influence".

Change and adaptation are the only possible solutions in a universe tainted by all kinds of violence, where rapes are just the tip of the iceberg of unending acts of abuse. Changes and metamorphoses are everywhere in this play also because the characters are looking for themselves or for their lost selves. "I remember me", they all cry out together at the beginning of the play, longing for their freedom and for their personal histories outside of jail. The walled-in condition of these women is replicated on the stage and *by* the stage, with its three-dimensional walled-in representation (metonymical spaces are also suggested in Almazan's *The Hopefulness or La Esperanza*).

This idea of being boxed-in, that, like the author said, amplifies every sensation and perception, is in turn conjured up by big boxes that signal the characters' positions on stage and serve as repository of past and present experiences. These women are walled-in, boxed-in, and the focus of the playwright, as well as their own, zooms in

from open spaces to the jail, to their cells, and eventually to their bodies. Bodies are the real protagonists of this play. It is not a case that, if the production allows it, writes the playwright, at the beginning of the play all the women can be naked, showing that their bodies are all they have and all the rest is a social and cultural construction. Then they get dressed and take up their roles, but during the play the attention is again turned to bodies.

Bodies that are ripped open by La Paloma, and bodies that are stitched up and closed by La Doctora Marilyn, kidnapped by the Farcas and forced to operate on their members. Bodies that are killed by Soliar, the Farcas leader, and bodies that are healed by love. Bodies that are locked in and bodies that are exposed in beauty pageants. Bodies that are transformed by life, by death or by love.

The prison becomes, in the words of La Paloma, “a family of steel” and it is only here that true love can take place. Interestingly enough, the love the characters enact is not only the familial love of mothers and children or of two lovers. It is also the love for Colombia, which serves as a live element in the love-hate relationship narrated in the play.

Especially at the beginning, all the women together address the nation in a dialogue made of accusations and then of pleadings and then of love-making. “Colombia I love you”, they chant. “Colombia I hate you. Colombia please hate me. Squeeze me, tickle me, kiss me, lick me”. So loving takes on a political as well as a spiritual and a universal dimension. It speaks to the nation, and to the single inmate in the same way, for Colombia is really outside and inside the prison as well. In Paloma’s words, “The crimes we have been accused of are crimes committed against the entire country of Colombia”. At the same time, the prison is a hell on earth, or, better, it is an envisioning of the next world, either a paradise, when love wins, or a hell, when the forces of evil are stronger, a place where beloved sons reappear, but where also undesired monsters are able to make themselves seen and heard. As Paloma says, “all those stories I heard in the streets, in the mountains, from the old ones, about devils were true. There are devils floating all around us. They appear in different forms, faces and memories”.

There is no easy solution to the sadness and loss that mark this world. Religion has failed, for those who have prayed or want to pray are sarcastically asked for whom they pray: “Jesus? God? The Virgin Mary? Who all wiped their asses with Bogotá?” After all, the goddess

and superheroine of the play is “locked up for helping God and Colombia eliminate evil”. If Colombia is both “padre and madre” Paloma is good and evil, loving and violent, human and supernatural. This is why, if someone or something threatens to kill her, she replies: “You can’t kill what is eternal”.

The mythic dimension of Paloma’s metamorphic identity also infuses her love for Oro and Oro’s future child. It clashes, though, with Oro’s mother’s old ideas of “normality”. If Paloma has killed the rapist from whom Oro expects a child and offers herself to be the baby’s mother, Diana dislikes the love that has sprouted between her daughter Oro and Paloma. She wants her grandchild to have a “real father, not a dyke father”, in spite of the fact that most men, most fathers in the play are untrustworthy, immoral, unable to really love. Also in spite of the fact that Diana herself had to love Oro, when she was a baby, “twice as hard as any mother”, for she was her “father too”.

But tragedy strikes this microcosm, as Oro loses her child and dies herself. Everybody in *La Paloma Prisoner* loses something or someone, whether from love or from hate, from war or from defense, from attack or from revenge, since life, as shown by the stage directions indicating the passing from one scene to the next one, is “a transition, a continuation”. Indeed, the final transition has several aspects: it blurs the boundaries between audience and performers, real and imaginary, fictional and real, as the cast members from the television show *Caminos de mi Corazon* enter the jail to look at the beauty pageant the inmates have organized. In giving an imaginary, utopistic freedom to Paloma – who flies away as the curtain falls – the playwright once more remarks the arbitrary concept of entrapment. Who is more “entrapped”, the convicts or the guards? Or maybe the fictional characters of the television *novela*, blurred and hardly recognizable among static light on old and broken television sets?

Closing the play on a beauty pageant also shows that transition is a movement toward beauty as it is deeply connected to issues of personal and ancestral identity. Convicts can wear the same clothes for decades, be it the infamous orange robe at Guantanamo or the blue, loose uniforms Almazan saw while working at a maximum security jail in Broward, Florida. The outward generic appearance makes you lose your identity and separates you from your cultural history. What could seem as the result of fashion victimization, the beauty of fabric, colors and style can actually turn into an uplifting

celebration of life. It was, in the playwright's experience in jail, "a healing ritual for the women who were adorned in large feather headdresses and glittery sequined dresses". This was their moment to be fully recognized at last, if only for a moment. If we are still using beauty as a draw to bring attention to those that have been abandoned, it is a beginning place to raise awareness". This idea, staged in Almazan's most famous play, has a real-life counterpart in the prisons of Bogotá. The parade of prisoners – the day before the pageant – is an event where the women adorn themselves in a variety of wardrobes, costumes and personas. Some include ancient indigenous dress of the people who inhabited the Colombian region before colonialization. The worshipping of the Zippa by the indigenous people to the Gods involved the beautification of the body, its ritualization, including painting and adorning the skin with colorful dress and jewelry. In this perspective it is the ancestral version of modern beauty pageants, even though the Gods to whom this practice is offered nowadays are not so easily identified (society, our peers, our own self-confidence, love, resistance). Gods in all their shapes, and belonging to all the credos are invoked throughout Almazan's plays (Gods and Dios of "Earth, Sky, Pain, Rain, War, Peace, Harvest and Fasting" are called on in *Café*).

The beautification of the body is also a symbol of health and fertility. The playwright endowed the characters with the agency of honoring their fertility, power and sexual potency that does not need the dependency on men. The ability to call on the spirits with this worship often involves altering the body and preparing the "appearance" for this type of spiritual exchange that is now performed through fashion, style and makeup. So what might appear as a sarcastic denunciation of the shallowness of a beauty pageant is actually a revelation of its wider and deeper meanings. And one of these meanings is doubtlessly the re-definition of female identity in a situation of incarceration, which epitomizes women's role and position in real-life, everyday situations, especially in Latin America. Women warriors are part of an ancient concept which has also been investigated in another diasporic experience, namely that of Chinese-American women in Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*, significantly subtitled *Memories of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Similar issues are revisited in the staged jail of *La Paloma*, but this myth of the strong, fighting woman leads to a sort of annihilation of the male.

The unavoidable, unmistakable issue raised by *La Paloma Prisoner* is, in fact, that of the virtual absence of male figures from the play. *La Paloma* promises she will father the child that Oro is expecting from one more rape, but this does not mean that she's a male figure. She's a powerful, gender-bending, polymorphous – and extremely feminine – creature involved in a loving relationship which will end up in death. Male figures appear from the dead: sons of the convicted women, former husbands who were violent or even rapists, like Paloma's stepfather, who was her first victim. But there are male figures also among the jail wardens, thus giving an idea of control and limitation of freedom connected to the male gender, and the nation. There is a sentence spoken by all the women together: "Colombia, mi Colombia, I listened to my mother and you fathered me like a dictator". Issues of gender are understandably interwoven in the political aspects of Almazan's world.

Paloma's multilayered persona challenges our notion of traditional womanhood, in that a woman takes on male actions without giving up her feminine nature. The playwright created a mythical, theatrical, God-like figure, who is not limited by her sex, by giving Paloma full ability to explore her humanity without judgment on her gender. This fights the fact that "so much of our notions of gender are pre-destined by our cultures, our education and constant media conditioning", maintains the author. "Paloma's challenges towards the male characters in the play forces them to re-examine the male's notions of power in creating a male identity. If their power is displaced, what could men gain from expressing humility, vulnerability and a respect for the feminine? Men's need to face their fear of women's ability to give birth. Life outweighs death, in that physical death leads to a continuing spiritual life. Oro's unwanted pregnancy takes on a complex layering, where the responsibility towards life is laid to question by both men and women".

Women's connection with the earth is a motherly relationship and it harkens back to a matriarchal society where women had agency in the raising of their children. The expression "fathered me like a dictator" refers to not only the dictator-like relationship the women have with their country – where access to democratic rights has so much to do with societal status and wealth – but also to the notion that women are sent from their father's house to their husband's house but ultimately they always belong to the "Fatherland" of the country. Some fathers become household kings,

or dictators in their own homes, displacing the power of women. This power structure is what divides Paloma from her mother, and it is in the celestial world of the play that the mother can return with her daughter and reconstruct a new power made of forgiveness, acknowledging the crime committed against Paloma.

Being in an all-women jail, Paloma relates to the setting as a kind of free kingdom where she is surrounded by the worship of the feminine dynamics and she is allowed the re-construction of women's community. But the jailers, reporters, soldiers, fathers, and men from these women's past break in and out of the play, representing the relentless forces that play against women around the world and – more specifically, in Latin America. *La Paloma Prisoner* is indeed part of a bi-lingual cycle of thirty-three plays in which Almazan will finally address each country and dependency in Latin America. The cycle, named “Latin is America” is presently comprised of seven plays, including *La Paloma Prisoner* and promises to fathom the extraordinarily rich and varied cultural basin of Latin America investigated through field work and direct experience of the social forces at play in every different country. Almazan does not neglect current criticism on the subject, as she constantly engages the theories of post-colonial theorists such as Aurora Morcillo, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Walter Mignolo and Eduardo Galeano.

The River's Edge is a play that deals with the 1937 Haitian massacre ordered by Dominican President Trujillo. The massacre is also known as the “parsley massacre” since the Dominican soldiers wanted to determine if people living on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic were native Afro-Dominicans or immigrant Afro-Haitians. Soldiers would hold up a sprig of parsley and determine the person's origin from their pronunciation. This sadly reverberates in today's Somali terrorists who have had Kenyan students read the Koran in order to determine whether they were Catholic or Muslim, finally killing the first.

La Negra grapples with the issues of the drug-trafficking conflict along the U.S.–Mexico border, one more strongly connoted location which conjures up ceaseless violence, abuse and death. For this play, Almazan found inspiration in the true story of Colombian drug “lord” Griselda Blanco and the cult of La Santa Muerte (Holy Death), a folk deity traditionally associated with healing and safe passage to the afterlife. The play centers on the struggle of a female drug lord to find love and spiritual fulfillment despite her life of

criminality and a childhood marred by sexual violence.

Café, excerpts from which have been published in *The Best Women's Stage Monologues 2015* (edited by Lawrence Harbison, Smith and Kraus, 2015) is set on the coffee-growing banks of the mystical Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. From the lens of a Mayan storyteller, the play follows an indigenous family from the ancient world to the present, as they struggle to protect ancestral farm lands from the advancing reach of colonialism and globalization.

Meaningfully titled *The Hopefulness, or La Esperanza*, another play gives voice to two prostitutes (maybe sisters? Are all prostitutes across the world virtual half-sisters in a dysfunctional, dystopic family?) who attempt to leave behind their dark past by stowing away at the bottom of a cargo ship traveling from the Dominican Republic to France. The price of passage is spelled out in desperate, clown-like gestures and games, rituals that bring to imaginary life their parents, former clients, and lovers in a struggle for identity that parallels the immigrant struggle to conquer the ghosts of the Old World. Exiting from boxes stacked in the bottom of the ship, they play at finding the coordinates of their position, an activity that is symbolic of their – and of millions of others' – migrant condition.

Born in Madrid of Spanish and Costa Rican descent and having lived most of her adult life in the United States, Almazan “embodies the post-colonial” and she does not only write about “the others”, who are members of the Latin diaspora in America, but also about those who are “abjected by power in Latin America”. The ancient rituals she deploys in her theatre are those that have been stifled by imperialism, whose evils she constantly addresses in her work: “Invaders came and took our most fertile lands. Esclavos of cafe and cocoa they made us. Stripped our language, codes and dress. Our worship as witchcraft, as hundreds of our books burned by the hands of the Catholic priests. Still our shells will sing strongly”, says a Mayan teller in *Café*. And through Almazan's plays, through her beautifully crafted scenes, her love stories that are moving in spite of the sad and violent backgrounds, through her undeniable mastery of dramatic language in all its aspects, made up of heteroglossic texts that prove culturally disturbing, these shells do speak to mesmerized readers and audiences.

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La Paloma Prisoner, 2015 at the Signature Theatre.
Photo by Bobby Plasencia.



'Paloma Finale', *La Paloma Prisoner*, 2015 at the Signature Theatre.
Photo by Bobby Plasencia.

*Alessandro Clericuzio Interviews Raquel Almazan*¹

AC Paloma is a very strong character, a ‘superheroine’. Where and how does she get her supernatural powers?

RA Those who are open to a variety of ways of spiritual guidance can have animals that guide them and or embody their spirits. Those that can access their spiritual powers can have the ability to transform and use those abilities in other dimensions. The dove Paloma bird is often a symbol of peace and the animal has the ability to spiritually release the dead. Paloma birds honor the dead by leading spirits to their place in the after life. Paloma in the play leads men to their afterlife as a vigilante figure.

The crimes committed against women, murder-rape, verbal and physical abuse leave a lasting mark (that Paloma can recognize) not only on the men who committed these acts but on the world energetically. This physical act of abuse can manifest negative and positive metaphysical forces. Paloma is able to harness these forces, she embodies them, they run through her, transforming her into her animal guide. She both, then, carries light and dark energies, she is a conduit for all the forces, she opens herself for them to enter her.

She also transforms the harm done against her and manifests it into a power. Instead of letting the abuse done against her destroy her, she wields a force to help others. She also tries to end the cycle of violence against women by committing her own violence directly against the abusers. This is a revolutionary concept for women to defend themselves against their abusers in their home, work place and society at large.

¹ A slightly different version of this interview was published online on February 25, 2015, followed by a “Closing Statement”. Web. May 2, 2016. <<http://raquelalmazan.com/interview-w-alessandro-clericuzio-in-rome-italy/>>

She can be seen as a anti-hero because of her use of violence-but that is a question I leave for the audience. The supernatural aspects of her power is also a question for how we view our physical reality. Those who can enter the metaphysical world can have the power to travel in and out of supernatural worlds. I also believe that the dead spirits of women fuel Paloma and aid her power to break barriers out of the jail. Celestial forces transcend the physical world.

AC How is love intertwined with violence, in your play and in society at large?

RA The love between mother and daughter, Oro and Diana who are outside of society create their own personal society of righteous crime. To remove themselves from helplessness and poverty they create their own code of violence, and of thievery to survive; their code is what serves them. What has been taken from them returns to them by the opportunities of gaining what they need.

The FARC Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Columbia (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) is an anti-governmental group that has operated since the 1960's in the name of love for their country. They formed a violent community. This group takes hostages, steals children for the group, makes death threats, and puts hits on citizens and government officials.

Paloma commits the violence in the name of peace and love. In the name of love for Oro, Paloma kills the guard who raped Oro. But it is that same love finally that moves Paloma to recognize that eternal killing can not create the world in which she and Oro can live in peacefully.

Does female vengeance create a balance in the universe? Can it counterbalance all the violence and hate created by men? This is a question Paloma battles with.

It is the love of Paloma's mother that haunts Paloma and that leads her to possible forgiveness. Many of the characters enact a love that is violence, an act of violence as an act of love. Marilyn the doctor heals the wounds of those caught in the cross fire in the FARC, she stitches up, she cuts open and stitches again to create healing.

Soliar's violence in the FARC, when she is caught putting a bomb underneath the President's car, gets her incarcerated. When her dead son visits her in the jail, her love for her son brings a

realization that she has served only the deaths of her three sons and not their lives.

Loba's dead son writes to her a mystical letter in the jail, so that she can finally let go of the violence her husband committed against them. The love she has for her son enables her to let her son's spirit rest and stop reliving the violence of the past.

AC Which power do you most believe in, tradition or innovation? And could you elaborate on this topic in theatrical and in sociological (or gender-related) terms?

RA In theatre I believe in the traditional forms of ritual. That the actions on the stage, physical and textual, visual are forms of rituals that are traditional to a specific culture, ways of life, ethnic groups, religious, spiritual or in communion with nature. The power of innovation – the evolution of women gaining equal standing in society – is challenged in this play. Is innovation moving the rights of women forward? In Bogota, Columbia the crime rate for women is on the rise; women are taking on the roles of “men” in society. Is this a role reversal for women? Or are women harnessing the power that has always been present but suppressed? This brings to question if innovation is the light of truth or if the deeper traditional ways of indigenous cultures that worshipped women is what we should return to.

The Latino culture like many cultures around the world, is a society of patriarchy. I grew up in this culture, where the needs of men are fulfilled first and women take a secondary role at every level of society. Every female character in the play attempts to break through the traditional roles of women that still make up modern society – women only as silent mothers, one-sided prostitutes, stuck in the Virgin Mary role of morals: that the suffering of women creates a higher moral order in society, that we bare all the sins of the world, that woman were created as cleansing tools.

This play is also a response to the misogynistic work of popular male playwrights like Simon Stephens, David Mamet and Martin Mc Donagh, and Neil Le Bute, who create a world of violence and suffering without giving women agency in the world and no spiritual acknowledgement. Male writers whose work includes violence and politics have much more production opportunities versus us women playwrights who bring the female voice in violence center stage

without apology. We are not given the same standing in society to express our stories and narratives.

Paloma and Oro share a loving, passionate and dangerous relationship. A relationship where the presence and identity of men is not necessary but is still beholden to men because of the prison system. Paloma states that she will become the father of Oro's unborn child, exposing the new family dynamic that includes woman and woman and child.

AC The whole play is set in a jail. How does *freedom* affect, or restrict our perceptions, our feelings, our powers?

RA I sought to create a world where the women could live in their full selves beyond the constriction of their societies. When you are in forced incarceration, you are challenged spiritually to endure, to question your perception of the world and how you continue to create and live no matter what constricts you. There are rules of sacrifice in the world of the play, rules of the ancient world and the roles the modern characters play out in the play – a new cycle. Whether you live in small tribal communities, small towns or large metropolis, we are all playing roles that make that society function.

Incarceration amplifies your memories, your awareness of your place in society – the new prison system and the world outside. Incarceration also amplifies your understanding of institutional power – the use of guns, laws, the justice system, physical bars, restrictive rules. This power is also working in our everyday lives of the new industrialized complexes of prison systems throughout the world.

Our false freedoms in our societies can make us perceive the world through economic, racial and status privilege. It becomes difficult for us to understand how entire populations are bred to be incarcerated. The women in Bogota are allowed to have children in the jail until baby is three years of age. Children are born in jails, are nursed in jails. Many youth I worked with in New York City where 14 and 15-year old are incarcerated, unable to break away from the pre-destined path that their families and under resourced environment offered them.

The world of *La Paloma Prisoner* offers a spiritual communication with those who have died. The play has a series of celestial meetings between the women and their loved ones. The wall that

closes the women in also creates a need for us to break into this world. When Paloma becomes a celebrity of vengeance for women around the world, physical walls begin to tumble down. A portal opens. My hope is that the play evokes feelings of empathy and longing and execution of actions as new citizens of the world. That we can begin to redefine what governments and military powers globally create to imprison us in economic, surveillance, censored and stifled ways of life. My focus is not only on physical imprisonment but the imprisonment of the spirit, the mind and the exchange of information and knowledge cross culturally. And that ultimately like Paloma at the end of the play, that we ourselves can manifest our own liberations.

Even in the spiritual dimension there is entrapment and jails with cycles of violence. When we break cycles of violence we change our spiritual makeup towards cleansing and healing.

AC Do you address beauty only sarcastically or do you believe in its healing force?

RA The strong perception that beauty gains you power (social status- value- tied to Latino cultural values) in Latin American and in many cultures around the world was a strong draw for me to address the subject of obsession with beauty. While working in a maximum security prison in Broward, Florida, I facilitated an arts program that involved a dance performance at the end of our six month process together.

The women who wore blue loose uniforms – some had worn those uniforms for 15 to 20 years. That outward generic appearance makes you lose your identity; this separates you from your cultural history. The women wanted to feel glamorous and dance a can-can dance with elaborate colors. They wanted to feel like women again, they said. We didn't have the colorful costumes with feathers of the can-can dance but we had our spirits that created a celebration of womanhood.

What could seem as superficial, the beauty of fabric, colors and style was an uplifting celebration of life for the women in Bogota. This was definitely a healing ritual for the women who were adorned in large feather headdresses and glittery sequenced dresses. This was their moment to be fully recognized at last, if even for a moment. If we are still using beauty as a draw to bring attention to those that

have been abandoned, it is a beginning place to raise awareness.

Woman as warriors is an ancient concept that is being revisited in the jail of Bogota. The parade of prisoners – the day before the pageant – is an event where the women adorn themselves in a variety of wardrobes, costumes and personas. Some include ancient indigenous dress of the people who inhabited the Colombian region before colonialization.

The worshipping of the Guativita Lagoon Goddess by the indigenous Zippa people to the Gods involved the beautification of the body, the ritualization of the body, that involves painting the body gold and adorning the body with colorful dress and jewelry.

The beautification of the body is also a symbol of health and fertility. I endowed the characters with the agency of honoring their fertility, power and sexual potency that does not need the dependency of men. The ability to call on the spirits with this worship often calls on altering the body and preparing the body for this type of spiritual exchange. We now use fashion, style and makeup to engage in this exchange today.

The modern use of makeup in the pageant as a mask to call on the Patron Saint of Prisoners, The Virgin of Mercedes on Sept. 24 every year in the Buen Pastor Jail.

AC The unavoidable issue is that of the virtual absence of male figures from the play, other than the son Antonio. La Paloma promises she will father the child that Oro is expecting from one more rape, but this does not mean that she's a male figure. She's a powerful, gender-bending, polymorphous – and extremely feminine-creature involved in a loving relationship with Oro which will sadly end up in death. Male figures appear from the dead: sons of the convicted women, or former husbands who were violent or even rapists, like Paloma's stepfather, who was her first victim.

But we have male figures also among the jail wardens, thus giving an idea of control and limitation of freedom connected to the male gender, and the nation. There is a sentence spoken by all the women together, which has struck me: "Colombia, mi Colombia, I listened to my mother and you fathered me like a dictator". Could you explain your treatment of the male element in the play?

RA Paloma's gender bending – polymorphous persona challenges our notion of traditional womanhood, where a woman seemingly

takes on male actions without giving up her feminine nature. I sought to create a mythical theatrical, God like figure, who is not limited by her sex, to give Paloma full ability to explore her humanity without judgment on her gender. So much of our notions of gender are predestined by our cultures, our education and conditioning. Paloma's challenges towards the male characters in the play forces them to re-examine the male's notions of power in creating a male identity. If their power is displaced, what could men gain from expressing humility, vulnerability and a respect for the feminine? Men need to face their fear of women's ability to give birth. Life outweighs death, that physical death leads to a continuing spiritual life.

Oro's unwanted pregnancy takes on a complex layering, where the responsibility towards life is laid to question by both men and women.

Women's connection with the earth is a motherly relationship. It harkens back to a matriarchal society where women had agency in the raising of their children. "Fathered me like a dictator" references to not only the dictator like the relationship the women have with their country – where access to democratic rights and processing has so much to do with societal status and wealth. But also to the notion that women are sent from their Father's house to their husband's house but ultimately they always belong to the "Fatherland" of the country. Our household fathers become kings, or dictators in their own homes, displacing the power of women. This power structure is what divides Paloma from her mother, and it is in the celestial world of the play that the mother can return with her daughter and reconstruct a new power, forgiveness, acknowledgement of the crime committed against Paloma.

Being in an all woman's jail- Paloma refers to it as a kind of freedom where she is surrounded by the worship of the feminine dynamics and re- building of women's community. But the jailers, reporters, soldier, father, and men of the past for the woman break in and out the play- that represents the constant forces that play against women around the world.

The opening song of the pageant – the women celebrated 200 years of Colombia's independence by singing the national anthem.

AC Oro and her mother Diana are in jail for robbery and shoplifting. They take what they believe is already theirs. The rapists take what they believe belongs to them. Says Paloma: "This damn

raping that everyone believes is supposed to happen. Like a privilege they're born with". Now ... Is their mutual behavior based on the same approach to life or one justifies the other or what?

RA The men rape on assumption of ownership and agency in society. My mother Flor, and her sisters in Costa Rica and in many Latin American countries, also globally grow up in a rape culture. This is about entitlement. What we believe already belongs to us. If we can treat the act of violence as property, a right, it becomes unspoken law, it becomes our subconscious self-worth and our value systems. Oro and Diana out of their own necessity reverse that entitlement and rob what is already theirs. Their survival in this culture takes precedence over the old male laws. It is their visceral gut response to their circumstance and if they are to enact change in society – at times we can not go by the current laws or rules of that society. We must often criminalize ourselves to create a new way of life. To challenge and bring attention to the needs of those that are marginalized in poverty and class.

Every woman in the play has their own justifications for their crime that is deeply interlinked with their life experience. So when we create a justice system that does not take into account the societal conditions under which people are tried, this will create an environment of retaliation.

AC The obsession with beauty that is at the core of the women's experience in the jail has deep roots. It has to do with a wider, further reaching obsession with, but we could name it a focussing, on the body. Your focus as an artist seems to be – among other issues – the body. It is the bodies that Marilyn, the doctor who worked for the FARCAS, opens and heals and stitches and opens again. It is the bodies that rapists illegally appropriate, the bodies that La Paloma gushes open, the bodies that are displayed in the beauty pageant. What dimensions do you see in the body?

RA The bodies of women in the play are in a constant struggle with the spirit. It still seems in our societies that women battle against their bodies, the condemnation of aging, the natural process of what the body becomes after childbirth. Billion dollar beauty industries attack us with the ideal image of the feminine beauty that does not acknowledge our spirits.

Paloma struggles with her spirit that transforms her body from animal powers to human. With this pageant they reclaim their bodies in their own way, self-confidence, celebration of the sensual – the sexual, the bawdy, the mystical, the ancient and the absurd. Witnessing the hundreds of cell block members cheer on their beauty pageant queen was a transcendent experience, those women were indeed representing an unseen population to the world.

The violence against the body (men and women) is a large part in my play, where in detail I account for the damage against the female body, slicing, bullets, rape, the entrapment of the female figure as ownership. With the FARC and other para-military groups we find that the actual living breathing body of Colombia is also under attack.

The play also has many extended dance/ritual sequences that counter balance this violence with healing. Based on Butoh and cultural rituals we take back the body as an anonymous figure that is being processed for a jail sentence at the beginning of the play to the journey of the end of the play, where the women explore the bodily identities and take form. The body is the conduit of the holy spirit. We need not be separated but to honor the body in space is to join our heart, mind and spirit.

In my practice of theatre I seek to create always an alchemy of the body, the space and spirit. This includes the audiences' participation in this experience. To transform ourselves we must actually change the molecules in the space and this is a conscious effort of how as writers and directors we approach the process and staging techniques of theatre.

AC One more issue I have detected is that of representation. Not only and not simply the idea of celebrity – the women are fascinated by the heroes of their favorite soap opera, and La Paloma is likewise adored by her fans, but also that of the media representing history in the making and a comment by a character who asks La Paloma if she thinks “they’re going to make a movie” about her. And the play “is” this product of the imagination centered on La Paloma. Are these threads connected?

RA My grandmother Rosa ritually watches soap operas every day. When I call to speak to her, I can always tell when she is distracted by the novellas on TV. She very politely asks me to call her back when they are done.

These soap opera narratives hold strong weight in the Latin American culture. There is an obsession with appearance of beauty, wealth and status on those soap operas. The value put on fame is enormous. In a culture where human life can be dispensable or overlooked, fame is a major acknowledgement that you actually exist, that you matter. That you lived and had an impact on the world. In Bogota real life soap opera stars and pop singer attend and judge the beauty pageant at the Buen Pastor Jail. Witnessing the excitement and joy, and communal sharing in singing all the songs that everyone knew was electrifying. Soap operas and pop songs are legitimate culture.

When Paloma thinks there will be a film made about her, it leaves a mark on immortality when she very well knows she could be murdered at any minute. The Greek Gods and myths were scripted, the Kings and Queens of Shakespeare, the historical figures that were wealthy always got their stories recorded and dramatized. But why not the average person who struggles, the ones that are seen too small and insignificant? Paloma makes herself into a figure that can not be ignored, made historical, given value to, made into a God, so that no one could claim that she suffered and acted in vain.

Fame as the ultimate recording of history: when you don't have access to high level education – how do you make the world value your experiences? Does the media only respond to ridiculous freak shows? They often do, how far do we go to get attention? – to be noticed in a sea of millions suffering.

Do we exist without a facebook account? Does Paloma exploit herself and her relationship to the public? Or is she gaining leverage in a world that wants her ultimately to disappear? We ourselves use this technology of fame – to be made sure on a daily basis that we are not disappearing.

CLOSING STATEMENT

ALMAZAN: I would like to meditate on Liu Xia wife of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Liu Xiaobo, who has been under house arrest since October 2013 in China, while her husband is in a Chinese prison. She is continuing to write poems and is releasing her writing through the Independent Chinese PEN Center. I would like to read a poem that captures the resiliency of the spirit when the body is imprisoned.

– after a minute meditation for Liu Xia and all prisoners.

Is it a tree?

It's me, alone.

Is it a winter tree?

It's always like this, all year round.

Where are the leaves?

The leaves are beyond.

Why draw a tree?

I like how it stands.

Aren't you tired of being a tree your whole life?

Even when exhausted, I want to stand.

Is there anyone with you?

There are birds.

I don't see any.

Listen to the sound of fluttering wings.

Wouldn't it be nice to draw birds on the tree?

I'm too old to see, blind.

Perhaps you don't know how to draw a bird at all?

You're right. I don't know how.

You're an old stubborn tree.

I am.

(May all our spirits be free – thank you for your time)

From:

La Paloma Prisoner by Raquel Almazan

SCENE 2

First parade of prisoners.

The stage is empty as Oro and Diana enter from the left, Soliar and Marilyn enter from the right. Loba enters from up center. Cell bars appear behind them. The women enter wearing nude bras and a simple bottom. Or if a production allows that the performers are comfortable nude, this can be explored.

Each woman carries a large box. These boxes will serve as set pieces for the remainder of the play. These boxes contain the objects that are most dear to each character and will be used throughout the play.

The following is a choreographed movement with text, similar to processing when first entering a prison. The executions of the movements and text, rhythm must be precise. The sound of water running down a river is heard mixed with footsteps running quickly in jungle. The women will use the dirt and water elements through out this section.

The text for all women can be divided up between characters, while certain sections are spoken in unison.

The women form a straight horizontal line facing forward towards the audience. They all turn their heads to the right. Then to the left. They all then face forward. In unison they set their boxes on the floor in front of them.

Together they open their box and retrieve their 1st object.

The women speak the names of their objects, within quotations

DIANA: “a hair brush”, LA LOBA: “a photo of her son”,
ORO: “a ripped piece of newspaper”, MARILYNN: “a
medical pin with her name and picture on it”, SOLIAR:
“a small machine gun”.

ALL WOMEN: Colombia, mi Colombia. Colombia, my Colombia. I
have freed you and you have condemned me. I have
traveled your streets, and you have poisoned my veins. I
have drank your rain water and you have drowned my
spirit. I have fucked your history and you now fuck my
future.

The women hold the objects in their hands as if for the first time. They are re-discovering their objects and themselves. Each character turns to the women

beside her and they switch objects, look at it, and give it back to its owner. They put their object back into the box. In unison they turn to the left and form a line to walk together, circling in front of their boxes. They return to the same position in front of their box. Each character retrieves a 2nd object.

DIANA: “a makeup compact”, LA LOBA: “a pair of nylon stockings”, ORO: “a silver ring”, MARILYNN: “a nail file”, SOLIAR: “a military metal”. They hold up their objects again, physically using its purpose.

ALL WOMEN: I prayed in your churches, you sent me to hell. I listened to my mother and you fathered me like a dictator. You told me to dream big, *duerma con los angelitos*, and awakened me from my sleep with invisible hands choking my throat.

They repeat the same action of discovery with their object. Each character retrieves a 3rd object.

DIANA: “a shawl”, LA LOBA: “a necklace with a wolf claw”, ORO: “a baby’s blanket”, MARILYNN: “a pair of glasses”, SOLIAR: “a small evening purse”.

ALL WOMEN: Colombia, I love you. Colombia, I hate you. Colombia *por favor amame* (please love me). Colombia *por favor, odíame* (please hate me). Squeeze me, tickle me, kiss me, lick me. Put your hand on my knee. Remember to put your hands through my hair first. *Asi no, asi* (Not like that, like this). Now lie on top of me. Put your weight on me. Let me feel how heavy your past has been. Do you know what to do next?

They repeat the same action of discovery with their object. They put their object back into the box. This time in unison they each step in front of their box and walk upstage. Each step they take is weighted. They are on fire inside. They advance on the audience, a group of calculated bulls charging forward.

DIANA: I want to travel on an airplane again.

LA LOBA: I want too see my dead son.

ORO: I want to eat chocolate until I’m sick.

MARILYNN: I want to stitch up open flesh.

SOLIAR: I want to hug my brigade again.

Once they reach downstage, the edge of the stage, their movements soften and they turn upstage, their bodies floating. They sing together loudly.

ALL WOMEN (*Canon*): I remember the jungle, recuerdo the river that curves down into town, dirt clouds that form off the

road. I remember tin roofs, and pastry shops, and lost children en la calle. Cars honking, and drunks staggering, and my mother calling me for dinner. I remember ...

ALL WOMEN: I remember ME.

The women are now back behind their boxes.

The women all begin to retrieve simple shirt tops and simple bottoms and dress themselves in unison. They close their box with the following text.

DIANA: I broke into a jewelry store for you.

LA LOBA: I sliced my husband twelve times for you.

ORO: I took what was rightfully mine for you.

MARILYNN: I healed your sick for you.

SOLIAR: I slaughtered your false citizens for you.

The sounds of the prison world: ALARMS sound. CELLS open and close. The sound of GUARDS ORDERING a group of women to roll call over the loud speaker.

Guard #1 enters.

GUARD #1: Presente! Presente! Presente! Quien esta presente?!

The women straighten their line.

GUARD #1: Those chosen to represent each of the nine cell blocks for the 1st annual beauty pageant present yourselves.

ORO: Presente!!!!!! Oro Brillante present! Representante de cell block numero dos.

DIANA: That's your last name now?

ORO: Yes. It's now Brillante.

DIANA: Bueno! Presente. Diana Gomez presente. Representante de cell block numero uno.

LOBA: Aca estoy yo, presente. Loba. Just Loba. La mas vieja. The oldest of cell block numero siete. Representing.

SOLIAR (*as a military salute*): Presente esta Soliar "Reyes". In memoria de Raul Reyes, my recently dead hero. Representing cell block numero seis. I represent the political prisoners, held in block 6 of this overcrowded place. We demand a humanitarian exchange of political prisoners as a first step for a political solution to the deep social and armed conflict in the country –

Marilynn cuts in, stepping forward. La Loba can't help but laugh at Soliar's extremity.

MARILYNN: Estoy presente. Marilyn Ramirez. I am in opposition with prior comments, as those of us who are innocent should be released immediately. Eso es todo. (That is all). Representante de cell block numero quatro.

Suddenly Paloma enters wearing a large gold key around her neck and joins the line.

PALOMA: Paloma. Everyone knows who I am. Presente. Representante de cell block numero nueve. Each cell block divided by our crimes –

The women look over at her surprised.

An alarm rings loudly. Guard #2 enters.

GUARD #2: Everyone to your cells!
(to Paloma) Two men sliced down the stomach last evening were found in Medellin 153 miles from here ... Abnormally large white feathers surrounded their bodies. The victim, she was older, and was cradling the feathers, singing.

The women look over at Paloma quickly.

GUARD #1: Do not stop at the cafeteria! To your cells! NOW!

The guards disperse the women.

The women lift their boxes and place them on stage in creation of the set. The guards exit in haste after Paloma.

Paloma sits stage right in preparation at her cell.

The women exit the stage in the direction that they entered.

“TO PUT MY LIFE BACK INTO THE MAIN TEXT”

Re-Dressing History in Carolyn Gage’s
The Second Coming of Joan of Arc

by Sabrina Vellucci

Joan of Arc is one of the most thoroughly documented and well-known figures of the fifteenth century: a national hero in France, she is typically portrayed as the divinely led peasant girl who donned men’s clothes, mounted a horse and guided an army. As historical records indicate, after bravely fighting for God, the French king Charles VII, and the military, Joan of Arc was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake by the English on May 30, 1431, when she was only nineteen. Following a long process of rehabilitation started in 1450, the Catholic Church finally canonized her as a saint in 1920.

Several playwrights have written about her (Bernard Shaw, Jean Anouilh, Charles Péguy, and Paul Claudel, among others), and, since the fifteenth century, Joan of Arc has inspired poets, prose writers, historians, composers, and, in more recent times, film directors. However, in most of these representations, her story ends at the stake. Carolyn Gage wanted to do something different. In her blog she writes: “In my play [...] the stake is in the past. We are looking to the future” (Gage, “Saving Mr. Disney”). In her introduction to the play, she also states: “I wanted to create a character who could transform shame into pride, self-doubt into militant conviction, and self-hate into blazing anger at a system that is bent on turning women against ourselves and against each other” (Gage, *Second Coming* xiv). Thus, Gage’s Joan returns to share her story with contemporary women. She has become “an impassioned survivor” bent on recruiting her audience to the cause of women’s liberation and

redeeming their collective and historic pain (*Second Coming* 3). In this play, observing that for female characters marriage or death have been the options for too long, Joan self-reflexively raises the question of “*what* is the happy ending for women? [...] Is there some happy ending for us that doesn’t call for our total spiritual annihilation?” (10-11). Rewriting Joan’s story, Gage asks us to read beyond the ending, following her in her ongoing search for new forms of representation¹.

The Second Coming of Joan of Arc was written in 1987, marking a turning point in Carolyn Gage’s personal and professional life. It was her “manifesto” as well as her “tribute to all the women [... she] knew who had ever been raped” (xiii). The show was also “a recruitment speech”, conceived at a time in which Gage had begun to realize that her lifework lay in the field of women’s theatre, and that she “was going to need to organize [her] own theatre, train [her] own actors, attract and cultivate [her] own audiences, publish and produce [her] own work, [...] and generate radically new archetypes and paradigms in [her] plays” (xiii)².

The Second Coming of Joan of Arc is a one-woman show in which Joan of Arc is portrayed as a teenage lesbian cross-dressing runaway who returns from the grave to voice a radical feminist critique of the betrayals she experienced with the highest levels of the church, state, and military. In dealing with a historical character that has reached mythic proportions, *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* foregrounds the necessity for women to probe the so-called facts of history. At the beginning of the play, the reliability of historical accounts is questioned by the protagonist, who disclaims the way she has been represented in the collective imagination. She is determined to redress the mistakes of history – all the things about her life that in five hundred years, as she says, “got lost in the translation” (7). She begins by stating that her name is not Joan but Jeanne. Even her

¹ As Janet Brown remarks, “[i]n feminist drama, this struggle to find new stories and new forms in which to tell these stories must necessarily be central” (163).

² Linda Hart points out that theatre is a particularly effective (although risky) literary genre for bringing the silenced to speech: “As a form, the drama is more public and social than the other literary arts. [...] The theatre is the sphere most removed from the confines of domesticity, thus the woman who ventures to be heard in this space takes a greater risk than the woman poet or novelist, but it may also offer her greater potential for effecting social change” (2).

origins have been obfuscated, since “there is no such place as ‘Arc’” (7). She comes from a village called Domremy. “Arc” is a poor translation of her father’s name, which she never used, preferring instead her mother’s name, Romée. As if this were not enough, she has never wanted to be a saint – “saint”, she asserts, “is just another word for a woman who got burned” (7).

In this way, the character actively re-appropriates Jeanne’s story, telling it from her point of view, and in her own voice³. Jeanne does not want her account to be relegated to the category of “nonessential information” that too often defines the chapters on women in high school history books. Enacting a subversive, empowering gesture, she has come back to “take the border off ‘Saint Joan of Arc’, and to put [... her] life back into the main text”, because her story is “not a sidelight of history [...it] is the story of all women” (Gage, *Second Coming* 6, 7). Indeed, Jeanne warns that the fate she incurred does not attend only those women who, like her, dare to reject gender conformity. All women, she says, are “inserts” in the textbook of their countries, in the history of their nations, and, as her brief, extraordinary life and career demonstrate, “when it comes down to the real issues, we are all going to be missing from the program!” (Gage, *Second Coming* 7).

The drama opens with Joan recalling the fateful episode in the battle to conquer Margny, that is a territory belonging to the Duke of Burgundy’s men, who fight for the English king. She is “ditched” by her own men, who raise the drawbridge before she has the time to reach it (she is engaged in covering their retreat) letting her be captured by the enemy. In her re-examination of history, relying on the original records of the trial and partly inspired by Vita Sackville-West’s biography of Saint Joan of Arc, Gage fills in the gaps of Jeanne Romée’s intimate life. With her insight and imagination, she contributes to the project of generating “ancestral memories and cultural prototypes” advocated by Monique Wittig, whose injunction

³ In her urging that girls, too, be allowed to assume the position of subjects, and in her interpretation of Joan’s story, Gage anticipates what Mary Pipher would write less than a decade later: “[r]esistance means vigilance in protecting one’s own spirit from the forces that would break it” (264). Catherine Driscoll states that “[t]he marginalization of girls in relation to Subjectivity, and ethical and political agency, constitutes a productive position from which to consider the contemporary repetition and reformulation of those models for the modern self in the modern world” (305).

to “make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent” Gage makes her own (“Monique Wittig” 57). Her sustained effort at re-writing women’s history in her work is also consonant with Adrienne Rich’s notion of “re-vision”. Revision, according to Rich, is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes”, and for women it represents “more than a chapter in cultural history”. For them, “entering an old text from a new critical direction” is no less than “an act of survival” (Rich, “When We Dead Awaken” 35). Depriving women of their history, their art, and their spiritual traditions – as Jeanne observes in the play – is one of the ways of “pry[ing] their mind apart from their bodies” (Gage, *Second Coming* 20). *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* shows Gage as one of those brave authors who, to borrow Rich’s words, “[c]onfronted with this ‘Great Silence,’ [...] [had to follow] the path of searching out those women who [...] though often penalized, misconstrued, [...] or [...] tokenized in lonely and precarious acceptance, still embodied strength, daring, self-determination” (*Of Woman Born* 84).

In this respect, Joan of Arc is certainly an exemplary figure. Among her contemporaries and through five centuries, she has been understood as bearing a series of different identities: she has been, in turn, “Maid of France”, prophet, “Harlot of the Armagnacs” (Warner), heretic, knight, patriot, child of nature, amazon, the personification of virtue, and ultimately a saint. In many ways, Jeanne was a crosser of borders. Gage’s character sums up her eccentricity, and multiple marginality, when she pointedly states: “what everyone else knew and I didn’t, was that I had broken all the rules. Here I was: A peasant – Strike One! A child – Strike Two! And a female – Strike Three! [...] And if that wasn’t bad enough, I was also illiterate, outspoken, and dressed like a man!” (*Second Coming* 18).

Transvestism was the most obvious mark of Jeanne’s tendency to disregard fixed identities. Although a known practice by the fifteenth century – attested by a popular tradition handed down through song, drama, and oral tales – the adoption of male clothing and/or way of life would not become a common phenomenon before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in countries like Holland and France. Interestingly, though, there was a considerable number of medieval female saints who wore male clothes despite the prohibition sanctioned by the Bible’s Book of Deuteronomy (22:5), which dictates that “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a

woman's garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God" ⁴. As the play makes clear, these cross-dressed female saints of the Christian monastic tradition were among the few role models available to Jeanne. Like them she left her family, refused to marry the husband her parents had chosen for her, and rejected male domination while appropriating male privilege. Yet, unlike these women, Jeanne did not choose the costume, or the life, of a monk; instead, "crossing class as well as gender lines, she maintained herself as a knight" (Garber 215). Not surprisingly, then, transvestism played a major role in the accusations leveled against her during her trial by the Inquisition, and ultimately determined her death sentence. No less than five charges detailed her cross-dressing as emblematic of her presumption: "she was unwomanly and immodest, [...] she wore sumptuous clothing to which she was not entitled by rank, and she carried arms" ⁵ (Garber 215-16).

Accordingly, Gage foregrounds dress as pivotal in shaping Jeanne's identity ⁶. Following Sackville-West's biography, the author refers to an episode in which Jeanne asked her cousin to take her to the governor of a town nearby in order to persuade him to give her a

⁴ With respect to the transformative power of clothing, Marjorie Garber writes that "[s]uch power was at the root of the fears of the Puritan antitheatricalists who objected to cross-dressing on the Renaissance stage: that wearing the clothing of the other gender might change the wearer, that a disquieting power – a power at once sexual and political – did somehow inhere in clothes" (217).

⁵ Marina Warner observes that "Joan did not respect divisions, did not sift and classify according to the given laws of appropriateness" (136). The saints in her visions "have bodies, talk French, wear clothes and can be held and touched. She could not see the incongruity". Thus, "she trespassed against a basic structural axiom in the Christian idea of the holy and sinned both against the classical idea of propriety, that abstractions should remain abstract and not take on material shape, and against the strong, enduring strain of Platonic idealism, which decrees that all things have their appropriate nature. Always artlessly, Joan displayed a profound and unerring ability to cross from the permitted to the impermissible and thus to define others' fears and assumptions, until the clarity became unbearable" (Warner 136) and she became the scapegoat of her culture's worst fears and vileness.

⁶ Notwithstanding the age-old proverb "Non habitus monachum redit", as Cristina Giorcelli observes, "the equivalence of clothes and identity has always been recognized in literature, history, folklore to such an extent that metamorphoses in dress [...] can impinge upon the essence of self" (5, translation mine).

military escort to go and see the king. In the play, Jeanne identifies the reason for her failing to obtain what she requested with the way she was dressed:

[...] the more I thought about it, the more I kept seeing this big, red, long, hot, heavy, wool dress – the dress I had been wearing... the dress I always wore... the same kind of dress that every woman in my village had always worn. And the more I thought about this big, red, hot, heavy, wool dress, the more I began to see things the same way the governor had.

You see, that dress had a voice. In fact, that dress spoke louder than I did. Before I even opened my mouth, that dress had already introduced me: “Hi. You don’t know me, but I’m someone who chooses to wear this thing that is uncomfortable, impractical, and unsafe. I’m someone who chooses to wear this thing that won’t let me run, fight, ride a horse, swim – that won’t even let me walk outside without falling over, unless I have both hands free to hold up my skirts. Hi. You don’t know me, but I’m someone who chooses to wear this thing that will make rape very, very easy for men – even though I know a lot of men will rape any chance they get, and I don’t really want that to happen. So, how about it, big boy? Think you can take me seriously wearing this garment you wouldn’t be caught dead in?” (*Second Coming* 15)

Therefore, Jeanne decides to go back to see the governor “in real clothes, like the kind men get to wear” (15). And, this time, she is allowed to speak.

In her study on cross-dressing, Marjorie Garber argues that “one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what [...] she] call[s] ‘category crisis,’ disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (16)⁷. She illustrates that the category crisis embodied by the transvestite “mark[s] displacements from the axis of *class* as well as from *race* onto the axis of gender” (17). In medieval and Renaissance Europe, for example, the sumptuary laws that regulated

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar note that while male modernists used cross-dressing as a negative symbol of the disintegration of civilization, “female modernists frequently dramatized themselves through idiosyncratic costumes, as if to imply that, for women, there ought to be a whole wardrobe of selves [...] as Woolf said, we are what we wear, and therefore, since we can wear anything, we can be anyone” (327).

dress for each social class quickly came as well to regulate and reify dress codes for men and women. As Garber observes, “[t]ransvestism was the specter that rose up – both in the theater and in the streets – to mark and overdetermine this crisis of social and economic change” (17).

This notion of transvestism as “*a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*”, and bearing a disruptive element which indicates “not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (Garber 17, emphasis in original), is a useful lens for looking at the significance of Jeanne’s transgressions. Her obstinate refusal to wear a woman’s dress once she was captured and the importance she placed on her masculine attire is highlighted in Gage’s play, where Jeanne’s clothing is equated with her identity and ranked on a par with the truth that her voices held for her. That Jeanne cared deeply about her dress is made clear by her abjuration and its subsequent reversal – an incident that is often overlooked in the narratives of the saint’s life⁸. *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* shows how, after her “confession”, Jeanne was forced to renounce her voices and resume a female dress, “selling out”, as she says, “every single scrap of my integrity” (26). When Jeanne, who could not read, was told what she had signed, she realized that she had forsworn both her perceptions and her identity, and swiftly returned to her previous stand on everything. Within four days of her recantation, Jeanne had taken off the woman’s dress she had been given and assumed her male costume again as “she could not bear the nonsense such a denial made of her past” (Warner 141).

Yet something crucial happened during those four days. In fact, Jeanne’s transvestism had also been motivated by her effort at avoiding being raped, first by the soldiers she camped with during the battles, and then, once in prison, by the five English guards who kept a relentlessly abusive surveillance on her. As it turned out, two days after her recantation, a well-dressed Englishman came into her cell and brutally raped her. And he did it so much more easily,

⁸ Warner writes: “Standing up to authority has cost many a life, but to lose one’s life for one’s dress, to express one’s separateness, one’s inalienable self through one’s clothes, is unusual. Yet Joan’s transvestism [...] ranked of equal significance for her with the truth of her voices. When she found, after her recantation, that she had forsworn both her ‘counsel’ and her dress, she swiftly returned to her previous stand on everything. The visions and the dress were one and indivisible” (140).

Jeanne says in the play, because of her wearing a woman's dress.

If I had been wearing men's clothes, he would have had to use both hands. He would have had to untie forty knots and two sets of lacings – with both hands! I would have made him pay for it, you better believe it. But with a dress? One hand, one movement. That's what dresses are about, isn't it? Accessibility? I don't see where that's changed much in five hundred years. And neither has rape. (27)

In a much debated article titled "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape", Carine Mardorossian criticizes postmodern feminist analyses of violence against women for their focus on discourse rather than experience, and for the "regressive implications" of what she terms "the general (re)turn to interiority" that "too often reduces antirape politics to a psychic dimension" (747). Mardorossian affirms that "[r]ape has become academia's undertheorized and apparently untheorizable issue" (743). She insists that feminist thinking must not lose sight of the corporeal reality of sexual assault, and the wide range of women's responses to the threat of male violence.

Rape and sexual violence are recurring themes in women's dramatic writing⁹. Lisa Fitzpatrick notes that "[t]he variety of representations on stage suggests that sexual violence is a prominent concern across cultural borders though refracted differently through the specific cultural circumstances" and other material conditions of diverse communities of women (183). Themes surrounding sexual violence are often embedded in women playwrights' experimentation with representing gender on stage. These themes, however, as Fitzpatrick notes, raise a series of issues, such as the danger of being exploitative and the possibility of avoiding conventional rape scripts through re-enactment (183).

The process of "scripting" gender identity through rape is analyzed by Sharon Marcus, who explores how women's behavior in response to the threat, or experience, of sexual violence both conforms to, and challenges, normative gender relations. Marcus writes

⁹ In spite of such recurrence, scarce critical attention has been devoted to this subject: "Violence in the theater in general has been dealt with in studies of medieval or Renaissance plays or in the works of canonized playwrights such as Sam Shepard, but women playwrights who portray women victims have been largely ignored. An overview of publications on violence in the theater highlights this gap in both theater and women's studies" (Hernando-Real and Ozieblo 6-7).

that “[m]asculine power and feminine powerlessness neither simply precede nor cause rape; rather, rape is one of culture’s many modes of feminizing women” (391). Hence, according to this author, “rape is not only scripted – it also scripts” by acting to feminize the woman and by imprinting upon her the “gender identity of ‘feminine victim’” (391). Marcus identifies rape as “one of the specific techniques which continually script these [gender] inequalities anew” (391). To counter such a process, feminist discourses need to develop both a language to talk about rape, and an understanding of rape as language. Using the word ‘script’ in a broad sense to encompass the range of discourses that the individual is exposed to and shaped by, Marcus argues that “rape as a linguistic fact asks how the violence of rape is enabled by narratives, complexes and institutions which derive their strengths [...] from their power to structure our lives as imposing cultural scripts” (388-89).

Taking up this argument, Mardorossian notes that it still fails to focus on the perpetrators of rape. She writes: “A model like Marcus’s [...] downplays the ‘materiality of gender’ and ignores that social inscriptions [...] do not simply evaporate because we are made aware of them” (775). Hence “[t]he feminist community needs to become more alert to the ways in which the source of women’s powerlessness is constantly located within the victims themselves rather than in the institutional, physical and cultural practices that are deployed around them” (772). Thus, Mardorossian convincingly argues that the emphasis should instead be laid on engaging with “systemic practices of power” (772). In this respect, Jeanne’s second coming, motivated by her desire to warn women that, after the second wave of feminism, “the men haven’t changed, the rules haven’t changed, and the institutions haven’t changed” (Gage, *Second Coming* 11), appears to be most timely.

To go back to the issues related to the representation of gender violence on stage, and the need to develop a new language to talk about rape, it is worth to stress that in *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* the rape scene is entirely narrated from the woman’s perspective. It is only through Jeanne’s comments that the audience learns about the event, so that we are never allowed unmediated access to it and our awareness of the woman’s subjective response is maintained. Jeanne’s words convey her utter disgust and revulsion – the absolute horror of the profanation of her “precious girl body”, her own “sweet body”, her self (27). In her play, Gage provides an example of

“[w]oman-focused representation of rape on stage [as] an empowering and activist practice” allowing her character to speak her experience and “directly challenge patriarchal discourses of sex, rape, and sexuality” (Fitzpatrick 186). Most importantly, Gage refuses to let her character assume the position of victim. A day after her violation occurred, Jeanne rises “again from the dead”, having reached a profound understanding of rape as “the crucifixion of women” (*Second Coming* 29). She is not daunted but animated by a new vigor, since: “[I am proof that] there is life after rape – even more life, because when a woman is raped, she buries that part of herself which is accessible to men. Now, in a rape culture, they’ll try to make you believe that’s everything – but it’s not. She rises again with what no man can penetrate, her self-esteem. She is reborn, in her own image” (29). Also, significantly, Jeanne comes back to herself when she puts on her so-called “men’s” clothes:

And then the miracle happened. I had been raped and battered and broken. I had denied my voices. For three days, I had not known who I was. But suddenly, when I put on my old clothes again, my “men’s” clothes – no! – my *human* clothes – I came back to myself. I knew who I was again, and I was all through with compromise. (28)

In her study of Joan of Arc as the “image of female heroism”, Marina Warner effectively posits Joan’s transvestism as a structure of *language*: “a figure of speech to lay claim to greatness beyond the expected potential of her sex” (149). While for the virgin martyrs transvestism was “the transitive verb in a sentence of self-obliteration” (Warner 157), the clothing Jeanne chose and the trial she underwent testify not to invisibility or annihilation but rather to a distinctive visibility or legibility.

In *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc*, Gage stresses the importance of clothes as language, shaping perceptions and controlling people’s behavior. By showing the tangible effects of dress on her character’s life, she refuses to downplay the materiality of gender and the body. She stages a character who voices her outrage and names the names of her persecutors, and demonstrates that speaking out can help women to examine the terms in which they are represented. Speaking out can denaturalize the equivalence of sexual violence and loss, shifting the emphasis from the victims to the agents of violence. It can become a kind of collective speech whose proponents may

ultimately form a critical mass of empowered individuals, capable of bringing about social change. As Jeanne exhorts: “it’s time we woke up and stopped letting other people change our names, and it’s time we stopped believing it’s some kind of honor to be tortured by men – and most of all, it’s time we started telling the truth about our own lives. These myths are killing us!” (7-8).

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Carolyn Gage as Joan of Arc (2002).
Photo: Emily Weir

Sabrina Vellucci Interviews Carolyn Gage

SV In 1987, *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* marked a turning point in your life. Among the reasons that drove you to write it, there was your dissatisfaction with existing stage roles for women, which also brought you to organize your own theatre. Could you tell us something about this experience? Also, after almost three decades, how have things changed?

CG I began my career in theatre as an actor, and I found that the roles I was being asked to perform were all written by men and all portraying projections of male anxieties or fantasies. These characters were not real women. I understood clearly that I was being asked to participate in the creating of propaganda for male supremacy. In addition, these roles would not allow me to develop my full range as an actor. Cross-dressing male roles in an effort to work with complexity and depth of character was not an option for me, because I understood that this was no solution, but another strategy for reifying the hegemony of males in the world of theatre. Things do not appear to have changed at all, and I will give you my theory about why that is: The taboo against authentic lesbian representation, especially representation of the lesbian butch, is alive and well, even after three decades of gay male drama dominating first-class productions. Also, exploration of child sexual abuse from the perspective of the recovered survivor is missing-in-action. As long as these gynocentric archetypes are missing, women's theatre will remain colonized.

SV In your work (both your plays and essays) you consistently raise the issue of the pervasiveness of a deadly culture for women, and stress the importance of language to counter this distortion – writing in remembrance of your mentor, Julia Penelope, who was a

linguist, you mention her reflection on the tendency to remove the agent in such expressions as “rape victims” or “battered women”, or even the use of gender neutral phrases like “victims of domestic violence”. Is this also connected to what you write regarding the imperative of “decolonizing” the language (and oneself)? In what ways can we begin to take action against such a culture?

CG Separatism. Because the fish does not know that it is wet. Separatism is the first stage of any organized or even personal effort toward decolonization. Women who engage in any activity or who create any space where males are disallowed are heavily censured. If women are not colonized, why so many sanctions against our separate spaces? When women begin to carve out spaces, and especially theatres, for ourselves, we begin to notice who is missing... the lesbians and the recovered survivors of rape. And when we begin to put those characters on the stage and allow them to tell their truths, we begin to identify and give name to the agents of our oppression. We begin to see the universality of the “Stockholm Syndrome” that underlies the pervasive romanticism of heterosexual narratives. We see the colonizing agenda of patriarchal religions and languages.

SV You have written a number of historical plays in which you revive submerged, buried or censored lesbian archetypes as a way to respond to the absence of empowering role models, forms, and a canon or context for women, and lesbians, in particular. How do you adapt historical material for the stage?

CG It is a process of remembering and then forgetting. One does the research, thoroughly. And out of this research a theme will emerge, and then one begins to shape a narrative to explore this theme. And at this stage, it becomes necessary to forget. Sometimes the playwright must set aside historically accurate chronology, or contradictions of character that undermine the theme. The playwright does not need to apologize for this, because she is writing a play. It is understood that it is not a documentary, or even a “docudrama”. It is a play. In several of my plays, I move the historical figures into contemporary time and space.

SV In your plays you work to include all types of “diversity” and often focus on the subject position of the child – especially with

regard to the difficulty or (im)possibility for children to voice abuse and to have their point of view represented. Your closeness to the girl child point of view is something that is hardly ever found in literary works that are not intended specifically for the young audience. How is this preoccupation with girlhood connected to your lesbian feminist politics or pedagogy?

CG “The girl is mother to the woman”. The girls that we were will determine the women we will become. And, in my experience, the strategies of an unrecovered survivor of child rape will hijack the adult will. This is because we don’t outgrow our childhoods. We either heal and integrate them, or else we live divided lives, where these split-off selves direct their acts of sabotage from behind the walls where we have imprisoned them. “Stockholm Syndrome”, where a hostage will actually fall in love with her captor is an interesting example. Girls raised in patriarchal homes are subject to brainwashing and frequently terrorism. There is an entire culture (“Beauty and the Beast”) of sentimentalizing male abuse and abusers and eroticizing inequality. When women are able to achieve enough autonomy to critique these tropes, we come to understand that what appears to be complicity with our own degradation is actually a strategy formulated in girlhood, an attempt to gain control of a situation over which one is authentically powerless.

SV Humor and satire are successfully employed in your plays to deconstruct debilitating myths such as the ‘family’ as a safe place for women and children, and to create unforgettable voices. Where do you find inspiration for such witty characters?

CG It is the art of seduction. It is not easy to tell an inconvenient truth, a truth that may cause your audience to question many of their values and relationships. They will be resistant to the paradigm of the play. They are not *incentivized* to “go there”. What humor does is it incentivizes the audience to enter the world and the values of the play. The pay-off is the pleasure of the comedy, an entertaining evening in the theatre. A tight plot with plenty of suspense and momentum will do this also. But the radical feminist playwright must be better than her misogynist peers, because she cannot assume her audience will be with her. I love that, in English, the dramatist is referred to as a “playwright”. That implies the building of something.

A boatwright builds boats. A cartwright builds carts. We don't create a play, we build it. It is a solid entity with presence in time and space: a vehicle. We transport people, but first we must convince them to board.

SV Going back to your inclusive approach to theatre as a way to take action against a pervasive discourse that tends to marginalize those who do not conform to the norm, could you tell us something about your company's activities and about the meaning, importance, and challenges of practicing a radical feminist lesbian theatre?

CG I only produce one play a year these days. I have found the challenges overwhelming for a company where one woman is both director and producer. The greatest obstacle in my thirty years of producing feminist plays has been internalized oppression, which plays out as horizontal hostility directed at other women – especially other actors and the director (me). When a lesbian butch woman takes the stage in a specifically butch role, she is breaking with centuries of silence and erasure. She has survived by keeping her head down, proving her worth through being useful, standing in the shadows. In the world of theatre, the lesbian butch has distinguished herself in areas of technical theatre, behind the scenes but not in them. When she does take stage with her own story, she breaks a deeply internalized taboo, and this is manifest in a storm of emotions: panic, rage, confusion. Not understanding the source of this chaos, she will either direct it outwardly at the most immediate and vulnerable targets (a lesbian production company!) or she may experience a breakdown and withdraw. This is also true with survivors of child sexual abuse, and especially incest, when they are participating in a drama about child rape. I have seen this dynamic over and over again, and it is always heartbreaking, because the women with the most need to tell their stories will be the very ones to take down the production. For me, every time I have this experience, it carves out deeper wells of compassion, and this drives me to write richer plays, but I find that I become progressively more reluctant to produce the work.

From:

The Second Coming of Joan of Arc and Selected Plays
by Carolyn Gage

THE SECOND COMING OF JOAN OF ARC
A ONE-WOMAN PLAY

ACT II

The setting is the same. Jeanne is seated on the stool with her back to the audience. The lights come up very slowly, and as they do, she begins to speak, her back still to the audience. As she speaks, she turns to face the audience, the lights becoming gradually brighter.

JEANNE: So ... how do you torture a woman? Well, you can tie her up on the rack and rip her bones apart from the sockets. That's one way. Or you can tear apart her mind and her body. Now, there's two ways to do this: You can pry her body away from her mind, or you can pry her mind away from her body. Either way, it works out to the same thing – you stop the woman. She can think but not act, or she can act but not think.

To pry her body away from her mind, you need to physically humiliate her. Of course, rape is the most traditional method, but it's not the only one, by any means. You can ridicule her body, or make fun of the things she does. You can make her self-conscious about her looks. You can make her strap her breasts in. You can make her embarrassed about her periods. You can make her frightened of puberty, frightened of sex, frightened of aging, frightened of eating. You can terrorize her with her own body, and then she will torture herself.

Now, if you want to pry her mind apart from her body, you have to make her believe she's crazy. I mean, you can haul her into a courtroom and have all the experts certify that she's mentally incompetent, but again – there are a lot of other ways to go about this. You can just annul her. We all know how that goes: Interrupt her, change the

subject, ignore her, patronize her, trivialize her, dismiss her. You can deprive her of her history – oh, does she have one? – of her art – where are the women artists? – of her spiritual traditions – you mean there’s something other than fathers and sons? You can restrict her contact with other women. You can have a fit over women-only space – as if the whole rest of the world wasn’t “male dominant!” You can lie to her so chronically and so comprehensively, that the lie becomes the entire context for her existence. It’s really not terribly difficult to make a woman believe she’s crazy, if you control all the resources.

And if you’re a real expert at torture, you can do both at the same time. You can offer to love her body, if she’ll just give up her mind. Or you can offer to love her mind, and, at the same time, reject her body. That’s what I got. The Church had so much love for my soul, they just had to burn my body. On the other hand, they promised to take care of my body, if I would just give up everything I knew to be true.

You think the days of the Inquisition are over? Every woman who’s ashamed of her body is a victim of torture. Every woman who doubts her own judgment is a victim of torture. So, just how many women do you know who haven’t been pulled apart?

TURNING MUTENESS INTO PERFORMANCE IN ERIN SHIELDS' *IF WE WERE BIRDS*

by Maria Anita Stefanelli

Now, these things never happened,
but are always
Sallust, *Of Gods and of the World*

I imagined women lying in their backs whilst being raped, looking up at the sky, longing to fly up with the birds. Then after the act, having been transformed by the trauma they had endured, actually flying above reality as birds above the earth. Trauma does transform. A part of the self will always fly above.

Erin Shields

Inspired by Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Erin Shields' *If We Were Birds* focuses on a myth that the playwright takes as the source of war crimes currently perpetrated on women, children, and civilians¹. The re-writing of the violent Procne-Philomela-Tereus episode – often revisited by poets, novelists, and playwrights over the centuries – is interspersed with memories and comments by female characters representing “all those women who survived the unspeakable and still continue to fly” (*IWWB* 5). To “all those women” Shields dedicates her work.

¹ Henceforth all references to Erin Shields' *If We Were Birds* (first produced at the Tarragon Theatre, in association with Groundwater Productions, April 14-May 23, 2010) will be given in brackets with the abbreviation *IWWB*, followed by their position in the Kindle edition.

The experience of women in war is often so dreadful that literature is at a loss in finding a language to express it. Even the mythic episode that Shields employs to deal with the phenomenology of violence against women relies on the central icon of the *os mutum* (dumb mouth), a metonymic figure that invokes the inability (or loss of the ability) to speak, namely the impossibility of ‘giving voice’ to what is beyond human comprehension. Theater comes to the rescue as it “enacts the paradox of physical embodiment” and involves “the ephemeral, the evanescent” (Luckhurst and Morin 2014a, 3) that it often exploits given “the capacity of embodied performance to invoke the ineffable” (Luckhurst and Morin 2014b, 2).

The play in question presents a mythicized framework of gender, and how it reverberates in contemporary conflicts, through the voices of a “diverse chorus” of “women who have suffered sexual violence enacted as a weapon of war” (*IWWB* 24). Keywords introducing the elements and themes that concur in providing a critique of gender violence range from *myth* and *gods* to *war*, *power*, *violence*, *blood*, *fear*, *pain*, *silence*, *embodiment*, *theater*, *performance*, and *empowerment*. The implications of these will be discussed, not necessarily in the order in which they appear above, but following the argument of the present author’s exploration of the text, passing from a culture that promotes the exercise of patriarchal power over and against women to the subversion of it in favor of gender equality.

Myth tells us of the origins of the world, and helps to make the world and its inhabitants intelligible. In its sacredness, as Northrop Frye maintained throughout a lifetime of research, myth is knowledge. Nothing comes before it, nothing is beyond it; it is, in its mystical significance, the richest narrative of humankind, charged with a singular gravity. According to Frye, myth “is a *factum*” [a deed, an exploit, a feat] “of human existence: it belongs to the world of culture and civilization that man has created and still inhabits” (Frye 37). Myth links earth and ‘heaven’, even though the latter is an unreachable place. In the beginning were the gods, with whom people became acquainted, and, through myth, learnt to establish an intimacy. Literature endows them with their plots and variants, their excursions and incursions through texts, the multiple manipulations of time and memory, and the profound spaces of the imaginary.

Following the Neoplatonist Sallustius, who wrote, “the world itself can be considered a myth”, the Italian classicist Roberto Calasso links myth closely with the mind and literature, and with the world

itself (Calasso 2001, 170). He insists that the “psychic powers [...] are fragments of the gods”, since it is from the “original state of things” or “the amorphous psychic mass” contained in the sacred enclosed space called *témenos*, that literature *sneaked* the gods out for them to be *scattered* across the *surface* of the *world* (169-70). “[O]ne way or another”, he continues, “the world will go on being the place of epiphanies”, and literature will be “the last surviving Pausanias” (170) – the name of the knowledgeable Greek traveler, geographer, guide, and enlightened cultural operator who described the past glories of his own country, as well as its later status as part of the Roman Empire.

Shields considers Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a work where the borders between the gods and humanity can be crossed thanks to the “universal contiguity” that Italo Calvino sees between “all the figures and forms of existing things, whether anthropomorphic or otherwise” (Calvino 1999, 26). Gods and human beings are contiguous, since they all belong to “that collection of corporeal, psychological, and moral qualities which we usually consider human” (26); they share qualities that Calasso calls “psychic forces”. As forms upon the earth change and exchange attributes with one another, narratives multiply, occur, recur, and mutate in form, or even conform to different genres across space and time.

In our postmodern and postcolonial times, with adaptations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* seeing a strong revival, the mythic narratives of our ancestors have become cultural models. A model provides a way of representing the world, perhaps even an interpretation of the world. For Calvino, “The interpenetration between gods, humans and nature implies not a hierarchical order but an intricate system of interrelations in which every level may influence the other two, though to varying extents” (27). Indirectly, then, the tales in *Metamorphoses* are open to interconnecting interpretations, judgments which tend to oscillate before settling on one position or other, readings which alternate between various choices, before allowing one position or the opposite one, or even some sort of cultural hybrid, to emerge. Whatever was once deemed as a ‘source’ or an ‘influence’ has been revised in terms of “rewriting/rereading and transtextualization” leading to the de-centering, re-directing, re-interpreting, and eventual radical overturning, of hegemonic discourse (Calinescu 243-44). In a word, an adaptation of *Metamorphoses* can become the vehicle for an anti-essentialist critique,

suitable for questioning current processes of social and cultural change.

The myth Shields draws on is that of Procne, whose hand in marriage is given to Tereus by her father Pandion, king of Athens, in gratitude for Tereus' help in defending his kingdom against Thebes. The married couple leaves for Thrace, where the homesick Procne asks her husband to go and fetch her beloved sister Philomela from Greece and bring her to their palace. Instead of fulfilling his mission, Tereus is overcome by lust and takes Philomela to a "private hunting cabin" in the forest with "thick walls" and "a lock on the door" (*IWWB* 1086), and rapes her. As she threatens to make the act public, Tereus cuts out her tongue and returns to his wife, telling her that her sister died on the journey back. Eager to leave her prison, Philomela manages to send her sister a tapestry illustrating Tereus' crime and her own mutilation. On seeing this, Procne disguises herself as a follower of Bacchus and pretends to join the festivities in his honor in the forest so that she can rescue her sister. She then frees Philomela and, together, the women plot their revenge, which consists of Procne murdering her own child, cooking the severed remains, and serving them as a meal to Tereus. As the king begins to realize that he has become the sepulchre of his own son, Philomela shows him the child's head, and when he starts to attack the sisters, all three are turned into birds.

Shields sets up the act of dramatic presentation in the theater using a strategy that subverts time by having her Chorus made up of female survivors of twentieth century wars who interact with the mythical characters and wear modern dress. Each of the contemporary female characters steps forward at various points during the action of the play to bear witness to her own trauma through a narrative of the pain and torture (rape being the prime means) inflicted upon her and, at times, her family, in wartime. Drawn from research into a number of modern conflicts – Nanking (1937), Berlin (1945), Bangladesh (1971), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Rwanda (1994) – these characters and narratives are directly linked to a real past, reminding the spectator that the rules of discord have hardly changed since Ovid's times, and that a woman's body is still seen as the legitimate booty to those who prevail (*IWWB* 22-25).

Among the various works which center on, or are interwoven with, the myth in question – or one of its derivations – is Margaret Atwood's re-visitation and recreation of it, in "The Nightingale",

based on Robert Graves' version (Graves 165-68). Atwood proceeds by *layering* onto a text of a writer of the past – as she explains in *Negotiating with the Dead* ('Descent', Atwood 2002, 178) – so that the myth can shift to the different time of the present. If “[a]ll writers learn from the dead”, as she believes, then most texts are shaped by previous texts with consequently, the emergence of intertextuality (even if the author is unaware of it) causing the new text to enter, as Barthes maintains, “into the undifferentiated proliferation of the intertext” (Barthes 44).

Atwood explains the process of recovering the roots of one's present culture: “All writers must go from *now* to *once upon a time*; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must care not to be captured or held immobile by the past. All, moreover, must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure; but it's useless treasure, unless it might be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change” (Atwood 2002, 178-79). Atwood does not concentrate on reworking the tale of the two sisters; indeed, her narrative responds to a tragedy that is impossible to retrieve, culminating as it does in a dialogue between the ghost of Procne and Philomela (who may also be a ghost). Acting as narrator, who is deeply traumatized and has an ambiguous relationship with her past as a woman reduced to slavery, Procne interacts with Philomela in the “liminal space” of the latter's dream. The essence of the myth is not retrievable from the consciousness of a woman who, *in her sister's view, does not want* to speak (rather than her being deprived of her tongue and mutilated), or of a woman who *does not want* to listen (rather than her dreaming). Atwood's treatment of the story is non-linear (that is, does not follow on the concept of ‘literary influence’) and, as happens in dreams, its representation of reality is fairly loose (Trivellini 85-89). The narration follows the diasporic details of the story, and resonates with issues – violence, silence, wars – that the author considers timeless. Atwood's perspective, deriving from her interest in the dynamics of literary reception, problematizes issues which are removed from ancient times and are nearer to the preoccupations of our own: among these, first and foremost, her analysis of migration as the loss of “‘real environments of memory’ associated with diaspora” (Goldman 210) that she tackles in novels

such as *Surfacing* and, later, in *Alias Grace*. In “Nightingale” she evokes the dynamic process of moving to a different place using the image of migrating birds (the swallow is the other image) who, like the women who must overcome their trauma by putting distance between themselves and their own recollections, fly away to free themselves from all traces of the past. With the traumatic effects buried in the “dark [and unexplorable] territories of the psyche”, Atwood “casts the two female voices as the material traces of that forgotten tragedy” (Trivellini 89).

In the context of postcolonial criticism – and of Canada in particular – the development of trauma studies (racism, slavery, and other forms of oppression, including violence against women) has in recent years stressed such factors as the local, the national, the global, and the transnational as well as a sense of belonging to a nation. While retaining the key facts of the myth, and simultaneously subverting or even negating them, Atwood’s “Nightingale” places at its center the female consciousness marked by past trauma. Her use of myth employs disembodied female voices (one emerging from one of the women’s dreams, the second being that of her sister in the role of the narrator) as the traces of an atavistic act of violence. As *traces*, then, those voices have lost their mythic value, and have become elements of the world we inhabit.

Shields, for her part, focuses her attention on the resonance myth has in the present, using theatrical performance in verse rather than Atwood’s short prose narrative. While the latter’s mythic narrative transcends time through the rhetorical constructions of female voices modeled on [disembodied] speech-acts, Shields’s theatrical strategy presents the ‘here and now’ of the feminine embodiment in opposition to the perpetual violence of rape, that ‘forceful seizure’ or ‘abduction’ of an individual’s body (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). Verse enriches the play’s dramatic force, and tightens the links with the universal quality of Greek tragedy that the playwright considers the “largest theatrical container there is” (Ue 98). When an interviewer asked Shields why she tells the story in retrospect, she answered, “I believe the only thing that can make trauma bearable is to tell the story. Again and again and again. The framework of the play is therefore Philomela’s retelling of her trauma. For me this makes a play which is mostly about revenge also about *reconciliation*. It also gestures to the importance of theatre as a vehicle for storytelling” [my italics] (Ue 102).

Reconciliation in postcolonial Canada is associated with the deeply unjust policies of assimilation that, through the use of residential schools for aboriginal offspring taken from their parents, were intended to “kill the Indian in the child” (Shelley 10)². Residential schools were established less than twenty years after the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, and many Aboriginal children were stripped of their language, their culture, their name and their identity in order to become “Canadian”. Links with parents were not encouraged, and abuse, sometimes sexual, was often the rule. Changes were gradually made to the system, but the process of imposing European values only stopped in the early 1990s, when the wrongs done to a large part of the Aboriginal population were finally acknowledged. The people who had been involved were listened to, and were defined as “survivors”, a survivor being “someone who emerged victorious, though not unscathed, whose head was ‘bloody but unbowed’; someone who had taken all that could be thrown at them and remained standing in the end. It came to mean someone who could legitimately say ‘I am still here!’” (*The Survivors Speak* xiii). Working for “attitudinal changes [...] to generate mutual recognition, respect, and responsibility” is the main goal of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission to “facilitate the eventual emergence of a balanced relationship of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Shelley 15)³.

Accommodating the idea of “reconciliation” to *If We Were Birds* might not be straightforward, since the ‘survivors’, in this case, are a mythical ancient princess – assaulted, sexually abused, and locked up in a cabin in the woods – and civilians tortured during war. Yet, there are similarities: Philomela, who has ‘survived’ in animal form, and the “slave women” of the Chorus are given a chance, like the Aboriginal ‘survivors’, to “speak of their pain, loneliness, and

² Shelley reports this proposition from The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2012 (81). She also explains: “The Canadian TRC represents movement on the path towards reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. The Commission was established by the federal government in 2008, the year following Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s official apology to residential school victims” (Shelley 12).

³ The works of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada began in the same year as the first staging of *If We Were Birds* by Groundwater Productions.

suffering, and of their accomplishments”; like the young guests of the residential schools, theirs is “a difficult story, [but] it is also a story of courage and endurance”. The process of reconciliation, as The Truth and Reconciliation Commission put it, “requires us all to attend to these voices, which have been silenced for far too long” (*The Survivors Speak* xiii). Shields is not for silence, nor for ‘revenge’ but is asking us to listen to the voices which originate in that space where all creatures partake of the gods, i. e., “that collection of corporeal, psychological and moral qualities which we usually consider human” (Calvino 26). In the space of myth the present can be described and we can be led towards an understanding of ourselves.

The way Shields approaches classical antiquity makes use of suggestions put forward by both classic and current feminist perspectives on female embodiment and women’s empowerment. Her reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s early theories about the body and the self informs her account of the adolescent sisters’ handling of their own bodies and their subordination to male desire and power. Writing in 1949, de Beauvoir draws the reader’s attention to how a woman learns from childhood to treat her body as a passive object: something to adorn and beautify, a thing for another’s gaze, something to please others, or maybe even as a source of embarrassment (de Beauvoir 295-351). “For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another”, she explains (65). With reference to the emphasis on the valorization of the body and the positivity of female embodiment linked to the second wave of the feminist movement, Shields opens up an arena in which woman might contemplate freedom from structures of submission, and a perception of sexual difference as “envelopes of identity” (Irigaray 7). From the perspective of Judith Butler’s performative account of gendered identification as described in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), and discussed in her earlier work as something that does not originate in biological, ‘natural’, or pre-existing cultural conventions (Butler 1988, 526)⁴, Shields interprets gender subjectivity as a set of acts which, by their very nature, are open to change (Butler 1993,

⁴ Drawing a parallel with Austin’s theory of speech-acts, Butler considers “gender constitution” *performative*. (Butler 1990, 270-82). A useful discussion of Butler’s concept of “performativity”, and its difference to Austin’s, is in Fischer-Lichte 24-38.

226). This means that the two women protagonists perform their gender through repeated acts in ways that enable transformation – and, eventually, a transformation does take place.

Shield's play puts the spotlight on such theoretical issues as embodiment, empowerment, gender, and performativity, and proceeds to channel them into a blind alley, where divine escape is found in the characters' metamorphosis, as happens in Ovid's tale of multiple violence in Book VI. In *If We Were Birds*, however, there is a sequel to the myth, and Philomela and the slave women (also turned into birds) appear "in a purgatory of nature" (*IWWB* 49) to re-enact the terrible story. The idea of 'purging' and 'cleansing' is expressed in the environment in which both Philomela and the Chorus find themselves, as if the wrong that has been done might gradually be, if not erased, then at least purified. Acknowledging the injustice and urging atrocious vengeance, those haunted by their physical and psychological wounds repeatedly call on Philomela to "speak" (51, 58, 65, 69, and 74). Their voices are perceived by the audience as poetic lines delivered to restore order among humans, and to establish an organic process of cohabitation in this world, potentially "void of conceptions of force" (Shelley 23). A journey, as it were, towards reconciliation between humans and those who have become non-human – a transformation that not only involves species, but also gender.

The play opens with Philomela who has undergone her metamorphosis. She addresses the issue of the politics of speaking, encouraged by the members of the Chorus: "No more silence" (*IWWB* 62), but also: "Not much has changed now that I am a bird. / Especially the size of my fear/large enough to get caught in the throat but not enough to die" (66). The organ of sight, which is a "corporeal fact" of life (Sheets-Johnstone 1994b, 69) and is predominant in intercorporeal encounters, underpins Philomela's recollection of her "ravaged tongue" (*IWWB* 1462), and the "blood" that her eyes "have watched stream from [her] body" (1468): images that become rooted in the woman's subjectivity, that abide within her, and torment her.

Philomela recalls her childhood. As adolescents she and her sister were enveloped by a reassuring darkness ("We were not frightened by darkness then", she says [88]), and by soothing feminine water ("Philomela is underwater in the bath tub, able to hold her breath for eighty-five seconds", reads the stage direction [207]). According to the allegory of Plato's cave – where the feminine figures

are “without voice, without presence [...] frozen by the ‘like’, the ‘as if’ of that masculine representation dominated by truth, light, resemblance, identity” (Irigaray 1997, 83) – the space the girls inhabit within the royal palace is a metaphor of the inner space, the womb, or *hystera*, where they experience certain imaginary settings that they believe make up reality. Reality, however, is quite different, as they will learn in due course.

With the “Prologue” about to conclude, Procne enters recalling the joy of the sisters’ childhood when they experienced their bodies “in situation”; when they played “rough games”, just as boys are taught to play, and being ready, like them, to “undertake”, “invent”, and “dare” (de Beauvoir 306-07)⁵. *Fear* played no role in their lives at that age: that was before *fear*; it was before the threat of rape entered the innocent world the two princesses inhabited. It was even before the sisters discovered that a woman’s body can be raped. It was before they found out that sex is not only a somewhat mysterious thing to enjoy at some future time, but that it can also be used as a weapon to violate their body, and even destroy “(if only temporarily), the intersubjective, embodied agency and therefore personhood of a woman” (Cahill 13). It was before they realized that women are “pre-victims expecting to be victimized” (159). It was before they even imagined that creating a representation of themselves “to attract male desire” would make it necessary “to protect themselves from that desire” (160). And that inescapable contradiction leads to the realization that “[a]ttracting the male gaze is, in the context of patriarchal society, necessary to achieve social status and worth, yet that attraction is in itself a trenchant threat” (160). Nature’s gift of ‘seeing’ as a way of making contact with other animate beings, creating meaning through one’s flesh, and establishing a corporeal relationship with a social purpose, can easily turn into moral injury when the male gaze objectifies the woman, thereby causing humiliation, “degradation” (Kelland 180), and “subordination” (175). In that context rape is, indeed, “the ultimate expression of

⁵ In later chapters of *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir provides a phenomenology of the body as lived through the different stages of a woman’s life, and explicitly offers her narrative as an account of lived experience. For a discussion of her acknowledgement of the body’s role in its transformations, and its responsiveness to cultural interpretations, see Bruce and Smits, Chapter 17.

patriarchal order, a crime that epitomizes women's oppressed status by proclaiming, in the loudest possible voice, the most degrading truths about women that a hostile world has to offer" (Cahill 2).

The fifteen scenes that follow, from the girls' "Bathtub Talk" to the final horrific "Supper", lead the audience to discover that the girls' gendered identity is dramatically constructed, deconstructed, and re-constructed through different bodily acts that, in their materiality, have meaning, and are realized through different modes of embodying⁶. By putting her script "through cycles of writing, development and performance", as she explained in an interview (Ue 98), Shields explores the stylization of bodily acts at a particular time and in a particular culture (Butler 1988: 520).

From their adolescence as tomboys, the two female protagonists are presented experiencing their sexuality with the younger of them fantasizing about disguising herself as a boy and then immediately changing into a mythical female marine divinity (a daughter of Triton) in order to follow her elder sister, once married, wherever she might be. In the following scene, the Chorus ironically makes the sisters "aware" of the "historical truth" of virginity as something to preserve for, and then be "ripped by", a husband; "the first man to enter me fully" (*IWWB* 238). That the ode is spoken by the women of the Chorus, whose bodies – one will learn – have been ferociously violated during military conflicts, is bitterly ironic; it contrasts shockingly with the brutal actions performed on their own bodies, often in their husband's or child's presence, as the same women relate in a subsequent scene. Raised to consider their bodies as objects for another's gaze (something which has its origin in "education and surroundings" [de Beauvoir 307]), and, when displayed, for a man's use and control, the girls are convinced that once married, submission is due to the husband just as it was to their father when they were young. On the one hand, being exhibited expresses the women's identities, but on the other, it reveals their vulnerability; their body, as well as their minds, becomes a site for the exercise of patriarchal power.

⁶ The process of embodiment takes place via the material "acting" of the body, a concept that Butler derives from the idea of the body as a repertoire of infinite possibilities that sets in motion "an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities" (Butler 1988, 521).

It is also up to the Chorus “to set the next scene then [step] into the shadows to watch” (*IWWB* 266) as the two kings, of Athens and of Thrace, discuss – in “A Celebrated Battle” (Scene 4) – the way in which the Theban rebels were vanquished, and to listen to Tereus’ summary of the action:

TEREUS: I mobilized my men here, at the southern gates,
Then with Ares pulsing through our blood
We bashed ribs and skulls and hips and faces,
Spraying the walls of Thebes with rebel innards.
(*IWWB* 310-12)

After such a foretaste of Tereus’ savagery, and following the exchange of human creatures as “gifts”, which includes Pandion’s offer of Procne’s hand in return for the Thracian king’s help, the ritual of marriage is rehearsed in Scene 5, “Bind Us Together” (608). A performance within a performance, the ceremony has Philomela holding “a scroll with instructions” (609) to prepare her sister for this turning point in her life. They act out a “script” derived from the ancient rites of fertility, associated with the beginnings of theater as “action” and “doings”, which are actually, according to the tenets of “performance theory”, concrete ways of “moving/singing”; in short, “a movement in the lives of people” (Schechner 68-73). Though preoccupied and doubtful – now that the time is fast approaching – as to whether she should abide by the performance of the marriage ritual that she has been “practicing for years” (*IWWB* 626), Procne ends up accepting, of all the options available to her, to “embody” those “both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (Butler 1988: 521). Both girls, just like the actors on stage, enact the roles of bride and bridegroom. While the younger sister, however, simply mimics Tereus’ savagery, the wife-to-be describes how the body responds to the mind’s impulses:

PROCNE: My head is ready for it; right here floating above my
body, reciting the ritual, the words, the actions like
everything we have done before. But then down here. I
even know what I’m supposed to feel, and how I’m
meant to contain that feeling.

PHILOMELA: Where?

PROCNE: There’s this churning, a wave of something I’ve never
felt and it’s pushing into my mind, distracting me from

the words I'll say, the steps I'll take. It's stronger than thought, Philomela. I'm scared. (*IWWB* 659-73)⁷

Procne's gendered performance as a wife is, in this context, part of a ritual that has been repeated several times. The action, which is governed by "theatrical conventions", brings about a "disquieting effect" (Butler 1988 527). Whatever pre-existing gender identity Procne may have embodied so far, its latest performance shows that it is "fluid"; a fluidity signaling a tendency for it to be "put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" (531).

Examined from Butler's point of view of gender as "act" rather than "role", Procne's fear is more than justified, since she feels "down here" (inside her body!) a resistance to the embodiment and the enactment of a cultural convention (*IWWB* 671). Her maturity is leading her towards a breaking of gender boundaries that will be accomplished as a performative "act" at the moment she learns that her sister has been wickedly wronged by her husband, and that the truth has been maliciously hidden from her. Her sister's innocence regarding her own performance of gender is, on the other hand, the reason why she falls into her brother-in-law's trap. This experience will lead her, however, to overcome her jailor-persecutor by means of the traditional weapon of loom and thread, which, both in myth and in history, women have used to defend themselves, to speak of themselves in silence, and even gain a modicum of economic independence. Once again, then, the performative fluidity characterizing gender will produce awareness – regrettably with catastrophic consequences.

A joyful, playful, coquettish, reckless, and prudish Philomela, whose boastful modesty borders on foolishness, is the protagonist of the scene "The Journey". It is here that all her emotions culminate in confusion when she is unexpectedly taken to a hunting cabin with "thick walls" and "a lock on the door" (1086) instead of a palace. The key mythic episode of her tongue being cut out is forewarned by hints and allusions, which gradually become open references to threatening intentions. Tereus is possessed by lust, feeling it "in [his] teeth" (1089-90), and, after *aching, watering, throbbing, and clench-*

⁷ In a previous draft, "this sense of/fear, of apprehension, or dread" follows.

750) – becomes obsessive (752, 777, 800, 815, and 1498), thus anticipating a significant turning point in the narrative that will overturn the idea of the woman's body as object for the male gaze and, ultimately, strip Tereus of his absolute power.

With some degree of confidence, the victim remarks that the gods will eventually turn their gaze towards her, and to her efforts to rid herself of shame: “The gods watch all evil if they are more than names / They will see me. / See me! / See me down here scraping my shame deeper into my wounds. / See me! See me / see me see me see me see me” (1171-76). Gaze direction or gaze strategies do not make up the whole story of rape. Ever since Foucault's argument for the decriminalization of rape as a sexual crime (Foucault 200-202), the origin of rape has been discussed, within the ideology of the male exertion of power, as a political act. In effect, King Tereus' abuse of power is analyzed in the play from both public and domestic perspectives. Wishing to make the violence known, Philomela gathers up her courage to counter any resistance to the idea of speaking out in order to make his offense public. She explodes:

PHILOMELA: I won't stop screaming.
I won't stop saying the words
Again and again and again.
Rape! Rape! Rape! (*IWWB* 1176-78)

Hearing her cry, “[H]e cuts out her tongue” and – without any interruption – Procne enters to hear him spinning the false story of her loss at sea. The prey is reduced to silence.

Before the scene closes, he rapes her again, and in Scene 11, he rapes her once more, while the women of the Chorus take turns describing the violence that they have suffered, which overlaps with that suffered by Philomela. Half way through their accounts, “*Tereus exits*” (1210). The women's desire to reach the sky is expressed by the slave women in a sequence of turn-taking as they try to create a distance between themselves and the horror they have endured:

DWINDLING: If we were birds we could fly up,
YOUNG: Away from this wrenching pain,
PREGNANT: Away from the shame and the blood and the terror,
YOUNG: Away from what will be left of ourselves when he's done.

- DWINDLING: If we were birds he would disappear below
as the wind caught our wings like sails.
- BLEEDING: Up up up we'd go, into clouds
where our hearts could beat as loudly as they are
- PIOUS: If we were birds.
- CHORUS: If we were birds. (1199-1209)

Alone in the cabin with nothing except a “Thracian loom with dirty thread lying in a tangled heap” (1274), Philomela decides to act. The next stage direction informs us: “*Philomela weaves*” (1277).

A scene follows presenting Pandion’s delusionary state in his interaction with several women slaves pretending to be his daughters. The lines focus on the king banishing all foreigners from his kingdom, and his failure to protect his daughter. The implication is that it is impossible to foresee or fight rape and sexual abuse, since no social status or rank, or even careful protection within the domestic walls, can prevent such violence from taking place. Extirpating such evil is impossible while the traditional belief within the dominant culture is that the victim encourages aggression, and scant effort is being made to search for ways to change this culture of violence. The women slaves who play the role of Pandion’s daughters in the scene have turned from resentful to compliant towards their “father”, who is determined to draw a close circle around his “daughters” and his subjects. Far from being a solution to the problem, this ambiguous resolution functions as a suitable introduction to the next scene, where the disclosure of the crime is made, translated into a visual narrative that takes place in front of Procne.

In Ovid’s Book VI, Philomela weaves a tapestry of symbols explaining her situation – symbols that have been interpreted as words (a *carmen miserabile*, that is, a poem reflecting her suffering), or, according to another version, *notas* meaning “signs”. Ovid’s is an ephrastic account of what happened (*ecphrasis* was originally a verbal description), but unlike Ovid, who favors textuality and narrative discourse, Shields, who trained as an actor, gives prime importance to drama and performance. Her Philomela sets up a piece of theater. In her here-and-now, in her physical presence in a definite place, in her distance from her sister, in her experienced pain and her inability to speak, she tries to recreate her drama as precisely as possible, and turn her experience into an imagined performable story. Alone in her cabin and silenced by force, she renounces all

words and, by transcending her here-and-now, imparts presence on absence for her potential audience. As a body-self she uses her arms and her hands, and she takes advantage of the technology of the loom – an instrument traditionally used by oppressed women to weave, as opposed to the male activity of writing – appealing to the sense of sight. In this she enacts her own silence, which, as a creative act capable of translating fear into assertiveness, becomes performative.

While Procne is performing her daily ritual for her drowned sister, she receives a package brought by a woman who served in the woods:

Procne and the servant stretch out the tapestry. Lighting shift: the sheet is lit from behind.

Movement Piece: silhouetted tableaux of the rape and dismemberment are projected onto the tapestry. Procne understands every image. (1425-27)

The back-lit stretched-out tapestry functions as a theatrical screen upon which the dynamics of the double violation appears. While a textual narrative – or weaving a (literal) inscription – would have delayed the process of awareness, the tapestry instantly activates a channel of communication between the two sisters. The ironical reference to the nineteenth-century *tableaux vivants*, which were conceived for entertainment and amusement, and exhibited women for the male gaze, works as a means which allows the gaze to shift towards the woman. In this form of entertainment the woman – clothing lightly draped to give an illusion of nudity as she posed as a mythical or legendary figure (Hovet and Hovet 93) – would “disappear” or “kill herself into the art object” with her “personality [...] subdued” to the voyeuristic male gaze in the scene in which she was depicted. However, Philomela’s *tableau*, dependent on the “disposal of light” in the space where her sister would watch the scene on the tapestry, and the “corresponding adjustment of the mental vision” that such *tableaux* allows, presents the story of “rape” and “dismemberment” that has herself as protagonist, and that she herself embodies (94). A performative silence characterizes the female image, but her use of the loom, a technological device, takes on connotations of newness: *new* as in a break with the past, and thus a qualitative leap forward. The feminine hand that weaves tells of female oppression, but also of the opportunity for the violated woman to manipulate the oppressive situation in which she is caught, and to

resist it. Philomela's performative act is a theatrical model that replaces the words she cannot utter, not only because her tongue has been cut out, but also because, as a woman who has experienced trauma, she sinks into a "wordless nothing dominated by chaotic anxiety" rather than a "wordless fellowship", a potential means for healing after trauma (Larrabee, Weine, and Woollcott 353). It is also a means for asking for solidarity and overcoming trauma. In the present case, however, the reaction of both women is a desire for revenge, from which further violence derives. As Shields proclaims, "violence begets violence" (Ue 100).

Female muteness is central in Irigaray's feminist theory. There is no room, she claims, for a female voice in what she calls the "phallogocentric" (or patriarchal) imaginary, and this has not only resulted in a misrepresentation of female sexuality, but has also made women into "products", i. e. mute "objects of transaction among men alone" (Irigaray 1985, 171). The idea of "morphology" as *différance*, then, is put forward by Irigaray as the source of woman's imaginary; indeed, the 'form' of forms of an embodied subject that is expressed in the logical interlinking of body forms, imaginary, sentience and consciousness (Irigaray 1985, 111). This is a site for opening up "possibilities of different legibilities" of materials of art (Robinson 97). Shields sides with Irigaray, arguing that instead of using and recurring to man-given forms which are only appropriate to men, a woman must explore her potential to use signs to understand her morphology in order to "become", thus fulfilling the wholeness of her being. A feminist-inspired politics, therefore, would give women the power to make their voices heard, and liberate them from their former condition of muteness. A woman artist is the person who must find the materials and forms to manifest her morphology.

By using the loom creatively, Philomela explores the chance to overcome her mutilation and muteness, and become whole again. Her body has been violated, yet her mind is alert, so she does not allow herself to be diminished, but uses her ability to explore the morphologic link between her dismembered body and possible fulfillment through symbolic expression. In the timeless night of the Prologue (providing the continuation of the action) a talking Philomela has undergone her metamorphosis into a bird *and* has been given her tongue back by the gods. Though deprived of her humanity, she can speak the logic of her own reconstituted body-and-

imaginary, and pave the way for her story to acquire its social significance. Hers is not simply an art of reporting, but an act made up of “scripts”, i. e. the acts made during various stagings, where events, gestures, behavior, operations and rituals are dynamically created and de-created, and never frozen into one final production.

Shields' interest in promoting the theatrical event with an emphasis on the performing body as a cultural signifier, and specifically, in the case of postcolonial contexts, on notions of identity and alterity, is based on the legacy of the classical world. This provides a site, in contemporary playwrights' hands, for experimental staging leading to cultural negotiation and resistance.

In a similar way to Mikhail Bakhtin's “understanding of the body as a vehicle for extant cultural meaning, its forms and actions a mnemonics of what had gone before”, and his description of “the celebratory body's symbolic participation in the subversion of social hierarchy” perceived as “acts of embodied remembering” (Counsell 1), the Bacchae celebrations are exploited as an arena in which identity and gender can be contested, where “resistance take[s] the form of a subversion of hegemonic regimes” (4). This holds true in the theatre, where the Dyonisian/Bacchic ritual is understood and re-proposed as a way of *re-mem-bering* Pentheus' *dismemberment* by bringing together members of society or the body politic, to gather and witness the dis-assembly of another, or by having two people confront each other on the theme of power. As proposed by Shields, the Bacchic ritual *sparagmos* signifies the act of rending, tearing apart, or even castration. The Greek word, and the rite itself, are associated with *omophagia*, which, of course, is also a consequence of Procne's search for revenge against her husband. In *If We Were Birds* the tearing apart of Pentheus' body is evoked when Procne joins the worshipers to search for Philomela, and proceeds, in the next scene, to embody the very name of “that tyrant, Tereus”, unable as she is, to “spit it out” (57). While talking to the rescued Philomela, she vents her irrepressible desire to torture him before she comes to the final decision to kill her own child, and serve his dismembered body to his unknowing father.

Assailed by such man-like eagerness for punishment, revenge, and torture provoked by the crime inflicted upon them, both sisters eventually assimilate the aggressive male characteristics that, due to the husband- and brother-in-law's abhorrent behavior, have erased the “difference between family and war” (1460), and allowed lust to

become juxtaposed with familial affection (Jacobsen 1984, 45). They proceed to deal a fatal blow to their perpetrator and to the baby boy born of this union, thus turning Tereus' viscera into a female womb carrying the child, whose murder has prevented him from growing into another violent criminal.

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Sebastiano del Piombo, “Tereus chasing Philomela and Procne” (c. 1511)
Sala di Galatea, Villa Farnesina, Roma.



Geoffrey Pounsett (Tereus), David Fox (Pandion), Philippa Domville (Procne),
Tara Rosling (Philomela) in *If We Were Birds*, by Erin Shields, directed by
Alan Dilworth. Tarragon Theatre Mainspace, Toronto, Canada, 2010.
Photo by Cylla from Tiedemann.

Maria Anita Stefanelli Interviews Erin Shields

MAS Erin, you are an actor, performer, playwright-and-writer; you have international experience, having trained in Canada and the UK. In an interview you outlined the differences between theatre in the UK and Europe and theatre in Canada, where there is “a greater emphasis on play creation” and “play creation is an essential aspect of the Canadian theatre scene”. Could you possibly elaborate on this aspect?

ES Sure. Canada still is quite a young country. Canadian theatre itself only really started to take hold in the nineteen-seventies when people started writing their own plays. Before that we were mostly presenting British and American plays. In Canada we are obsessed with trying to figure out who we are. In Europe the question of national identity never seems to me to occur to anybody – to really think about what it is to be Italian, for instance. It’s in your blood, it’s in your bones. In English speaking Canada we are caught between Britain and America in our literature, in our theatre, in our films. Quebec has had a much stronger sense of cultural identity as a preservation of their language and culture is tied to artistic expression. There is also an ever-evolving cultural demographic in all of Canada which is perpetually influencing our notion of cultural identity. This is one reason why creation is such an integral part of the theatrical landscape in Canada.

Canada is overflowing with independent theatre creators; people who are making their own work, and self-producing it at fringe festivals and alternative theatre festivals.

I trained as an actor at a drama school in London and then I moved back to Canada. I started auditioning for everything. But I was really unsatisfied with the roles available – you know, Anne of Green Gables, Anne of Green Gables, the sequel ... It killed me! I

needed to perform but I wasn't being cast, and also I wasn't really interested in what was being produced. I quickly found myself part of a whole generation of young theatre creators making the work they wanted to make.

The work started to get so good at the smaller festivals that larger theatres began looking to these festivals to program their seasons. In a way, that's how *If We Were Birds* emerged. I produced it with my own company at the Summerworks Theatre Festival in Toronto. The Artistic Director of Tarragon Theatre saw the show and programmed it for the following season.

MAS You started as an "independent theatre creator" yourself. Now, how would you describe your theatrical activity today in the framework of Canadian Theatre? More specifically, what are you doing now?

ES As I said, I began by producing my own work. I am still producing my own work but in the past few years I have also been commissioned to write plays for specific theatres. There are benefits to that – being paid properly to write is a big one – but I don't think I'll ever eliminate self-producing from my life because – as Marina Carr was saying – once you get into large and larger theatres there's so many more people who want to tell you what to do. And what not to do. Negotiating those relationships and conversations can be good for a play but it can also destroy it. So often I prefer to apply for writing grants, write what I want to write, then see if anyone wants to produce it. If not, I can do it myself.

MAS In an interview you said that your play, *If We Were Birds*, went through a series of revisions and transformations, depending on the director, the actors, the theatre, the audience, and so on. Can you tell us what happened to the play, how it got shaped and re-shaped. Marina Carr said that once a play is finished, it is like a baby leaving the house; once it grows up it goes into the world. The play, in your case, stays more with you and you transform it yourself. Can you tell us what happened to this particular play?

ES I agree with Marina that when the play is published, it has to go out into the world. But for me, it takes a long time to get to that point. I find it necessary to put a play through cycles of writing,

development and performance. So I might finish a third draft and have a reading of the play. Finish a fifth draft and do a workshop. Or I might mount a bare-bones production in a festival to see how the play interacts with an audience. I learn from each of these interactions with an audience and make rewrites.

I'll give you an example of a scene that shifted greatly after the first production of *If We Were Birds*. In the play there are two major traumatic events. The first is that Tereus rapes his sister-in-law and cuts out her tongue to silence her. The second is that Procne, in revenge for her sister's rape and dismemberment, slaughters her son, cooks him up and serves him to her husband Tereus.

The rape scene itself has always been extremely visceral. Although the rape is theatricalized rather than literally simulated, the two characters live the emotional reality of the scene. When the tongue is severed, many people in the audience put their hands to their mouths. The infanticide scene, on the other hand, was initially more emotionally distant for the audience. The chorus narrated the event in the past tense while Procne and Philomela reenacted the murder. Because of this narrative removal from the action, the theatrical tension was slightly decreased. In the audience, we didn't reel in the horror of slaughtering one's own child. I ended up feeling as though I had excused this latter act because of the violence of the first. This was wrong. These two acts of violence had to sit side by side one another.

I rewrote the second scene for the Tarragon production. I added Procne's voice, her rationale for murdering her child, her escalating fury and this made the murder as emotionally present as the rape. Suddenly Procne becomes just as much, if not more of a monster than her husband. Violence begets violence.

MAS About violence in the theatre. There is a lot of violence in Greek tragedy, which is "the largest theatrical container". Of course you are writing today, and your audience is more than 2000 years older. Can you explain how the spectacle of violence connects with human rights?

ES I think the "spectacle of violence" is sewn into the fabric of our day to day existence. We are constantly watching horrifically violent images on the news and even more so in our entertainment. American television shows are rife with the rape and violation of

women and children. You can see women raped, tortured, dismembered and murdered on television a 6: 00pm. However, while we are constantly in the presence of a spectacle of violence, we have somehow lost a visceral connection to that violence. We're seeing it, we're seeing it, we're seeing it, we're seeing it, but we can't feel it because if we did feel everything it would simply overwhelm us.

With this play in particular, I really wanted to situate the violence in our stomachs, in our guts. I wanted the staged violence, although the actors didn't touch one another during the rape scene, to provoke a visceral reaction.

The chorus of *If We Were Birds* is comprised of survivors of twentieth century conflicts, in which rape was used as a weapon of the war. Each one of these survivors steps forward at a point in the action of the play, and bears witness to their own trauma. Those stories were drawn from research into the following conflicts: Nanking (1937), Berlin (1945), Bangladesh (1971), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Rwanda (1994). Each of their speeches is intended to transform historical anecdotes into lived experiences to affect the audience.

MAS About your title, "If We Were Birds" is an allusion to the metamorphosis of the three protagonists of your play into birds. After Tereus' abuse, the two sisters perform their crime. "Violence begets violence" – I think you are right in saying that. But you also conceived of the metamorphosis of the three into birds in a different way: "I imagined – you said in an interview – women lying in their backs whilst being raped, looking up at the sky". How did you deal with that theatrically?

ES It was important for me, when adapting this myth, to grapple with every detail of the myth. However, one plot point in Ovid's 'Tereus, Procne and Philomela' always struck me as strange. In the very end, when Tereus realizes he has eaten his own son, he lurches to attack Procne and Philomela. That's when the Gods intervene and turn them all into birds. I thought of the transformation as a positive thing, as a way for the wronged sisters to fly to freedom, and was therefore puzzled that Tereus got to join them. I wrestled with the image for a long time. I thought a lot about birds and their significance to this story. I started to think about the image of a woman being raped, staring up over the shoulder of her violator,

wishing she could fly up with the birds to escape the pain. I also read that Ovid couldn't fathom a more excruciating experience than a human being trapped in an animal body; to not be able to express oneself.

My thinking evolved. Maybe transforming into a bird wasn't so great after all. The image also started to resonate for me in terms of surviving trauma. When a severely traumatic event happens in your life, you no longer exist in the world in the way you once did. You are fractured, in a sense, from your original self and part of you is always, for evermore, flying above, separate.

It eventually made perfect sense to me that Tereus also becomes a bird. He too suffers a great trauma. He eats his own son (that's pretty traumatic). For me the bird imagery is really about surviving trauma, and the horror of our animal selves.

MAS It's a few years now since "If We Were Birds" (It was published in 2011, and you first wrote it in 2008). How has your theatre developed? Have you been handling female issues? Or experimenting with different themes?

ES The first play I created after *If We Were Birds*, (I needed a bit of an antidote to the violence) was a play called *Montparnasse* which I co-wrote with a friend of mine, Maev Beaty. It is about two Canadian girls who go to Paris after the first World War. It is all about James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein, and the many visual artists and artist models of the time. All the research and reading for that play was about gorgeous, juicy, erotic sexuality and love and loving your body. We were naked on stage for almost the whole play, which was, of course, challenging but also wildly liberating. We did one performance for which my husband (who produced the show) thought it would be really a great idea to invite a nudist colony. So we had a clothing optional performance. And people came. In droves. It was middle of March and in Canada that is bloody cold. It was minus thirty! People came to the theatre wrapped in winter coats and mittens and toques (Canadian for wooly hat) and proceeded to check all of their clothes.

At the beginning of the play, the lights come up, and I'm standing there completely nude posing as an artist's model. Most nights there was a palpable silence. It felt as though the audience was thinking, 'wow ... she's naked'. But the night the audience was also

naked, there was no silence as people took in the spectacle of live nudity. Rather, the audience was thinking, 'okay, she's naked too, now what happens?' If anything, I was the one who paused trying to process the glare that from the light reflecting off the rows and rows of bare skin.

I've done quite a few plays since then. In fact, I'm opening a play called *Soliciting Temptation* in a week. In terms of feminist work, women are always at the centre of what I make and that still feels like a political act. I really long for a time when women's stories can be human stories. So plays featuring women are not just plays about women's issues, but human issues. Female characters are still, for the most part, relegated to the realm of stereotype. Most female characters don't have the complexity of Iago, or Richard III, or Lear. Of course Shakespeare penned some incredible women, but in any given cast there are only, on average, three in a cast of twenty.

I long for a time when men can watch work by women, about women, and say: that's me! As a woman, I do that every time I watch plays or films. I have to do that, or most stories would be unavailable to me. If I do not look at a story, and recognize myself in a male protagonist, I don't have that story. As women we are trained to do that when we watch performances. We need to do that because our literary inheritance is mostly male, and even when there were great women writers, they were shoved away in the back of the library!

MAS So, thank you very much for this talk. And now, I believe you have prepared something for us. We will be delighted to listen to your reading.

From:

If We Were Birds by Erin Shields

PROLOGUE – NATURE

Philomela and the chorus dwell in a timeless purgatory of nature. They scavenge and are hunted. In darkness:

CHORUS: *(Whispered)* Speak it, speak it, speak it, speak.

Lights up on Philomela wrapped in a blanket of feathers. Seeing the audience, she opens her mouth and blood spills down her chin.

PHILOMELA: The gods have sewn my tongue back in.
Some sort of mercy for some sort of guilt,
and they'll be wanting some sort of praise.
Thanks.
Now that it's back, it cowers in the depths of my throat,
curled and trembling,
remembering the squeeze of pincers
so I need to coax it forward to speak.
Like this:

She sticks out her tongue. The Chorus makes sounds of approval. Lights slowly up on the Chorus wrapped in blankets of feathers.

I think they've sewn it back so I can sing through
the night;
so I can mourn my fate with a sweet sweet song.
No more silence, thanks to Aphrodite.
Was it her guilt that brought me back
to the world of the more-than-screaming?

CHORUS: *(Whispered)* Speak it, speak it, / speak it, speak it, speak
it, speak it

PHILOMELA: Not much has changed, now that I'm a bird.
Especially the size of my fear:
large enough to get caught in the throat but not enough
to die.

CHORUS: Speak it, speak it, / speak it, speak it

PHILOMELA: We were born for fear because the gods made us weak,
but when we were girls we could run as fast,
jump as high, yell as loud as the boys,
so you can see why we forgot to shake.

The Chorus shudders, shivers and cowers.

CHORUS: Speak it, speak it, speak it / speak it,

PHILOMELA: Before the fear.

CHORUS: Yes?

PHILOMELA: Oh, before the fear we ...

CHORUS: Yes?

PHILOMELA: We moved in such different ways.
When we were children, Procne and I,
we would disappear for hours
through a maze of closets and tunnels calling:
“Marco!”

Procne enters.

PROCNE: “Polo!”

PHILOMELA: “Marco!”

PROCNE: “Polo!”

BOTH: We were not frightened of darkness then.

PROCNE: We were not nervous with lightening bugs or spiders.

PHILOMELA: We could pick up critters –

PROCNE: In the palms of our hands;
construct intricate homes for them in jars –

PHILOMELA: Or cardboard boxes.

CHORUS,
PHILOMELA,
PROCNE: We were not frightened of darkness then.

PHILOMELA: And I could hold my breath for longer than you in the
bath.

SCENE 1 – BATHTUB TALK

*The Chorus forms the bathtub in which Philomela and Procne bathe.
Philomela is underwater.*

PROCNE: 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 –

Philomela gasps for air.

PHILOMELA: How long?

PROCNE: Seventy-two seconds.

PHILOMELA: One shy of your record.

PROCNE: You'll never beat me.

PHILOMELA: Again.

PROCNE: I'm bored.

PHILOMELA: What now?

PROCNE: Three questions you'd only ask in the bath.

PHILOMELA: What's your favourite birdsong?

PROCNE: You'd only ask about birdsong in the bath?

PHILOMELA: Father isn't fond of birds.

PROCNE: Come on.

PHILOMELA: He shoots them through the window.

PROCNE: Boring.

PHILOMELA: Alright.

PROCNE: Alright.

PHILOMELA: Anything?

PROCNE: As long as it's good.

PHILOMELA: What is it that bulges out from under a soldier's tunic?

PROCNE: Philomela!

PHILOMELA: You said anything.

PROCNE: I'm glad you asked.

PHILOMELA: Alright.
PROCNE: Alright.
PHILOMELA: Go on.
PROCNE: It is a fleshy utensil.
PHILOMELA: A fleshy utensil?
PROCNE: Yes.
PHILOMELA: Oh.
PROCNE: Next question.
PHILOMELA: What's it for?
PROCNE: Dirty mind!
PHILOMELA: You told me to ask.
PROCNE: It is the fleshy utensil that contains a man's ambition in love.
PHILOMELA: Well that's disappointing.
PROCNE: Why?
PHILOMELA: I thought Aphrodite shot men in the heart.
PROCNE: She does.
PHILOMELA: Then how can the fleshy utensil be ambition in love?
PROCNE: It's all connected.
PHILOMELA: What?
PROCNE: Just listen.
PHILOMELA: I am.
PROCNE: Men are shot through the heart, then their ambition grows.
PHILOMELA: It grows?
PROCNE: And gets firm.
PHILOMELA: Firm?
PROCNE: Like a sac filled with wine.
PHILOMELA: Really?
PROCNE: Of course.

PHILOMELA: And then girls get to drink from the sac filled with wine?

PROCNE: Philomela!

PHILOMELA: I'll burst one open, kneel underneath, and drink until it runs down my face.

PROCNE: That's disgusting.

PHILOMELA: You're disgusting.

PROCNE: Next question.

PHILOMELA: So what contains my ambition in love?

PROCNE: It's not the same for girls.

PHILOMELA: But I must have a –

PROCNE: Do you see a fleshy utensil flopping between your thighs!

PHILOMELA: Right here.

PROCNE: Don't touch that.

PHILOMELA: Why?

PROCNE: Just leave it alone.

PHILOMELA: Why?

PROCNE: Next / question.

PHILOMELA: Do you touch it?

PROCNE: What?

PHILOMELA: That little bit. Do you touch it?

PROCNE: Of course not.

PHILOMELA: I'll bet you do.

PROCNE: Stop it.

PHILOMELA: This is bathtub talk.

PROCNE: Yes.

PHILOMELA: My question is good. Do you touch it?

PROCNE: This isn't the / type of question –

PHILOMELA: Open your legs and wiggle it back and forth, back and forth, back and forth,

PROCNE: I ...

PHILOMELA: You have to be honest.

PROCNE: I know.

PHILOMELA: Do you do it?

PROCNE: Now and again. Alright? I do it too.

Beat.

PHILOMELA: You do?

PROCNE: Well, yes.

Beat.

PHILOMELA: I never said I did it.

PROCNE: What?

PHILOMELA: You said, "I do it too". Well I never said I did it. I can't wait to tell father.

PROCNE: You little shit!

Procne dunks Philomela's head underwater and holds her down. Philomela squirms free. The bathtub opens up into their room as they dry off.

PHILOMELA: I wouldn't tell.

PROCNE: If you did, I'd hold you down longer than eighty-five seconds.

PHILOMELA: You counted seventy-two.

PROCNE: I counted eighty-five.

PHILOMELA: I did win. Eighty-five. Now I get a promise.

PROCNE: One promise.

PHILOMELA: You must swear to tell everything about fleshy utensils and their uses after you marry.

PROCNE: I will.

PHILOMELA: Swear it.

PROCNE: On our mother below.

SCENE 11 – TRAPPED

The chorus steps forward. As they speak, Tereus continues to rape Philomela.

PIOUS: At times like these when we are pounded
into earth and muck and slime,
we look up from where we lay and think:

DWINDLING: If we were birds we could fly up,

YOUNG: Away from this wrenching pain,

PREGNANT: Away from the shame and the blood and the terror,

YOUNG: Away from what will be left of ourselves when he's
done.

DWINDLING: If we were birds he would disappear below
as the wind caught our wings like sails.

BLEEDING: Up up up we'd go, into clouds
where our hearts could beat as loudly as they are.

PIOUS: If we were birds.

CHORUS: If we were birds.

Tereus exits.

YOUNG: They kept me tied to a stake in the ground,
on a bed of leaves under plastic sheeting.

DWINDLING: Every night they pulled me from the cellar.

PREGNANT: Six of them on me, taking turns, in my own bed.

DWINDLING: Like a rat, they pulled me out.

BLEEDING: I was in the Safe Zone.

PREGNANT: They made my husband watch.

PIOUS: I was taken to an Internment Camp.

PREGNANT: He threw up, poor thing.

PIOUS: They kept us in empty rooms that used to be
classrooms.

DWINDLING: Some hid in attics.

PIOUS: At night they would come with flashlights,
shine them in our faces.

- BLEEDING: Some in roofs of barns.
- PIOUS: We tried not to be seen
because we knew they would grab
one or two girls who would never come back.
- YOUNG: Some hid in holes in the Manioc fields.
- BLEEDING: Some hid in piles of bodies.
- PIOUS: The night they grabbed me,
I was whispering prayers
to the girls around me.
Please god please god please god please.
- They took me to a room
where there were seven soldiers.
They elbowed two young ones
who had caps pulled over their faces.
I knew those two.
They had been my neighbours before the ethnic
cleansing began.
- CHORUS: Please god please god please god please.
- PIOUS: They gave the boys drinks
and told them to rape me,
to enjoy it,
to complete their initiation.
The first boy grinned as though our eyes had never met.
He tore the clothes from my body
and raped me on a table while the older men cheered.
When he was done,
he spit in my face.
- CHORUS: Please god please god.
- PIOUS: The other boy squirmed.
He made awkward jokes,
he made excuses.
A soldier hit him in the head,
another fired a shot into the ceiling.
- They made me undress him,
the boy who had been my neighbour.
He was thin and trembling.
Tears welled in his eyes.
They made me touch him and pull him into me.
They chanted, jeered, threatened if he didn't 'get it up'

they'd shoot him in the head.

I whispered in his ear:

“Good boy, you can do it, good boy, come on”.

He couldn't get it up but I pretended that he did.

PIOUS AND

CHORUS: Good boy, you can do it, good boy, come on.

PIOUS: They shot him while he wept
and sent me back to the room.

YOUNG: Oh, Philomela, banished to the room.

PIOUS: The room of remembering the face of that boy.

BLEEDING: The room of bleeding and wringing of hands,

PIOUS: The room of praying for others like him.

DWINDLING: The room of eternal captivity.

PIOUS: The room in which despair can give way to hope,
or maybe a chance at escape.

PREGNANT: If there was something sharp,
something heavy,
something in the ceiling to hang yourself from, you
would.

DWINDLING: But there is nothing,
in this room,
there is nothing.

PIOUS: But a loom.
A Thracian loom with dirty thread lying in a tangled
heap.

Philomela crawls towards the loom.

PIOUS: Philomela, you can crawl
toward life outside this room.

Philomela weaves.

Afterword

VOCAL AND VERBAL ASSERTIVENESS

Remarks from a Champion of the Speaking Voice and
the Spoken Word, and Practical Voice Exploration
Techniques

by Kate Burke

In the early 1990s noted British theatre voice expert Patsy Rodenburg published two seminal texts: *The Right to Speak* and *The Need for Words*. Arcing far beyond a predictable menu of necessary voice and speech skills, these volumes sounded a clarion call for equal vocal rights. Every human being (read every woman) has a fundamental right to speak and a profound need for words. Yet for many women whose voices are dominated or obliterated by bullies, these fundamental rights are left un-honored, these needs unmet. The playwrights interviewed in this journal have given voice to women's stories, on paper. It is every woman's right and responsibility to cultivate an acoustical voice that expresses her complex inner life, in time and space.

Two contemporary manifestations of vocal deprivation and dysfunction include vocal fry and "uptalk". The former has been in the news in recent years, notably when National Public Radio (in the U.S.) fired an announcer for her abrasive, frog-in-the-throat vocal delivery. Young women and, increasingly young men, run out of steam at the ends of phrases or thoughts, their voices subsiding in a crackly croak. It is nearly impossible to project a professional message to a large group in a large space with this choked off voice, and recent research has shown that young women with vocal fry do not secure high-level positions with top-flight companies. "Uptalk" is the tendency to end phrases and thoughts with a questioning, upward inflection, which makes the speaker sound tentative or apologetic.

This open-ended, numbing pattern leaves listeners wondering if the speaker's words are true or if the speaker stands by them at all.

Humans are born with superb speaking instruments. Although we attribute acoustical properties to large public spaces, WE are living, breathing acoustic beings! Owing to an increasing cultural focus on the visual, most individuals live their entire lives without working knowledge of their own speaking voices, much less vocal awareness, skill and enjoyment, or even virtuoso deployment! The ear, which craves variety like the eye, is left starving for vocal dynamics.

While the fundamental right to speak is not being honored, *other* crucial needs are not being met, the needs of the listener! Every listener's ear has a right to clear, committed and communicative speech, especially in public and professional settings. We have all attended talks or conferences showcasing internationally renowned scholars who look down at their notes, their murmuring voices falling onto the podium, the microphone a vain attempt to compensate for their limited energy. Watch the audience and you will see young people disengage immediately and pick up their iPhones and by placing their attention elsewhere they will take a mile.

Experts may devolve into low energy vocalization because they find their very own fields boring. Are we so mired in our own academic jargon that we assume colleagues will receive our message, ignoring the needs of the general public? Is it ethical to allow flaccid voices to keep listeners at the margins? Especially listeners with even a mild hearing impairment or those whose first language is not the language being spoken. A gifted trainer, a communicator, a humanitarian, is able to reach every listener in the room, a reach which is ethical, generous and *de rigueur* in today's increasingly interdisciplinary, global settings. Researchers at the University of Virginia are forming an organization called "Communicating Research and Science", and none too soon.

Podium skills improve presentations, but to connect to listeners on a deeper level speakers must develop kinesthetic awareness of "bone tone" and cultivate it.

Human beings come with a built-in speaker system, natural woofers and tweeters, our BONES. The bones of the facial mask and skull serve as a natural microphone, magnifying and projecting sound waves generated in the delicate vocal folds, sending these waves forth in a valiant arc to listeners. This is the phenomenon of resonance,

which creates the unique timbre of every freely vibrating speaking voice. Indefatigable bones bear the speech load, taking the weight off delicate vocal folds tissue, which initiate sound but cannot magnify it or bear it forth from the source with brio.

Practical and engaging exercises, undertaken with curiosity and dedication, invite sound waves to “place” or vibrate in our bones, easing strain and tension in the “voice box” and releasing our unique, rich, effortlessly flowing voices.

Here’s a gauntlet thrown down: if you are in a private space as you read these words try the following techniques to wake up your voice and feel your own vocal vibrations. The feeling part is crucial. Don’t listen, don’t judge. Jam like a jazz musician in a studio with a saxophone or fiddle. Cultivate a kinesthetic relationship with your own voice before you send it forth into the world to spread your message.

Breathing

“Whoosh” out all your air and, further empty on an “sh” sound. Wait till your body wants to breathe and inhale deeply through your nose. Repeat. This rhythmic in-and-out breathing will involve the upper, middle and lower lobes of your lungs, oxygenating your entire being, waking you up and preparing you for action.

Awakening Your Lips

“Flutter” your lips as babies make “raspberries”, adding a full flow of voice and sirening the pitch up and down. Lips are replete with responsive nerve endings that communicate pleasurable sensations (which is why we kiss with the lips, rather than, say, on the elbow).

Resonance

Extended “m” sounds will give you a keen kinesthetic awareness of your own vocal sound waves resonating in your facial bones. Hold an “m” sound on a medium pitch as long as your exhalation will extend. (This “m” sustention is better rendered on the page as “Mmmmmmm”). Siren an extended “m” up and down in pitch several times on one breath. Stair step a sustained “m” up in pitch slowly, one pitch at a time, and back down the same way. Your vocal range may include 13-15 comfortable pitches. Sustaining and feeling the “m” sound several times a day will help you get to know your vocal pitch range, ground it and extend it. Gently rub the bones of your face and head as you sustain the “m” sounds to stimulate even

more vibration in those areas. (Avoid pressing your lips together with tension, or turning them inward. Although your lips are gently touching, float, or yawn, your teeth apart inside your mouth to maximize vibration).

Articulation

Meet the 8 voiced, sustained consonants which add a legato richness to articulation: m, n, v, z, zh, th, ng, and l. These sounds require intricate positioning of the tongue, teeth and lips. Sustaining them on a single pitch and sirening them up and down (as with the “m” sound above) will guide you to the most relaxed, free release of the sounds. (N.B.: Don’t speak the symbol’s name – make its sound). One artistic and improvisational way to get to know these sounds is to sing melodies on them: the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” on “vvvvvvvvvvvvvv”, Gershwin’s “Summertime” on “nnnnnnnnnnnn”, or any hummable song from any language and culture. (Any legato, extended melodies work; the “The Flight of the Bumblebee” would be too frantic).

With light, upbeat clicks (not heavy, labored thuds) feel the action of the percussive consonant sounds that give any language clarity. In English they are d, t, b, p, g, k, dg, ch, dz, and ts. Conduct them out of your mouth with your hand, as if raising a maestro’s baton in a quick, clean motion. Speak each consonant sound at the beginning of the English (or any) vowel sound sequence, a, e, i, o, u, as in “day, dee, die, dough, do”. Then, most importantly, place each one at the END of the sequence where we most often let them dribble away: “aid, eed, I’d, ode, oohed”. Extend the inflected vowel sounds in the words to balance the final, light, percussive click of the consonant.

If you have taken up the gauntlet and are still taking this vocal journey, the final step is to choose a great text, one with rhythm, one with words about large concepts, one with rich images, one with delectable language that speaks to you. The Gettysburg Address would serve, so too the latter portion of the “Declaration of Independence”, or a Shakespeare passage, or any powerful poem. Only you know what you like, what feels good in your mouth. Keep a text copy within reach (in the car or by the kitchen sink) and explore it.

Text Exploration (all aloud, except where indicated)

1. Read the entire text while walking at a good pace. (In a small space, walk in circles).
2. Read the text one word at a time. (We speed read and miss so much). Give yourself the time to discover each word, and each sound in the word, and your response to the word.
3. Chant or intone each phrase of the text on a single pitch, and (without stopping) speak it normally. (Chanting releases full, flowing sound and a vigorous speaking voice).
4. Read each sentence in the text on its own, tasting rhythms and length of thoughts. (Older texts are composed of longer thoughts; don't rush, but flow through them).
5. Whisper your way through the entire text to feel the need for breath and the lip agility required to shape and release the words.
6. Read the text as you push vigorously against a wall, experiencing a physical obstacle that stands in for the resistance which repels all spoken words. (This activity will promote a primal need to speak, to get your message across).
7. Finish by visualizing listeners on an opposite wall and delivering your text directly to them, reaching them with your words and your message.

The voice and text “jamming” described above prompts the mouth and ear to crave rich, dynamic words. After grappling with great texts you may feel stronger, more alive and more communicative. Add voice and text exploration to your daily routine, for even a few minutes each day, and you may well become a vocal gladiator!¹

A parting exhortation: seize your right to speak and embrace your need for words; cultivate a kinesthetic awareness and experiential knowledge of your own instrument; honor your listeners' needs by offering them, clear, committed, communicative speech. As a listener, glory in the clarity, commitment and communication that are the hallmark of every generous and confident speaker!

¹ 12 filmed voice lessons introducing extensive voice techniques are available at www.VocalGladiator.com

CONTRIBUTORS

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Van Badham is a Melbourne-based writer, critic, trade unionist, feminist, activist and occasional broadcaster, an internationally award-winning theatre maker and one of Australia's most controversial social commentators. She is currently employed as a weekly columnist for *Guardian Australia* and is Vice-President of MEAA Victoria, with her work published by the *UK Guardian*, *UK Telegraph*, *Vice Magazine*, *Australian Cosmopolitan*, *Fairfax*, *Daily Life*, *The Hoopla*, *Southerly*, *Hardie Grant* and *Pan Macmillan*, amongst many others, and featuring in regular guest appearances with Radio National and Q and A. She is a proud alumna of the University of Wollongong and has a Master from Melbourne. She tweets via @vanbadham.

Kate Burke is head of theatre voice in the University of Virginia Master of Fine Arts acting program. A member of the Actor's Equity Association, she has appeared at American Repertory Theatre, the American Conservatory, Portland Stage, New Harmony Summer Rep, Nebraska Rep, Iowa City Summer Rep, Porthouse, and Virginia Repertory Theatre. Professional production coaching credits include the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, the Tyrone Guthrie Theater, American Players, Ft. Worth Shakespeare, San Diego Old Globe, Seattle Rep and Heritage Theatre Festival. An inaugural member of the U. Va. Academy of Teaching, Burke has collaborated extensively with Andrew Wade, long-time Head of Voice at Britain's Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Her article, "Speaking from the Soul: Theater Voice and Text Work for Clergy" will appear in Plural Publishing's *Voice for Professional Speakers: Global Outcomes*.

Marina Carr is one of Ireland's most important playwrights. Born in 1964, she grew up in County Offaly, and studied English and Philosophy at University College Dublin. To date, she has published fourteen full-length plays, which have been translated in several languages and produced across Europe and the United States. Amongst Carr's vast body of work, the most renowned titles include *Portia Coughlan* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats ...*, (1998), *On Raftery's Hill* (2000), *Woman and Scarecrow* (2008), and *Hecuba* (2015). She has held posts as writer-in-residence at the Abbey Theatre, Princeton University, Trinity College Dublin, and DCU. Carr's awards include the Dublin Theatre Festival Best New Play Award, a Macaulay Fellowship, a Hennessy Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and an E. M. Forster Prize from the American Academy of Arts & Letters. In 2011, she was awarded with an honorary degree of Doctor of Literature in University College Dublin. She is a member of Aosdána, a peer-elected affiliation of Irish artists.

Alessandro Clericuzio teaches English and American Literature at the University of Perugia. He has published books and essays in the fields of Queer Studies, American Literature and Film Studies. His recent publications deal with American culture in a transnational perspective and include essays on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* in America, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and *Desperate Housewives*, and the monograph *Tennessee Williams and Italy. A Transcultural Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Carolyn Gage is a playwright, performer, director, and activist. The author of nine books on lesbian theatre and seventy-five plays, musicals, and one-woman shows, she specializes in non-traditional roles for women, especially those reclaiming famous lesbians whose stories have been distorted or erased from history. Gage has taught at Bates College and the University of Southern Maine. She has won numerous awards, including the Lambda Literary Award, the top lesbian/gay literary award in the US.

Cathy Leeney is adjunct lecturer in Drama Studies at University College Dublin. She established the first MA in Directing for Theatre in Ireland, now succeeded by the MA in Theatre Practice, in partnership with the Gaiety School of Acting. Her research interests include women's writing for theatre, Irish theatre and performance, and contemporary performance practices. Publications include *Irish Women Playwrights 1900-1939*, *The Theatre of Marina Carr* (with Anna McMullan), articles in *Etudes Irlandaises*, *Modern Drama*, *Australian Drama Studies* and *Irish University Review*. She is currently researching directing and scenography in Irish theatre.

Barbara Miceli holds a PhD in "Euro-American Studies" from Roma Tre University. She published articles, in *Altre Modernità*, on Raymond Carver's poetry and Joyce Carol Oates's novels and short stories. More research on the relation between fact and fiction in Oates's work is in progress.

Valentina Rapetti is a PhD candidate at Università Roma Tre. She is working on a research project on two adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello*: Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*. She has translated into Italian works by Marina Carr (Gremese; Editoria&Spettacolo), Morris Panych (Gremese), Netta Syrett and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Dragomanni), Hannah Moscovitch (Sigismundus); she also translated works by Gary Kirkham and Anne Enright for Italian theatre productions. She won the 2013 DARTS Award for Best Translation (Moscovitch's *East of Berlin*).

Erin Shields is a Montréal based playwright and actor. She won the 2011 Governor General's Award for her play *If We Were Birds*, which premiered at Tarragon Theatre where she is currently a playwright-in-residence. *If We Were Birds* has been widely produced and translated into French, German, Italian and Albanian. Erin is co-

Artistic Director (with Andrea Donaldson) of an independent theatre company, Groundwater Productions, which recently produced *Beautiful Man* at The SummerWorks Festival. Erin's version of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* was part of The Shaw Festival's 2015 season and *Soliciting Temptation* premiered at Tarragon in 2014. She has two plays for young audiences currently touring North America: *Mistatim* with Red Sky Performance and *Instant* with Geordie Productions. Erin's latest play, *The Millennial Malcontent*, will premiere at Tarragon Theatre in 2016. Erin has been nominated for numerous awards including the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the K. M. Hunter Award and five Dora Mavor Moore Awards.

Melissa Sibra is Assistant Professor of Drama and Theatre, Trinity College, Dublin. She is former President of the Irish Society for Theatre Research (ISTR 2011-2015) and editor of *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Palgrave Macmillan), co-editor (with Paul Murphy) of *The Dreaming Body: Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Oxford University Press & Colin Smythe Ltd.) and co-editor (with Pirkko Koski) of *The Local Meets the Global in Performance* (Cambridge Scholars Press). She teaches and researches in the field of feminism, gender and women in performance and is currently writing a monograph on the theatre of Marina Carr.

Maria Anita Stefanelli is Associate Professor of History of North-American Theatre, Università Roma Tre, and Fellow of Trinity College Dublin. She holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh (1984). She has published, in book form, on W.C. Williams, Kenneth Patchen, and City Lights Pocket Poets and Pocket Books. Her work on American intellectuals' literary identity at the turn of the 18th century, American poetry (Whitman, Dickinson, Williams, Eliot, Lowell and Kenneth Patchen, among others) and American drama (E. O'Neill, A. Miller, T. Williams, E. Albee, D. Mamet, the sixties' experimental theatre, and the postmodern theatre of Susan Sontag) has appeared in press in Italy and abroad. She is a member of a network researching on global women's cinema, and serves on the board of the World Center for Women's Studies.

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