

Preface

The first time I heard about Nightwood Theatre was in 1989, in Richard Plant's Canadian Theatre course at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto. I was in the first year of my two-year MA program, and had come back to academia after three years working for the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee — first as a volunteer, then as the paid coordinator of the provincial office in Edmonton. I had determined that being a professional lobbyist was not the career path for me; I missed being in school, and I missed being involved in theatre even more. After completing the MA, I continued into a PhD program at the same university, and when the time came to select a dissertation topic, Nightwood jumped out at me. It represented the perfect point of intersection between my newfound commitment to Canadian theatre and my long-term connection to feminism.

I spent some time as a volunteer in the Nightwood office, located at that time on Adelaide Street — helping to construct a database, stuffing envelopes, working front of house, and selling tickets to the “Five Minute Feminist Cabaret.” The women I had the most contact with were Leslie Lester and Soraya Peerbaye, and the place I spent most of my time was in their office closet, digging through the theatre's collected archives. It was a hot, dark closet and the archives were largely unorganized — just file folders in boxes, which I would drag out and sort through one by one, making an inventory and photocopying items of particular interest. Those materials are now in the University of Guelph Theatre Archives, but back in the early 1990s, I felt like I was the only one who knew the wealth of history in those boxes.

In addition to excavating the archives, I conducted interviews with people at Nightwood over the years. I began by interviewing Cynthia Grant and Kim Renders, the two founding members of Nightwood still living in Toronto (by then, Maureen White had moved to Ireland and Mary Vingoe was busy running Ship's Company in Nova Scotia). Cynthia had her own personal archive and was eager to share articles from Nightwood's earliest period. Kim later became a colleague when we taught in the same semester at the University of Guelph. In 1996, the Canadian Association for Theatre Research (at that time known as the Association for Canadian Theatre Research) bestowed honorary membership on all four founding members of Nightwood. I was thrilled that Nightwood was being recognized, and I remember being especially pleased that Kim was able to attend the awards banquet in St. Catharines to accept on behalf of the founders.

I went on to interview all the other women who had been leaders at Nightwood: Kate Lushington (who actually stored her boxes of archival material in my basement for a time); and Leslie Lester, Alisa Palmer, and Diane Roberts, who were extraordinarily welcoming and warm. I completed the dissertation and graduated in 1997. Although I moved away from Toronto afterward, I was determined to keep my research focused on Nightwood. I interviewed Kelly Thornton on 28 May 2002, just after she took over the company as artistic director, and then interviewed her again in 2006 along with Monica Esteves, Nightwood's producer.

Despite these significant connections to Nightwood, my intention has never been to claim an insider's status, to relay personal anecdotes, or to settle debates. My research has always been focused on materials in the public domain: the productions and play scripts, the media coverage and journal articles, the programs and posters. In addition to the plays and productions, I am interested in the ways Nightwood has presented itself to the public through the media and on its own website, and in how Nightwood interacts with its supporters through vehicles such as the newsletter. I am concerned with how Nightwood has communicated its feminist mandate: for example, what kinds of terms are used

in a press release? How does a program blurb convey the company's history in a quick paragraph, or how is a play described in a newspaper interview to convey what its director thinks about its feminist message? What I have discovered is that, over the years, the definition of feminism has continually changed and that, as a women's theatre company, Nightwood has had to respond and adapt to changing attitudes — including the prevalent attitude that feminism has ceased to be relevant.

While this book has come a very long way from its origins as a dissertation, my overarching focus has remained on contextualizing Nightwood in terms of feminist theory and history; if anything, that focus has broadened. I had never intended to write only a straightforward history of Nightwood, although the compilation and maintenance of the chronology has been a paramount undertaking. Rather, I wanted to explore how feminist theory has changed since Nightwood's founding in 1979, and how Nightwood as a women's theatre has changed to reflect developments in feminist philosophy. This is a complex matter, for there is a great difference between feminist activism — as it is practiced by an advocacy and lobbying organization like the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee, for example — and the scholarship of feminist academia. Adding to the complication is the fact that a Canadian theatre company is an intensely busy place, influenced by the many people who come and go, marking the work with their own political and creative visions.

I have considered Nightwood in three distinct contexts: first, of contemporary conceptions of feminist theory; second, of other feminist theatre companies in Canada and beyond that grew up in the same time period; and third, of collective creation and its place in Canadian theatre history. Nightwood's significance is most clearly understood when considered within these frames of reference.

For most people, the point of contact with any theatre company is through viewing or reading its plays. While I have seen a good number of Nightwood plays, many others were produced before I arrived in or after I left Toronto, and my access to them

is only through the published texts and other production records. I have also directed university productions of two plays that originated at Nightwood: *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and *This is For You, Anna*. It may well be impossible to determine how audiences perceive a theatre company based on a performance they have viewed; after all, an idea that seems like “old news” to one spectator may be a revelation for another. But it is possible to look at which plays a company has chosen to devise, produce, and market, and, by closely examining the politics and aesthetics of those plays, to comment on the relationship between a theatre and the discourse in which it chooses to engage.

So my focus remains on Nightwood and how it communicates to the world—primarily through its plays, but also through articles in journals and newspapers, for example. Of course, the world communicates back to Nightwood too, through reviews, grants, and even box-office returns, but these have been of secondary importance for me, partly because they are skewed by so many variables. Funding cuts in Canada have more to do with what party is in government and how much it values the arts, or how the economy is doing, than with any factor specific to a feminist company. All small companies struggle. I am more interested in how Nightwood responds by marketing itself—how it tries to persuade the public of its worth and value, the tools and language by which it engages in self-definition and self-determination, and how all this is coloured by the dominant feminist and other political discourse of the day. For example, in Nightwood’s most recent mandate statements and website copy, the term “theatre ecology” has been used for the first time. It is an evocative phrase that clearly reflects contemporary preoccupations about the environment, perhaps even suggesting an alliance with eco-feminism.¹

Throughout its history, Nightwood’s decisions have been governed by what I describe as a dialectic of accident and intention. Over the years, there have been shifts in policy; various aspects of programming have been emphasized over others; and conflicts and controversies have flared up. There is little value in passing

judgment in retrospect, in trying to assess who was right or if mistakes were made. Theatre, like feminism, is always in motion. The debate over whether Nightwood was really a collective in its earliest years serves as a good example of how differing perspectives and memories make it hard to write a definitive version of history. Debates such as this one will surely never be resolved, since they concern personal recollections and perceptions, and different conclusions can remain equally “true” for different individuals. What is more interesting to me is the way Nightwood’s founders have chosen to write about this question in the public forum; how subsequent artistic directors rewrote, reacted to, or rebelled against the same question; and how little any of it influences the critical response to the productions, or the business of appealing to ticket-buyers in the twenty-first century.

Feminism and theatre were my first areas of interest, and they remain my twin companions throughout the book. My personal identification has been mostly with materialist feminism, at least until the term Third Wave caught my attention a few years ago. Third Wave feminism is most often associated with a younger generation of feminist activism, an interest in popular culture and sexual agency, and an acceptance of pluralism and contradiction. Although the Third Wave has been notoriously hard to define, I associate it with many of the topics most interesting to me, such as the complications of gendered identity. In my first book (*The Violent Woman as a New Theatrical Character Type: Cases from Canadian Drama*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), I argued that Western culture has ignored or misrepresented acts of violence and aggression by women in order to maintain an ideal of maternal femininity. That book was a Third Wave project, because it took the position that in order for women to claim their full humanity, the whole, unvarnished range of their experiences must be acknowledged – not just those depictions that are flattering or politically convenient. I am most interested in feminism, and theatre, that embraces contradiction and explores complicity. Feminism is a strategy and theatre is one of its many tools, but it is a strategy that reinvents itself again and again. Theatre is an

art form, a business, and a medium for many practitioners. Theatre is a set of practices and a profession. Writing about both, I am guided by my own preferences and readings, but what I have produced here is a history that engages with the faces and functions that Nightwood has chosen to show us all.

In 1993, Rita Much wrote, “By nurturing an entire generation of women theatre artists for the past thirteen years — writers, designers, directors, actors — and by emphasizing a non-naturalistic style, Nightwood Theatre has made a permanent impression on the nature and scope of contemporary Canadian theatre, its politics and its aesthetic, as well as the conditions in which this theatre is created.”² We are now sixteen years further into Nightwood’s history, and Nightwood has influenced more than one generation of women theatre artists. With youth programs like *Write From the Hip* and *Busting Out!* and support for festivals such as “*Hysteria*,” that influence will continue well into the future. Nightwood’s fervent commitment to women artists is perhaps best characterized by former artistic director Alisa Palmer, who threw down the gauntlet in the Spring 1997 Nightwood newsletter: “Artists and audiences, feminists and thespians alike, are hankering for women’s art that laughs like a maniacal harlot in the pallid and even-featured face of the Disneyfied, sanitized Mega-theatre culture.” Palmer vowed that Nightwood, in solidarity with other struggling companies, would “keep the theatre doors open, the art outspoken, and the strategies for survival boisterous and ingenious.”³