Introduction
Context, Creativity, Collectivity

The larger context: Nightwood Theatre within feminist (and other) movements

Nightwood Theatre was founded as a Toronto collective in 1979, and can usefully be considered in the context of other women’s theatre companies of the period. In Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own, Lizbeth Goodman has discussed the origins of British and American feminist theatre in the countercultural movements of the late 1960s. She suggests that by 1968, the feminist movement was recognizing that public demonstrations were more effective than private group discussion sessions, and that this realization led to some of the early feminist theatres. The existence of a diverse fringe theatre movement also allowed for the development of splinter groups concentrating on women’s issues. Each decade since then has produced a new group of women playwrights, championed by women’s companies and producing collectives, and complemented by women directors. In England alone, Women’s Theatre Group was founded in 1974; Monstrous Regiment in 1975; and the lesbian-centred Siren in 1979. Mention must also be made of the highly influential Sistren Jamaican Women’s Collective, founded in 1977.

But the theatres that can be most closely compared with Nightwood remain within North America. Dinah Luise Leavitt identifies four companies as American feminist pioneers: New Feminist Theatre (founded in 1969), It’s All Right to Be Woman (1970), the Westbeth Playwright’s Feminist Collective (1970),
and the Washington Area Feminist Theatre (1972). According to Charlotte Canning, New York’s New Feminist Theatre toured to Canada in 1974 and reported that women actually joined the company along the way.\textsuperscript{2} Leavitt claims that the New Feminist Theatre was mainly interested in reaching as many people as possible with its feminist message, so they “sought the establishment theatre’s audience.”\textsuperscript{3} She contrasts this with a group like It’s All Right to Be Woman, an all-woman collective of eleven members that sometimes went so far as to exclude men from the audience for their performances.

It’s All Right to Be Woman had the primary goal of empowering its female audience; the company was run and all of its shows were created in an entirely collective manner, with the work developed through a lengthy process of sharing personal material, consciousness raising, and acting exercises.\textsuperscript{4} Canning cites It’s All Right to Be Woman, along with another company called Womansong Theater, as examples of the most extreme form of collectivity; company members even refused to list their individual names on programs or in interviews.\textsuperscript{5}

The earliest American company that might be closely compared to Nightwood is At the Foot of the Mountain. From an earlier incarnation, ATFOTM emerged as an all-woman collective in Minneapolis in 1976. Although the company folded in 1991, it was until that point hailed as the longest-running feminist theatre in the U.S. Its core members resembled Nightwood’s early members in their level of university education, involvement with outside companies, and extensive experience in theatre. Their mandate from 1976 read in part, “We struggle to relinquish traditions such as linear plays, proscenium theatre, non-participatory ritual and seek to reveal theatre that is circular, intuitive, personal, involving.”\textsuperscript{6} The company was determined to create a different kind of theatre through an alternative method of working, emphasizing process, ritual, and what they defined as matriarchal power structures. At the Foot of the Mountain was similar to Nightwood in its emphasis on creating theatre that was also political, rather than on agitprop or street theatre.
activities. Both companies reached out to their audiences by mailing out brochures and newsletters, holding open workshops, and inviting the community to view works in progress. While At the Foot of the Mountain encouraged discussions after all its performances, Nightwood has tended to do this only in fairly controlled ways—for example, through feedback forms at “Groundswell,” its annual festival of new play development, or at panel discussions with a moderator and guest speakers. Only recently, in its 2006/2007 season, has Nightwood started having “talkback” sessions after Tuesday night performances. The two companies were also similar in having a relatively large and active staff and receiving government funding through arts council grants. There is one marked difference between the two companies, however: Leavitt writes that when ATFOTM was invited to perform at “the prestigious ‘Alternative Theatre Festival’ in 1977, they declined because they suspected they would be a hit and that this kind of success would inhibit the work they want to do.” While they received good reviews and grants, At the Foot of the Mountain members were said to “reject most traditional success indicators.” This has never been the case at Nightwood, which has actively pursued as much of a profile as it has been able to afford.

Martha Boesing of At the Foot of the Mountain was one of the women who attended “The Next Stage: Women Transforming the Theatre,” a two-day conference held as part of the first “Festival de Théâtre des Amériques” in Montreal in May of 1985. Cynthia Grant was the panellist representing Nightwood. Other Canadian participants included Rina Fraticelli, Kate Lushington, and Pol Pelletier, and participants from the U.S. included Joan Schenkar, Maria Irene Fornes, Judith Malina, and JoAnne Akalaitis. Honor Ford-Smith attended, representing Sistren. On her panel, Martha Boesing argued that women’s theatre is experimental and should therefore not censor itself on aesthetic grounds by imposing standards of excellence that are traditional and patriarchal. Aesthetic criticism, Boesing said, is “based on a language not our own.” Instead, she believed, women should develop a new form of criticism, one that could transcend race,
class, and nationality, and by which the transformative nature of women’s theatre could be understood. Part of her suggestion was to invite the audience in to provide feedback at every stage of the work, not just for the finished product.  

Another American company that invites a close comparison with Nightwood is The Women’s Theatre Project, which, unlike At the Foot of the Mountain, is still going strong; it is the largest and oldest theatre company in the U.S. devoted to producing the work of female playwrights. The company was founded by Julia Miles, who, while working with new playwrights at The American Place Theatre from 1964 to 1978, was disturbed by how few plays by women were produced on the mainstage. In the late 1970s, a group called Action for Women in Theatre issued a report on the status of women in American theatre (which paralleled the 1982 Canadian study by Rina Fraticelli discussed later in this introduction). Miles learned “that only 7 per cent of the playwrights and 6 per cent of the directors in funded non-profit theatres during 1969–1975 were women.” She was also aware that only ten percent of the plays submitted to The American Place Theatre were by women. Miles concluded that a special environment was needed to “welcome women in a professional embrace” by providing role models as well as all the tools required — designers, a theatre space, and an audience. With an $80,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, The Women’s Project at The American Place Theatre was founded in 1978. Julia Miles still serves on the board as artistic director emeritus.

The Women’s Project began with a developmental process to take scripts through a rehearsed reading, directed by women and including a taped audience discussion. Scripts went on to secondary development work, and then to studio productions. A director’s unit was also established, which began collecting statistics on the employment of women directors. In only the second season, two of the Studio Production plays also made it onto The American Place mainstage, and Julia Miles began publishing volumes of the plays coming out of The Women’s Project. In a volume of plays published in 1989, Miles commented in her
introduction that, since the statistics were released in 1978, the number of plays by women being produced at non-profits had tripled to about 20 percent. “Not enough,” Miles insists. “Statistically 20,000 people see a Broadway play each night. Only 1,000 of those see a play written by a woman—Wendy Wasserstein’s Heidi Chronicles. Not enough.”

Today The Women’s Theatre Project operates three ongoing programs. Since its first production, in 1978—Choices, by Patricia Bosworth—the company has continued to produce women’s plays and cultivate women theatre artists. The Project maintains the Julia Miles Theater in Manhattan, as well as a separate rehearsal space. In the Lab Series, which runs programs for playwrights, directors, and (as of 2006) producers, eight to ten members participate in a two-year development program. Participants meet monthly for developmental work sessions with industry professionals and workshop plays in progress.

Perhaps the most ambitious undertaking of The Women’s Theatre Project is Ten Centuries of Women Playwrights, an arts education program in New York high schools. A Women’s Project teaching artist, along with guest playwrights, actors, and directors, works alongside classroom teachers to introduce students to plays by women. The students improve their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills through vocabulary, creative writing, and historical research assignments. The students then begin writing and preparing their own scenes, culminating in a public performance at the Julia Miles Theater.

The commitment of The Women’s Theatre Project to produce plays by women is obviously shared by Nightwood, and its determination to nurture writers is paralleled by Nightwood programs such as “Groundswell,” Write From the Hip (a development program for younger playwrights), and the recent Emerging Actors Program, which matches young theatre school graduates with professional actors to work on “Groundswell” shows. And while Nightwood cannot boast anything quite as ambitious as Ten Centuries of Women Playwrights, the intention to inspire young women is certainly present in its program for teenage girls, called Busting Out!
In Canada, Cynthia Zimmerman has argued that women’s theatre arose from the nationalist movement in theatre, and from a general environment conducive to the exploration of issues and social change. “In the early seventies in Canada,” she writes, “it was the nationalist movement that was the proud parent.” Both Lizbeth Goodman and Zimmerman recognize that women’s performance, whether in Canada or beyond, developed within the context of broader social forces. The British playwright and historian Michelene Wandor has claimed that whenever there is a movement toward social change and greater freedom, women will seize the window of opportunity to create new forms of resistance. Canadian Yvonne Hodkinson has charted a similar evolution in her discussion of women in theatre. In her introduction to *Female Parts: The Art and Politics of Women Playwrights*, Hodkinson laments that after women won the right to vote in 1920, the women’s movement seemed to lose its impetus. Women did not start confronting social and psychological patterns of oppression in an organized way until the 1960s—a period marked by the publication of landmark American studies such as *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and *Sexual Politics* (1970). In Canada during this period, playwrights such as Beverley Simons, Aviva Ravel, and Patricia Joudry began integrating a feminist sensibility into their work and using it to explore female psychology. Groundbreaking plays such as *The Fairies are Thirsty* (*Les fées ont soif*) by Denise Boucher and *Jennie’s Story* by Betty Lambert portrayed women’s oppression by patriarchal institutions, particularly the Catholic Church. Hodkinson notes that many female Canadian playwrights, such as Diane Grant, Wendy Lill, and Carol Bolt, began their exploration of feminist themes by looking back at women’s history; she finds it revealing that so many feminist plays deal with historical settings and figures, describing this phenomenon as one of “unravelling women’s past as a first step to understanding present day Canadian women.” Hodkinson articulates an important feminist principle: autonomy means being born into a world where one has a meaningful past and can therefore make choices for the future.

*Shelley Scott* • *Nightwood Theatre*
How far have we come?

In 1982, Rina Fraticelli, artistic director of the Playwright’s Workshop in Montreal, was commissioned by Status of Women Canada to conduct a study on the status of women in Canadian theatre. Although her report was solicited by the federal government, it was not published in full, nor was it ever acted upon at a government level. However, Fraticelli’s findings did serve as a wake-up call to Canadian women theatre-makers. Some of her statistics were published in arts-related and feminist journals; they were used to particular effect by the Toronto director Kate Lushington to illustrate her article “Fear of Feminism,” published in Canadian Theatre Review in 1985.18

Although Nightwood Theatre had existed since 1979, and had not initially promoted itself as a women’s theatre company, the release of the Fraticelli report was a catalyst toward a clearly feminist mandate. In their applications for government funding, press releases and advertising brochures, and programming, the women of Nightwood Theatre drew upon the awareness sparked by Rina Fraticelli’s statistics to articulate a new vision—one in which they could play a major role in addressing the gender imbalance in Canadian theatre. In a 1984 funding application to the charitable Laidlaw Foundation, Nightwood’s artistic coordinator, Mary Vingoe, stressed the urgent need for developmental contexts for women playwrights, directors, and performers by observing, “Our theatre increasingly finds itself viewed as a central resource and potential producer for women artists in the city.”19 Nightwood’s commitment to producing work by women took on an urgency that has carried the company forward for thirty years.

In 2006, updated statistics on the status of women in Canadian theatre were released, this time as part of a national campaign called Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women’s Initiative, spearheaded by Nightwood in partnership with the Playwright’s Guild of Canada Women’s Caucus and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT). In addition to hosting a series of public debates and presentations on the issue of gender inequity in the theatre world, The Women’s Initiative conducted a survey of
professional theatres in Canada to determine how many were headed by women, what percentage of plays produced were written and directed by women, and other related statistics. Although only 128 of the 273 companies responded, the information gathered revealed that there had been little significant change since Rina Fraticelli’s report was prepared in 1982. In terms of budgets, the survey found that the mean average of total revenues for companies headed by male artistic directors in 2004/2005 was $1,923,493, while the equivalent figure for companies headed by women was $1,165,275. The companies directed by males had average earned revenues of $1,270,065, while the “female companies” earned $695,998 on average. There was a tremendous gap in revenues from fundraising, and a smaller one for government revenues.

Furthermore, female-led companies were less likely to be incorporated or to have charitable status, and were less likely to be full members of PACT. While 49 percent of companies that responded to the survey reported having a regular performance space, 67 percent of these companies were male-led and only 33 percent were female-led. Clearly, even by 2006, gender equity in Canadian theatre had not yet been achieved.

While the findings of chief researcher Rebecca Burton are still being analyzed, Kelly Thornton, the current artistic director of Nightwood, hopes that their dissemination in 2006 will have the same kind of ripple effect that Fraticelli’s report had in the early eighties. Once Fraticelli’s report brought the issue of gender equity into public consciousness, it became something for artistic directors to consider in their hiring practices and programming decisions. But over the years, awareness of the issue seems to have faded, and some might even assume that equality has already been achieved. However, as Kelly Thornton and the other women of the Initiative point out, it only takes a quick consideration of playbills from theatres across the country to observe the continued dominance of men as artistic directors, directors, and playwrights — especially at the larger, better-funded regional theatres. Rebecca Burton has also interpreted the negative responses the Initiative encountered — questions about why such a survey was...
needed, or why a company should spend time filling it out—as further evidence that the theatre sector is reluctant to confront discrimination within itself. In this climate, Nightwood—a company where women’s work is always done—remains relevant.

**What are we looking at?**

This book focuses on Nightwood as the pre-eminent women’s theatre company in Canada. Because of its unique status as a Canadian women’s theatre company spanning the period from 1979 to the present, Nightwood can be examined as something of a microcosm, or a case study, of developments in feminist theatre and the production of women’s work. Over the years, the company has presented itself as a producer of new works by Canadian women; as a provider of opportunities for women theatre artists; as an inclusive theatre company committed to producing work by women of colour; and as the “home company” for some of the most celebrated names in Canadian theatre. Ann-Marie MacDonald is probably the best example of a “big name,” since her 1988 comedy *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, winner of the Chalmers and Governor General’s awards, is one of the most frequently produced of all Canadian plays. But many women theatre artists from across the country have had some connection with Nightwood, whether through its annual “Groundswell Festival” of new work, its playwright-in-residence and various play development programs, or its sponsorship of the annual “Five Minute Feminist Cabaret” fundraiser, a revue-style evening of entertainment with intense community involvement. Since Nightwood’s founding by Mary Vingoe, Kim Renders, Maureen White, and Cynthia Grant, the company has gone through numerous changes in leadership, produced both collective creations and plays by single authors, mounted tours, collaborated with other companies, and sought out many ways to encourage new work by women.

The role and development of Nightwood within the feminist and theatrical communities of Toronto leads to larger questions about aesthetics, process, and representation. For example, Nightwood’s work can be considered in the context of the company’s
history and mandate, but also in the larger context of international feminism. It is illuminating to consider Nightwood’s actual practice and to compare it with that of other companies that existed in the time period when Nightwood was first starting out, and with theatres that exist now. Nightwood can also be considered in terms of feminist theory, by considering what critics have written about the intersection of theatre and feminist philosophy as both have evolved from the 1970s to the twenty-first century.

The chronology at the end of the book can be considered in a number of ways. It lists all of Nightwood’s productions and many of the people who have contributed to the company. The involvement of certain individuals or the development of ongoing projects can be traced through various stages, from an appearance at a “Groundswell Festival” to a later production. Many familiar names in Canadian theatre, including Judith Thompson, Anne Anglin, and Sarah Stanley, are evident, as are numerous collaborations with other companies that place Nightwood within the community of Toronto theatre. There are also names from the international theatre community, such as Caryl Churchill and Naomi Wallace, whose plays were produced, and JoAnne Akalaitis, who gave a guest presentation in 1994. The subject matter of many of the productions, obvious from their titles, indicates the specifically feminist nature of material that, while nurtured within Nightwood’s unique context, places the work within the international framework of the women’s movement.

THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF DOCUMENTING FEMINIST THEATRE

Creating a chronology for a feminist company can require an unusual amount of digging and piecing together. Lizbeth Goodman comments that “drama” is often associated with a certain degree of literary integrity, which much feminist theatre does not necessarily aim to achieve. Instead, feminist theatre often focuses on more active elements: interaction between written text and performance; extra-scenic communication between performers and audience; and the dual role of theatre as both art form and
platform—a medium for social change. In Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada, Robert Wallace observes, “For many who work in the fringe, theatre no longer is centred on the playwright, nor on the creation of a body of dramatic literature, indigenous or otherwise.” In many cases, projects initiated by Nightwood are intended to be culture building, resulting in little in the way of literary evidence, but nonetheless important within the feminist movement. The Coloured Girls Project is a good example. Initiated by co-artistic director Diane Roberts in 1995, it was scheduled for public performance in the spring, but instead became an in-house workshop involving Roberts and a large team of creators and facilitators. The workshop was referred to as the first part of “An Explosion Project,” based on Ntozake Shange’s performance poem for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf. While no doubt a useful exercise, it remained a private event for the actors and other participants.

Because Nightwood, like many avant-garde companies, initially worked in an improvisational manner with visual images, the work did not always result in a written script. Furthermore, like many other early women’s companies, Nightwood employed a collective process, and often no one person was charged with the duties of a playwright. Of course, this lack of documentation can create gaps for the historian. When constructing a history based on material evidence, the status of the play text is significant. In some cases, the fact that a written text was never generated is irrelevant to the goals of the theatrical project, which might have had to do with the development of the performer, establishing ties with a certain community, or the exploration of an issue. In her book Redressing the Past, a study of an earlier era of Canadian women playwrights, Kym Bird contends that, when contemporary critics look back to the distant, or even the more recent past, they must recognize that “women’s contributions to the historical record require an alternative, affective aesthetics,” because the work may bring private virtues into the public, male-dominated sphere.

The nature of the historical record is always problematic for a theatre historian; not least, because of the kinds of materials left
behind for the researcher to use in her reconstruction. For the most part, what is preserved are the official materials demanded by government bureaucracy and funding agencies: grant proposals, fundraising letters, financial ledgers, lists of people who have donated money or corporations that have refused to do so. The paper accumulated over the years speaks volumes about how much time and effort a company must devote to raising money and the importance that holds for its survival. Furthermore, it points out a dialectic between accident and intention; when a company builds a theatrical season, its choices are dependent on the granting of funds by external bodies, and decisions are influenced in subtle or overt ways. Sometimes, projects are abandoned because no money was forthcoming. It is difficult to speculate on how an unrealized project might have altered the direction of history had it ever seen the light of day.

The funding of a feminist company might engender particularly relevant considerations. For example, has the mandate of the company, as stated on government grant application forms, been altered to reflect what the writer thinks the granting agency wants to hear? Perhaps there is an impulse to downplay the company’s feminism in order to avoid the potential disapproval of a conservative agency. Or, in a more inclusive climate, perhaps it is beneficial for a company to have a socially aware mandate, since it allows the funding body an opportunity to appear supportive of minority cultures. Diane Roberts has specifically addressed this phenomenon in an interview:

There’s been a lot of pressure put on the funding bodies to incorporate a more inclusive vision of people of all nations and colours that are represented in Canada ... We, Nightwood, have an advantage in that we’ve been working with artists of colour for some time — it’s not just the flavour of the month around here. I hope it won’t be that in the funding bodies either — I hope they continue to seek out advice from the communities, which is their mandate.
Her comment implies that she fears the funding bodies’ commitment to inclusivity may be fickle and their professed interest in minority cultures only temporary.

Guidelines for funding tend to define the difference between mainstream and alternative, or minority, culture. This is a central issue in Canadian theatre history, given that the modern development of Canadian theatre dates from the alternative theatre movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s. As companies once considered alternative, such as Passe Muraille and the Tarragon, became increasingly well established, an even more alternative group of theatres, such as Nightwood and Buddies in Bad Times, came to occupy that minority position, shifting the definition of “minority” from criteria of nationalism and aesthetics to identity issues of gender, race, and sexuality. In his study of Canadian theatre Producing Marginality, Robert Wallace finds real promise of innovation only in the small fringe companies that embody marginal perspectives. Wallace calls for a restructuring of the grant process, “a reappraisal in which the social networks that have constructed the mindset that controls the systems of power relations that define Canadian theatre are identified and held accountable” (Wallace’s italics). For Wallace, there is a vital need to fund fringe companies like Nightwood because they are the only source of theatrical experimentation and critical commentary. While his claim is exaggerated, Wallace’s type of passionate advocacy is necessary in order for smaller companies to get the attention they need in a competitive funding climate.

How does a commitment to diversity expand the feminist mandate?

Besides its commitment to feminism, Nightwood’s anti-racist mandate has been one of its strongest sources of creative success. According to Rita Much, when Kate Lushington began her tenure as Nightwood’s artistic director (1988–1993), she “began her task by implementing Nightwood’s long-standing anti-racist policy through board recruitment” and through producing groundbreaking plays such as Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots (1990)
by the Native actor and writer Monique Mojica. As a Jewish immigrant from England, Lushington represented a certain level of diversity herself, but Nightwood’s claim to inclusivity became much more credible when Diane Roberts, a Black woman, became associate artistic director in 1992. Roberts first collaborated with Nightwood as assistant director of *The Wonder of Man*, a play that highlighted issues of race as well as gender. After Lushington left the company in 1993, Roberts was joined by Alisa Palmer as co-artistic director. As a lesbian, Palmer represented another kind of diversity in Nightwood’s leadership.

Nightwood’s commitment to producing work from diverse communities was in many ways a logical response to both official government policies of multiculturalism and the changing demographics of Toronto. As Diane Roberts explained, “Councils and arts organizations have been compelled to expand their vision and have been challenged to include in their vision the ‘voice,’ the perspective of artists of colour — the additional Canadian voices. Nightwood has been doing that for some time. So we benefit both artistically and financially.” Much of Nightwood’s strength has come from its attempts to be open to women who have traditionally been under-represented — not only on Canadian stages, but also on feminist stages. As Roberts insists, “I want to be sure that [people] understand that this is not just racial integration for political or social reasons alone — this is primarily for theatrical innovation!” Robert’s assertion has been proven correct with the success of productions like Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, winner of the 1997 Governor General’s Award, and Marjorie Chan’s 2004 play *China Doll*, directed by Kelly Thornton and nominated for the Governor General’s Award. Nightwood broke important new ground again in 2000/2001 by producing and touring Alex Bulmer’s *Smudge*, a critically acclaimed show about the playwright’s experience of vision loss.

**Defining collective creation**

The theory and practice of collective creation has been another major source of creative energy at Nightwood. Theatre is naturally
a collaborative art form, and in some cases the notion of “collectivity” can more accurately be described as a kind of heightened and consciously implemented collaboration. The Latvian-Canadian actor, director, and playwright Baquito Rubess, who has worked frequently with Nightwood, has done most of her directing in collectives or in situations where she has directed her own work. Rubess argues that asserting power is often painful and difficult for women, and that the collective process is conducive for women to begin thinking of themselves in positions of creative authority.31

Rubess outlines three different models of working collectively in which she has participated. In the first model, there is no director, but responsibility is split up in advance, with each person taking authority for some aspect of a production. In the second model, the collective has an outside director; Rubess cautions that this method can lead to conflict over who has final say, and collective members may experience a sense of aesthetic powerlessness. In the third model, the director is part of the collective and serves to translate the process, by encouraging the actors to be concerned for each other onstage and to understand the larger context of their project.

Two realizations are important for any collective to function effectively. First, the collective must acknowledge that not everyone can do everything; participants should be encouraged to do what they are best at and to discover new things they can do along the way. Second, each member must be committed to working as a collective and understand why they are doing so. Programs from Nightwood collective productions generally list certain people as being responsible for particular functions, while the show itself is credited to the group as a whole.

Because part of the feminist agenda is to build women’s confidence and create bonds between them, the process by which a project is created can be as important as the finished product. A collaborative model, in which credit and responsibility are shared, as opposed to a strictly hierarchical structure, is a choice philosophically consistent with these feminist goals. Sharon Ott, the
former artistic director of the Seattle Repertory Theatre, has explained:

Women are particularly comfortable with the lateral sharing of responsibility, and not as likely to want to assume a hierarchical order with them at the top, but rather a more lateral order that, if they’re the leader, has them at the center. It’s a circle radiating out from something as opposed to a line going from bottom to top … Sometimes that can be problematic, because I think that society is still based on a hierarchical behavior model or organizing principle.\textsuperscript{32}

Collective creation offers at least the possibility for equality and a balance of power in an organization; since these are feminist goals for society at large, it seems only right that they should be put into practice in a feminist company. The benefits of a collective are practical: the individual develops more skills; increases her self-confidence by seeing herself in more powerful roles within a nurturing environment; and can add an intriguing project to her résumé. The benefits are also aesthetic and social, as the company proves that art, and the practice of theatre, can arise not just from the mind of the stereotypical lone (usually male) genius, but from sharing, equality, and cooperation—a hopeful model for all human interaction.

Collective creation has come to connote a particular kind of theatre piece: episodic in structure, presentational, and made up of a number of stories that all contribute to some overarching theme or purpose. But collective creation is more accurately defined by its process than by its outcome. Within the situation of a traditional, hierarchical production, the playwright’s text is the organizing focus, but for a collective there is no such map. The end result of the process might be a play about a specific community or historical event (for example, Nightwood’s 1984 production \textit{Love and Work Enough}, which celebrated Ontario’s pioneer women), and it might have an overt political motivation (such as the anti-war \textit{Peace Banquet} in 1983). But the collective
process might also result in a play like *Glazed Tempera* (1980), which was intended to explore an interdisciplinary aesthetic experience rather than to offer social commentary.

In Canada, and in some other countries—England, for example—it has become common to refer to this kind of process-oriented creation as “devised theatre.” This is partly due, in Canada at least, to the connotations of the term “collective creation”—its associations with a particular historical moment and even with specific theatre companies and their methodologies (the most famous example being Theatre Passe Muraille’s *The Farm Show* in 1972). But even within the relevant time period—the late 1960s until the early 1980s—it can be useful to think of devising as somewhat different from collective creation. Again, the distinction is illustrated by the difference between a play such as *Love and Work Enough* and *Glazed Tempera*. With its relatively narrative through line, named characters, and recognizable social theme, and its basis in authenticated documents and research, *Love and Work Enough* qualifies as a collective creation in the way that term has come to be understood in Canadian scholarship. *Glazed Tempera*, on the other hand, was aesthetically motivated and experiential rather than narrative, bears a stronger resemblance to performance art than to a traditional play, and might be more accurately described as devised.55 (Nightwood, however, used the term collective creation consistently.)

Nightwood’s mandate has always been to encourage diverse perspectives and to provide opportunities for women who might not find them elsewhere, and collective creation is in many ways an ideal model for this kind of empowerment. Furthermore, the work that is created through collective creation can be especially rich and powerful, benefiting from the combined efforts and gifts of a number of people, rather than being the vision of a single individual. As Maureen White commented regarding *This is For You, Anna*:

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

On the other hand, working collectively can be difficult and time-consuming, particularly if all the participants are not equally committed to or comfortable with the process. Ann-Marie Mac-Donald acknowledged some of the hazards of the process in her description of The Anna Project. “The collective process has been fraught with more challenges and obstacles than any other I have known; struggles such as fund-raising and administration of one’s own work, not to mention the constant striving for consensus in a process which is also a commitment to respect each artist’s creative input,” she wrote. The challenges of working collectively will be ruefully acknowledged by any artist who has tried to let go of traditional structures and experienced the frustration of not having a leader to turn to or familiar methods to fall back on. For people who are not used to working collectively, the process can seem maddeningly inefficient and unproductive, even chaotic. MacDonald concludes, however, that This is For You, Anna was worth “hanging in for,” and a collaborative, if not necessarily collective, method of working has continued to be associated with Nightwood and all other Canadian feminist companies.

There are two ways in which the collective model is significant for feminist theatre: in how the collective working process embodies feminist principles of equality, and in how it influences the aesthetics of the work produced. The collective projects that lead to a mainstage production and a published script are the plays that tend to be remembered and associated with the company’s name, and in those cases, the emphasis shifts from the collective process to the qualities of the “finished” product. In Nightwood’s case, collective creations such as This is For You, Anna and Smoke Damage are some of the company’s most recognized works: they
have been published, anthologized, and remounted by other companies; they have been the subject of scholarly articles and are included in course curricula; they have entered the canon of Canadian theatre. On the program for the Theatre Passe Muraille run of This is For You, Anna, The Anna Project noted the play’s adoption by mainstream culture—evidenced by its presence in university course curricula, for example—with pride. The uneasy balance between a non-traditional process and a desire for mainstream acceptance has been a defining factor in Nightwood’s development as a company.

**Collective creation as a feminist process**

Susan E. Bassnett-McGuire, in her article “Towards a Theory of Women’s Theatre,” traces the emergence of feminist theatre collectives from the left-wing movements for social change that began in the 1960s in Europe. Bassnett-McGuire valorizes the tendency of small groups to adopt a collectively administered structure—concerning themselves as a company with both financial and artistic decision-making processes, and crediting the entire group with the final show. A production, she says, can be “described as women’s theatre by what happens off rather than on-stage.” She also notes that feminist theatre companies often use the cabaret form because it establishes a “particular kind of performer-audience relationship that combines the distance of frame with the extreme closeness of frame breaking.” This form of theatre reinforces the expectations of a (feminist) audience, and works off the resulting interaction.

A good Nightwood example is the annual “Five Minute Feminist Cabaret,” which serves not only as an evening of entertainment, or even exclusively as a fundraising opportunity, but also as a kind of group celebration, a reunion, a reinforcement of the spectator’s ties with a particular community, and a statement of personal solidarity. In this context, an individual’s attendance at an event or performance is an opportunity for her to demonstrate her support for that work in a more overt way than is typical for a theatregoer. While attendance at any event implies a certain
level of support, or at least interest, an explicitly feminist event makes attendance into a political statement.

Bassnett-McGuire describes this kind of audience relationship in her discussion of Britain’s Women’s Theatre Group. She characterizes their performances as mere preludes to the group discussions that followed; their aim is to establish a rapport between actor and audience that transcends theatre and extends into life. The performers in the Women’s Theatre Group make the audience into a “support group” and the act of theatre creation into a project for establishing group identity.39

Another collective feminist theatre that bears comparison with Nightwood is the American company Burning City Women. In the book Guerilla Street Theater, edited by Harry Lesnick, the company published an account of itself, explaining that its members were originally part of a company called Burning City Street Theater, but that, as women, they felt a great need to work with each other and to initiate a project among themselves.40 The projects they create are not credited to any one member of the collective; their names are not even listed. They state, “The same impulse that has caused women to make theater together has been active in encouraging women to form collectives together, to put out newspapers together, write books together and make love together.”41 Clearly this is a company that sees itself as part of a women’s culture. Nightwood’s origins can also be traced to this “impulse,” since the company’s genesis was in a collective at Women’s Press, which formed to edit a book entitled The True Story of Ida Johnson.

The seven members of Burning City Women describe their working method as collective and improvisational: “One woman would tell us an event or series of events in her life and the rest of us would act it out.”42 The result was a series of six short plays, collectively entitled What is a Woman? A Revolutionary Soap-Box Opera, which was performed at the “Festival of Underground Theatre” in Toronto in 1970. The plays reflect a cultural feminist perspective by aiming to identify women’s common experiences and search for identity, dealing with issues such as body image, unwed motherhood, the negative impact of a sexist university education, and

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the mother–daughter relationship, all within a 1960s context. The plays demonstrate experimental theatre techniques, such as abstract movement and overlapping dialogue, and also show evidence of the performers’ training in street theatre through their use of simple, stylized props and masks and straightforward messages.

In their early days, feminist theatre companies focused on the collective process as well as a reconsideration of the actor-audience relationship. In Susan Bennett’s book *Theatre Audiences*, she locates a number of theoretical approaches that may explain the new ways in which feminist theatre practitioners communicated with their audiences. For example, Alan Sinfield is quoted as observing, “Any artistic form depends upon some readiness in the receiver to co-operate with its aims and conventions”; this seems particularly applicable to feminist theatre, which requires an audience willing to listen to its subversive perspective. Bennett then cites Una Chaudhuri’s formulation: “The description of how a play works on a spectator — rather than what it means — can supply the terms our criticism needs in order to erase the gap between theory and its object.” Again, this statement is highly relevant to the unique relationship between a feminist play and its audience, because it extends beyond the play’s subject matter into a kind of shared project of celebrating cultural production; this is especially highlighted in a collective creation, where the performers may be perceived to be more personally invested in the work. In a final example, Daphna Ben Chaim considers the relative effectiveness of different levels of distance and levels of engagement between performer and audience. Ben Chaim posits: “The combination … of unreality with recognizable human characteristics seems to be the minimum requirement for identification, and both of these conditions are variable and provide the borders within which distance operates.” The aim of traditional realism is an intense personal relationship and a minimum awareness of fictionality, which Ben Chaim defines as “low” distance. Much feminist collective creation, conversely, aims at an intense personal relationship and a high awareness of fictionality—for
example, by having one actor play multiple characters, all of them sharing a particular struggle—that produces a completely different perspective on reality for its audience.

**Collective creation and the Canadian context**

Nightwood’s experience with the collective model, both administratively and as a method of creation, can be understood within an international feminist framework, but it must also be situated within the context of Canadian theatre. The roots of collective creation and documentary theatre go back much further than the alternative movement of the 1960s. From Erwin Piscator’s theatre in Germany in the 1920s and the International Workers’ Theatre Movement, collective creation can be traced to Joan Littlewood’s Workshop Productions in England, and then to Littlewood’s disciple George Luscombe, who brought her methods to his own Toronto Workshop Productions in 1959. Another Canadian connection was Ray Whelan, who, after apprenticing with Peter Cheeseman in England, got involved with Luscombe’s TWP and then co-founded Open Circle Theatre. Open Circle’s method of creation was to identify local issues, create a text based on interviews with the people affected, and make the shows accessible to those people: it was “community theatre” done professionally. These companies gave rise in turn to the explosion of collective creation and alternative theatre that Canada experienced in the 1960s and 1970s, and then to Nightwood.

In his introduction to *Eight Men Speak*, a collection of plays from the Canadian Workers’ Theatre Movement, Robin Endres argues:

> Theatre, more than any other artistic medium, is conducive to the aims of politically conscious artists because its structure is social and public … If the theatre is the most political of art forms, and if all theatre is in some sense political, a distinction must be made between theatre in general and theatre which is consciously political. The key to the distinction lies in the fact that consciously
political theatre, in addition to its inherent role of altering reality, attempts to convince its audience that it is desirable for them to alter reality through conscious activity … it sets itself the task of literally changing the minds of its audience in order that this audience will in turn change the world. Given that the aims of this theatre are radically different from other types of theatre, the aesthetic choices it makes will also differ—indeed, attempts will be made to change the nature of the dramatic illusion itself.\textsuperscript{48}

Both practical aims and aesthetic choices link the political theatre of the Workers’ Theatre Movement of the 1920s and ’30s to the collective creations of the 1960s and ’70s, and to the birth of feminist theatre.

In the 1930s, John E. Bonn, the chairman of the American Workers’ Theatre, specifically questioned what method of theatre-making is most appropriate to the politically motivated. Bonn asked, “Shall we learn from the bourgeois theater or not? Do we need a stationary theater or an Agitprop Theater? Shall we use scenery, costumes and make-up or not?”\textsuperscript{49} He argued that despite having different aims, political theatre workers could still find appropriate forms for their work by studying the bourgeois theatre: “We cannot wait or look for a ready made style for our new theater; we have to develop the style of the workers theater by bringing it in conformity with its tasks and its means of expression.”\textsuperscript{50} Companies such as the Women’s Theatre Group, Burning City Women, and Nightwood all struggled with the same core issues as these earlier activists: how to create political theatre in a manner that was different from the theatre they were reacting against.

Workers’ Theatre Movement performances were characterized by mobility, as they needed to set up and clear out of performance spaces very quickly; by props and costumes that were extremely basic, but could be transformed for different uses; by a sense of theatre as a social ritual, which heightened and formalized the needs of the community; by the elimination of individual characters in favour of abstract representatives of class; and by the use
of mass recitation and chanting of slogans to make the working class aware of its collective strength.

The parallels between the Workers’ Theatre and the collective creations of the ’60s and ’70s, including those produced by feminist theatres, can be attributed to common funding situations as well as to political and aesthetic goals. The minimal use of basic sets and costumes, for example, can be read as both an economic imperative and as an aesthetic and political choice — an unpretentious identification with the working class. Workers’ Theatre and collective creations share the goal of reaching non-traditional audiences and take their performances to the people most affected, hence the need for mobility, simplicity, and broad, unambiguous characterizations.

A good example here is Nightwood’s 1984 production Love and Work Enough. While hardly agitprop, it did employ a characteristically simple set, consisting of a quilt and one or two chairs, which were transformed into a bed, a carriage, and other set pieces as needed. The cast took on many different, easily identifiable characters that could be described as types, such as the eager young bride and the hard-working immigrant. Instead of mass chanting, there were songs, which served to unite the characters through their common experiences. The play was toured to senior citizens’ homes, schools, parks, and other community locations where the company anticipated an interest in the subject matter. Love and Work Enough emphasized the great contribution of women pioneers to the history of Ontario and insisted that their stories should not be neglected. While not didactic in an agitprop sense, the play does convey its intentions to the audience in a straightforward manner. Quotations from historical documents, letters, and diaries are identified as such within the structure of the play and serve as a kind of internal authentication.

Theatre Passe Muraille became the company most closely identified with the collective creation method in Canada, and Nightwood, in turn, had strong ties with Passe Muraille. Under the direction of Paul Thompson, the Passe Muraille style was a combination of dialect realism, improvisation, and presentational
storytelling, guided by Thompson’s belief that theatre can locate and define the motifs and images that identify a culture and point to its formative myths. The actors started with recognizable characters and situations—a realistic “identifiable base”—but then employed a non-realistic, presentational technique that freed them from naturalistic portraiture and resulted in a kind of gestural storytelling. Another important factor in this method of creation was the freedom of the actors to discover not only the form and structure of a play, but also its content and scope. Thompson claimed to have no preconceptions of how a play would turn out, allowing it to emerge entirely from the rehearsal process. Besides legitimizing and popularizing collective creation as a genre of play-making and influencing the style of Canadian productions, Passe Muraille provided seed money, rehearsal space, and support for other artists. Paul Thompson became an early facilitator of Nightwood, arranging for the transfer of its show *The True Story of Ida Johnson* from the Annex Theatre to a longer run at Adelaide Court, as well as organizing subsequent financial assistance.

Because Nightwood came into existence at the very end of the seventies, it missed the period, ten years earlier, when the collective was at its most revolutionary—when collective creation, alternative theatre, the influence of an international avant-garde, and a passionate nationalism were all coming together in Canadian theatre. In many ways, Nightwood reflected all that had gone on a short while before, yet developed in its own unique direction.

The successful experience of the 1960s and ’70s gave theatre in Canada permission to be proudly nationalistic, meaning that Nightwood’s mandate to produce new Canadian work fit in well with the post-colonial politics of the times. The ’60s and ’70s were also a time of political activism: civil rights, gay and lesbian liberation, anti-war protests, and, of course, women’s rights. And finally, the prevalence of experimentation in all forms of art at the time allowed Nightwood freedom to explore new ways of working and new conceptions of what makes theatre worthwhile.

While collective creation was undeniably influential in its historical heyday, critics have disagreed about its long-term impact
on Canadian theatre. In the opinion of Cynthia Zimmerman, for example, “the collective creation method is usually a way station for writers, a stop en route to greater artistic control over their own work.”\textsuperscript{55} The form has showed staying power, however; in the 1980s, Alan Filewod observed “a notable resurgence of agitprop among women’s groups.”\textsuperscript{56} The Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance, for example, was formed in 1981 to promote socially active theatre (most of which was collective), and many of its member groups were women’s companies. Pol Pelletier, the co-founder and artistic director of Le Théâtre Expérimantal des Femmes, a Montreal separatist collective founded in 1979, presents yet another viewpoint when she claims that “collective creations are important and significant, although they are not the greatest artistic successes.”\textsuperscript{57} From her perspective, the collective is important for political and social reasons, and for the development of the individual woman, but not necessarily for the lasting value of the play.

\textbf{Creating collectively at Nightwood}

Throughout Nightwood’s history, the kind of work the company does and how it represents itself have been largely determined by its leadership; by what the artistic director(s) are interested in doing and who else chooses to get involved. Each of the founding members of Nightwood initiated projects, directed, acted, wrote scripts, and generally found imaginative ways to create theatre projects for themselves under the company umbrella; all but Kim Renders took on the title of artistic director or coordinator at some point. Likewise, when Kate Lushington took over from the founders, in 1988, she directed, wrote, or acted in a number of key productions during her tenure. In the first newsletter published after Alisa Palmer, Diane Roberts, and Leslie Lester took over as the leadership team in 1994, they included a statement that reveals their conception of how Nightwood functioned:

\begin{quote}
We’re enthusiastic to take up the challenge of maintaining Nightwood’s dual role as a leading producer of feminist art and as an important resource for women artists …
\end{quote}
Nightwood Theatre has provided a forum for women to explore the complexity of our relationships to each other, to society and consequently to history. Its identity today is a culmination of accident, serendipity and wilful efforts to have a say in the development of women’s culture. We are intrigued by the challenge of seeing the whole pattern, Nightwood’s past, present and future, in order to support the contribution that each individual constituent, each artist or script or decision, can make to the whole.58

Alisa Palmer directed many productions, from the first one mounted after her team took over (*Wearing the Bone*, 1994, which she also wrote) to the last one before she left (*Anything That Moves* by Ann-Marie MacDonald, in 2001). Her colleague Diane Robert initiated a workshop (*The Coloured Girls Project*, 1995) and directed *Mango Chutney* by Dilara Ally in 1996, in addition to running many “Groundswell” and “Five Minute Feminist Cabaret” productions. Indeed, the administration of “Groundswell” (and “FemCab,” in the years it has been produced) has typically fallen to the artistic director, assisted by some combination of temporary staff. Kelly Thornton has directed most of the mainstage productions since she took over in 2001, and her key area of expertise, new play development, is evident through initiatives like Write From the Hip and Busting Out!

The British writer Bryony Lavery has commented that when she first began running her own women’s theatre company, “I learned that just writing isn’t enough. If you want to write the plays you want and have them produced and performed how you want, you also have to learn how to direct, how to raise money, deal with the Arts Council, talk people into putting your plays on in their theatre, talk to the press, talk to the actors, talk to the audience afterwards and talk talk talk talk talk talk talk.”59

The job of an artistic director is never-ending, particularly for a feminist company. In the January 1995 Nighttalk newsletter, Alisa Palmer worried about how her company was being perceived in the public eye with no show going on at the time, but pointed out
that, since *Wearing the Bone* had closed, two months earlier, more than 200 people had circulated through Nightwood’s studio and office—rehearsing, reading scripts, and meeting as an artistic advisory committee. Palmer reassured herself, “Nightwood Theatre is the foremost women’s theatre in Canada. Our numbers prove our strength and the award winning quality of our art, all the art that comes from our artists, proves our commitment.”  

Both Lavery and Palmer are responding to the fact that every theatre company relies on the people who walk through its doors, but for a company that defines its mandate in social as well as aesthetic terms, participation is even more relevant.

The social mandate was not equally important to all of Nightwood’s leaders; in the very beginning, aesthetic concerns were clearly more dominant. In 1979, Cynthia Grant travelled to New York on a professional theatre training grant to study with JoAnne Akalaitis of Mabou Mines, and with Spalding Gray and the Wooster Group. When she returned from New York to work on the first Nightwood production, *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, Grant described herself as:

full of talk of imagist theatre à la Mabou Mines, courtesy of my first individual grant. My imagined career involved the creation of post-structuralist/modern style, and, like others that I met or was about to meet in forming the Theatre Centre—Richard Shoichet, Thom Sokoloski, Richard Rose, and Sky Gilbert—I wanted to “turn on” the Toronto theatre community to new work with radical artistic visions.  

Furthermore, Grant’s co-founders Maureen White and Kim Renders had studied movement work and the theories of Jerzy Grotowski while at the University of Ottawa, and had backgrounds in the visual arts. Kate Lushington has suggested that the founders’ grounding in these imagistic techniques led Nightwood to do work that, while still very much collectively created, did not follow the same model as other collective creations being produced in

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Toronto at the time. Lushington describes the “typical” collective creation as “a historical storytelling style, very much dependent on men,” one that had “a single narrative or a chronological narrative structure.” In contrast, Nightwood’s work borrowed more heavily from the experimental, imagistic aesthetic of its international influences.

Although each of the four founders (Cynthia Grant, Mary Vingoe, Maureen White, and Kim Renders) might take on different tasks and professional titles with each project, they shared the responsibility and credit for creating an artistic vision. At this stage, collectivity, as a philosophy and working method, was ideally about creating opportunities and encouraging theatrical freedom. Of her earliest motivations, Kim Renders recalls, “I wanted to develop my own performance vocabulary with a group of people; I thought that would be more useful than roaming the streets as a freelance actor.” Being part of a collective allowed Renders the opportunity not only to act, but also to write, direct, and to exercise her artistic skills through design work—a range of input normally unavailable to an actor hired by a conventional company on a show-by-show basis.

Not only does the collective creation experience provide opportunities for personal growth, it also fosters a sense of group identity. As Alan Filewod explains:

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

In Nightwood’s case, both elements were present simultaneously. The four founders and the other members of each collective creation were united through a common ideology (usually feminist, but in the case of a project like Peace Banquet, an anti–nuclear weapons stance), and also a shared interest in a particular kind
of experimental, multimedia aesthetic. Furthermore, financial constraints and a sense of being marginalized and avant-garde gave them a feeling of group unity and common purpose. Chris Brookes of Newfoundland’s Mummers Troupe has insisted, “Any political theatre which intends to really move its audience (I am referring to activism, not emotionalism), over the long term and on a wide social level, must find a language not just of issues and ideology, but of ritual and ceremony rooted in a sense of collective belief beyond language.”

Nightwood clearly intended something of this kind with the audience participation in *Peace Banquet*, when the actors and audience share a ceremonial dinner party with a heightened sense of social relevance.

Collective creations are more a genre of performance than of literary drama; more easily defined by their process than by the qualities of a final product. Filewod insists that traditional dramatic criticism cannot be used to evaluate these works because they reorder the fundamental relation of artist and society. Authorship as a group process makes traditional dramatic criticism, with its textual orientation, difficult. Many of the reviews of Nightwood’s collective creations, for example, focused on the contribution or absence of a director, perhaps searching for an individual who could be identified as the “authority” in the absence of an author. This was particularly true later in the 1980s, when collective creation had fallen out of favour. For those who continue to work in alternative or popular theatre, the lack of respect for their particular art form is a common complaint. Savannah Walling claims that there is a taboo against collective creation—a fear that artistic standards will be diluted, based on an assumption of the primacy of the playwright and script. “Collective creation,” she says, “circumvents the ‘truth’ that art comes only from the minds of bold individuals who rupture tradition and single-handedly change history.”

**Nightwood’s collective administration**

The question of whether or not Nightwood was run collectively from the beginning is a source of controversy. Judging by the
documents available—newspaper reviews, magazine articles, funding letters, and so on—it is clear that the company consistently referred to itself, and was referred to, as a collective, right until Kate Lushington took over in 1988. It is less clear at what point Cynthia Grant took on the title of artistic director and what exactly the existence of such a position might mean. In all of the documents, both the collective and traditional leadership models seem to have been employed simultaneously, in the sense that Grant is identified as the artistic director but “her” company is identified as a collective.

From the very beginning, Grant was often singled out in the press as the leader of Nightwood. For example, in a recap of the 1980 Toronto theatre season, Ray Conlogue noted that “Cynthia Grant and Nightwood Theatre … have become the dominant force at the Theatre Centre.” Conlogue says, “It’s nice to know that avant-garde can be fun,” and issues a whimsical Squeaky Floor Award “to be shared with Grant’s devoted actors.” Grant was most often listed as the producer and director of Nightwood’s shows and was their public spokesperson, which no doubt led the media to interpret and treat her as the artistic director as well.

In a 2004 Canadian Theatre Review article, “Still ‘Activist’ after All These Years?” Cynthia Grant recounts the formation of Nightwood in a way that explicitly portrays her as the founder and artistic director. She claims, “Although [Nightwood] is often referred to as an early collective, that was not really the case,” citing her membership on the Theatre Centre board and her efforts to obtain funding as evidence of her primary role. Grant also points out, “For the first seven years, I directed and produced almost every project.”

In refutation, Kim Renders wrote a lengthy letter to the editor, published in a later issue, which disputes this interpretation of events. Calling Grant’s article a “revisionist view of history,” Renders insists, “We all four possessed this passion, this concept, collectively.” She points out that she, White, and Vingoe did all kinds of other work:
Postering, making costumes and masks, organizing slide projections for our multimedia performances and putting up and taking down sets … Plus, we all worked on scripts, acted and regularly stood outside of rehearsals to co-direct. Is Grant implying that directing and producing has more value than the less prestigious physical grunt work (read: Women’s Work) required to get a show up on its feet?

Renders concedes that Grant was the first of the founding four to be in a paid position, but also claims, “We all agreed that she was not to be called Artistic Director, since our company was not run on the hierarchical principles that governed most other theatre companies at the time.” Renders implies that by not mentioning the names of the other collective members when she was interviewed by the press, Grant had intentionally, but erroneously, fostered the impression of her sole authority.

**Conclusion**

In comparing Nightwood to other Canadian feminist companies past and present, such as Redlight, Nellie McClung, Maenad Theatre, Le Théâtre Expériental des Femmes, Le Théâtre Parminou, Urban Curvz, and the Company of Sirens, similar struggles emerge: obtaining funding, defining a mandate, developing an organizational structure, and communicating with a desired audience. The different kinds of feminist philosophy that individual theatre practitioners advocate will be reflected in the work they produce within their companies. A commitment to feminism also influences how a piece of theatre is created, and each company attempts to develop an appropriate, collaborative working model.

Cynthia Grant became the first of the founders to leave Nightwood. Along with a number of other activist women, she formed the Company of Sirens in 1986. In her description of the new company, Susan Bennett suggests a rift in philosophy caused Grant to leave Nightwood—ironically, that she wanted to do work that was more collective and more political. According to
Bennett, the Company of Sirens completely rejected the theatre mainstream and wanted to work directly with the audience:

Cynthia Grant made it clear that her decision to leave her post as artistic director of the successful Nightwood Theatre in Toronto was the result of a growing dissatisfaction in working within an established institution. Her present participation in a co-operative venture, the Company of Sirens, permits a more direct and important contact between actors and audience without the constraints of the conventional theatre system.\textsuperscript{76}

Bennett then quotes Grant as clarifying:

Part of the move out of Nightwood had to do with making feminist theatre more accessible. Large numbers of people are put off by the idea of coming into a theatre, so we are taking theatre to them. We are very excited about playing venues as diverse as a union hall in Windsor or a cultural community centre here in Toronto.\textsuperscript{77}

Given how relatively marginal Nightwood already was within Toronto’s theatre scene, it is clear how far away from the mainstream a company like the Sirens sought to operate.\textsuperscript{78}

In Canada’s tradition of collective creation, and in feminist and popular theatre, the value of collective creation resides in both the process and the product. How this balance works itself out, however, can take different turns. Nightwood’s shows were identified as collective creations and the company itself was called a collective, yet the fact that individuals took on different tasks and roles within the structure has led to some enduring conflict. At least some element of risk is appropriate to theatre-makers aiming to define themselves as alternative, but one of the biggest risks is forsaking the authority of the author or the power of a leader.
Three of the Founders
Left to Right: Kim Renders, Maureen White, and Cynthia Grant on a bench in front of Theatre Passe Muraille.
From the personal collection of Kim Renders.

Smoke Damage
Left to Right: Mary Marzo, Kim Renders, and Maureen White in the “Lopsy Opsy” scene from Smoke Damage.
Photograph by Ken Martin. From the personal collection of Kim Renders.

This is for you, Anna
Back Row Left to Right: Patricia Nichols, Suzanne Odette-Khuri, Maureen White; and Front Row Left to Right: Banuta Rubess, Ann-Marie MacDonald in This is for You, Anna.
Photograph by Carter Brandon. Nightwood Theatre archives.

Pope Joan
Maureen White as Pope Joan.
Photographer unknown. Nightwood Theatre archives.
The True Story of Ida Johnson
Left to Right: Maureen White, Mary Vingoe, and Kim Renders in The True Story of Ida Johnson. From the personal collection of Kim Renders.

Kim Renders for Rhubarb
Kim Renders in Gently Down the Stream. This photo became the poster image for the "Rhubarb!" Festival. Photograph by Robert Caspari. From the personal collection of Kim Renders.

Glazed Tempera
Maureen White and Kim Renders in Glazed Tempera. Photograph by Robert Caspari. From the personal collection of Kim Renders.

Caution: Women at Work

The True Story of Ida Johnson
Left to Right: Maureen White, Mary Vingoe, and Kim Renders in The True Story of Ida Johnson. From the personal collection of Kim Renders.