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The Beginning of Nightwood Theatre, 1979–1988

An overview: How is the work generated?
Nightwood’s position in, and impact on, Canadian theatre can be evaluated in many different ways. There are three key elements to consider in the process by which Nightwood generates work: the company’s historical context; the use of festivals and other innovative play development strategies; and the company’s inclusive mandate and commitment to diversity.

Nightwood has used various methods for producing work—from the early collective creations, such as Glazed Tempera (1980), Peace Banquet (1983), and Love and Work Enough (1984), to plays by a single author, such as Margaret Hollingsworth’s War Babies (1987). The company has explored many genres, from the Soft Boiled clown shows (performed by Kim Renders and Maureen White, as Orangeade and Cellophane, at the Theatre Centre’s “Rhubarb! Festival”), to powerful political statements like Smoke Damage, written by Banuta Rubess with the cast, which deals with the persecution of women during the European witch hunts. Nightwood has produced shows ranging in scale from one-woman stand-up comedy, such as Sandra Shamas’s My Boyfriend’s Back and There’s Gonna Be Laundry (1987), to shows with large casts and budgets, like Djanet Sears’s The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God (2002).

To illustrate the broad spectrum of Nightwood’s work, consider
the two extremes represented by *The Danish Play* and Busting Out! *The Danish Play* by Sonja Mills exemplifies Nightwood’s desire to promote women’s plays and generate attention for the company by producing shows in high-profile contexts: in addition to its Dora Award–nominated run in Toronto in 2002, the play was taken on tour to Denmark, and presented at the “Magnetic North Festival” in Edmonton and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. The script has been published by Playwrights Canada Press, and Nightwood remounted the show in 2007. On the other end of the spectrum are more grassroots initiatives, such as the “Groundswell” playwrights’ unit, Write From the Hip, and Busting Out! — in-house development programs that do not necessarily result in a full production by Nightwood, but that encourage and develop women artists.

Write From the Hip is a development program for novice playwrights, aged eighteen to twenty-nine, who meet weekly for five months. Through workshops, seminars, and mentoring, the participants in Write From the Hip produce short works that are programmed at the end of the annual “Groundswell Festival” of new works. According to the Nightwood website, Busting Out! is a new theatre program for girls aged twelve to fifteen that aims to provide self esteem building and artistic expression in an open and creative, non-judgmental all-girl space. Over ten weeks, professional theatre artists work with the girls leading them through improvisation games, theatre exercises, group discussions and writing exercises. In the culmination of the program the participants create a collective project based on self-exploration and expression using the tools of theatre.¹

Busting Out! is a free program accessible to all girls, funded through Theatre Ontario and the ministries of Culture and Education.

Nightwood also uses its “Groundswell Festival” as a means for generating new work by women. “Groundswell” has been run

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since 1986, making it the country’s oldest women’s theatre festival. As well, Nightwood hosts the annual “Five Minute Feminist Cabaret” in celebration of International Women’s Day, and in 2003, Nightwood and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre inaugurated a new semi-annual festival called “Hysteria,” a multidisciplinary showcase of female artists from across North America. Over ten days, the first “Hysteria” offered play readings and full productions as well as dance classes, panel discussions, and art installations. One event in particular illustrates just how diverse the festival context can be: “Tits Up: An Evening of Fearless Feminist Porn” was curated by Erika Hennebury and featured “hilarious and horny” pornographic storytelling by local performers.

While “Groundswell” was the first, there are now women’s theatre festivals across the country offering variations on its model and providing a kind of network for play development. For example, since 2002, the Toronto company b current has presented a festival called “rock.paper.sistahz,” described as “an intimate presentation of new and original works ... focusing on themes, forms, and styles which have grown out of the black diasporic culture.” At the other end of the country, Vancouver has “busTin’ out,” an annual cabaret/festival of work by women to celebrate International Women’s Day, coordinated by Full Figure Theatre. The 2005 edition, in support of breast cancer research, marked the seventh year of the event. The “Her-icane Festival of Women’s Art” has been sponsored by 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon since 1999, and Sarasvati Productions presents the annual “Fem-Fest: Plays by Women for Everyone” at Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg. The 2004 “FemFest,” which took place over eight days, featured eight plays, including one in French, as well as workshops, panels, readings, and an open mic night.

**Redlight: An earlier feminist company in Toronto**

While it can boast of other “firsts,” such as “Groundswell,” Nightwood was not Toronto’s first feminist theatre company. That distinction belongs to Redlight, which was founded in 1974 by Diane Grant, Francine Volker, and Marcella Lustig. At the time, Marcella
Lustig and Diane Grant were working at Toronto’s Open Circle Theatre and Francine Volker was working as a freelance actor at the alternative theatres, such as Passe Muraille. All three were reading a book called Redlights on the Prairies by James L. Gray, “about prostitution in the wild west,” thinking it would make great material for a play. When the women decided to apply for a government employment (Local Initiatives Project) grant, they were awarded $16,000, and they used Redlight as the name of their new company. Francine Volker insists:

We never consciously set out to provoke or challenge by naming our new theatre “Redlight.” We had read the book; we had all played prostitutes, as most female actors do. It seemed to fit. Later, when we came to realize the name’s power to disturb, we made the decision to stick with it as an ironic emblem.

Similarly, Nightwood had to grow into its name. Although it was a company run by women and named for a feminist novel by Djuna Barnes, Nightwood at first defined itself as a producer of imagistic, experimental work, while the explicitly feminist mandate evolved a little more slowly.

Redlight Theatre spent its three seasons of existence (1974–1977) looking for an appropriate space, and used everything from nightclubs to rented theatres to a café. As Volker deadpans, “We weren’t always able to match the play to the ambience.” Redlight is probably best known today for its play about the suffragette Nellie McClung, What Glorious Times They Had, which toured Canada in 1975 for International Women’s Year. But the company also worked with collectives and commissioned work from important playwrights such as Carol Bolt and Margaret Hollingsworth; presented plays on serious issues like abortion (Penny Kemp’s The Angelmakers, directed by Anne Anglin); and produced comic satires of female icons, such as Queen of the Silver Blades—an ironic comment on the career of figure skater Barbara Ann Scott, written by Susan Swan and Margaret Dragu.
There are numerous parallels between Redlight and Nightwood in its early days. The first is both companies’ connection with Open Circle Theatre. Kim Renders explains that when she and Maureen White graduated from university and first arrived in Toronto from Ottawa, “we met Cynthia Grant and were all involved in an Open Circle Theatre piece called The Splendour and Death of Joaquin Murieta.” For Nightwood, like Redlight, books played an important role: the book that gave Nightwood its name, of course, but also the Sharon Riis novel *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, which led to the company’s first production. That project began in 1976 with an editing group at Women’s Press, which included Cynthia Grant. She organized a dramatized reading of Riis’s novel in March of 1977 with members of the editing group, and then a workshop production in 1978 that involved White, Renders, and Mary Vingoe. The program for the subsequent full production, in 1979, listed Renders, Vingoe, and White as actors and Grant as the director; Renders also worked on the design. These four women, who came to be considered the founders of Nightwood, and six others who helped with the production, were listed in the program as the “Theatre Collective and Associate Members.” In terms of its formal qualities, the production was described as “a highly innovative and fascinating social document” by the *Toronto Star.* According to Grant, “The work didn’t abandon but rethought plot and character. The style wove a fabric of sense impressions through music, dance, mime, mask and visual images.” Kate Lushington writes, “Using slides and non-linear text to illuminate the relationship between two women and their worlds, a new style of feminist theatre was born.”

The plot was simple but disturbingly ambiguous: Ida Johnson, a waitress in small-town Alberta, relates her life story to Luke, a Native man, who at the end turns out to be Lucy, Ida’s childhood friend. Ida’s story is both tragic—she has killed her husband and children—and untrustworthy, creating the ideal framework for an allusive and imagistic production.

There is one further connection to conclude the comparison between Redlight and Nightwood: in 1989, Redlight founder
Francine Volker engaged with what she called “the second wave of feminist theatre” when she worked with Nightwood to produce her own one-woman show about the Russian-Canadian artist Paraskeva Clark, a play entitled *The Paraskeva Principle*.

1979: **ALTERNATIVE THEATRE AND THE THEATRE CENTRE**

In the January 1995 issue of Nightwood’s *Nighttalk* newsletter, Kim Renders reflects on both her original and more recent involvement with the company:

> In those days we really didn’t see ourselves as a women’s theatre group. We were four artists with ideas and we got together to make theatre. But as Nightwood grew, we realized the terrific need for feminist expression in our culture. We realized that Nightwood could and should be a vehicle for many women’s voices and passions, not only that of we four … Now, after almost seven years, I am very happy to be back on the Nightwood “squeaky floor” boards. I am thrilled to see that the ship … she still sails!”

Renders has commented that, as an actor newly arrived in Toronto in 1978, she did not want to wait passively for someone to cast her in a show; instead, she and the other founders of Nightwood chose to create their own opportunities.夜

Nightwood can be considered to have emerged at the tail end of what theatre historian Denis Johnston refers to as the golden age of Canadian theatre: a time in the late 1960s and early ’70s when a new and exciting wave of alternative theatres sprang up across Canada, especially in Toronto. These small, experimental companies, such as Theatre Passe Muraille, were reacting against the domination of the established regional theatre system by foreign productions. While these new companies were initially inspired by the international avant-garde — companies like the Living Theatre in New York, for example — their motivation quickly came to include a passionate nationalism. Johnston argues that the failure of a “second wave” of young Canadian
companies was their inability to define a permanent mandate, to offer something different from the original alternative theatres like Passe Muraille. Nightwood is part of what Johnston calls the “third wave” of small theatres in Toronto, those established in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which proved more durable than their immediate predecessors because they did succeed in offering fresh perspectives. Certainly, Nightwood’s longevity can be attributed in part to its unique and evolving mandate, which has always dealt with the production of women’s art, but has adapted the means and manner by which this is done.

The definition of what qualifies as “alternative” theatre can be endlessly problematized. In an article published a few years after his book on documentary drama, Alan Filewod concludes that there are actually two models of alternative theatre: the first, a political theatre that speaks for a defined constituency, which may include a variety of institutional structures and aesthetic approaches; the second, a theatre that defines “alternative” in relation to the institutional structures of Canadian culture. When these two models overlap, as they did in Toronto in the 1970s, confusion results because a single term is used to describe both. Filewod also points out that the existence today of “fringe” and “popular theatre” companies and festivals constitutes yet another level of “alternative.” Nightwood bridges the two models of political theatre Filewod identifies. During its early years as a member of the collective Theatre Centre, Nightwood was defined as an alternative to the institutional structures of Canadian culture, marginal even in comparison to the alternate theatres such as Passe Muraille. In interviews and articles, the member companies of the Theatre Centre defined themselves in terms of their physical space, their artistic vision, and their marginal status—on the furthest outer edge of the mainstream–alternative opposition. Nightwood was further specialized in being run by and producing works by women, thereby fitting into Filewod’s first category as well, as a political theatre that speaks for a defined constituency, and that may include a variety of institutional structures and aesthetic approaches. In Nightwood’s case, this
meant identifying itself as both an experimental and a women’s theatre company.

Nightwood’s ongoing concerns were already clearly established in its first few productions: in 1979, *The True Story of Ida Johnson* introduced an enduring interest in literary adaptation; the 1980 production *Glazed Tempera* was a non-narrative, imagistic look at a famous public figure; and in 1981, *Flashbacks of Tomorrow* cemented the importance of multicultural and anti-racist work in Nightwood’s mandate. This early work, which involved both the collective process and collaboration with outside companies and projects, would continue to define Nightwood’s production history. While some Nightwood productions dealt with non-feminist themes (the male painter Alex Colville was the inspiration for *Glazed Tempera*, for example), the very first show dealt with issues of gender, sexuality, and race, was created collectively, and used experimental staging techniques—all attributes that situated Nightwood within the concerns of feminist theatre.

Nightwood was founded at the same time, and in conjunction with, the Theatre Centre, an artist-run facility established in 1979 to provide rental space and services to its members and other independent companies. It was legally incorporated on 10 February 1981 with the registered name B.A.A.N.N. Theatre Centre, reflecting the names of the five member companies: Buddies in Bad Times, AKA Performance Interfaces, Autumn Leaf, Necessary Angel, and Nightwood. During the period that Nightwood was associated with it, the Theatre Centre occupied three different addresses: 95 Danforth Avenue (1979–1981); 666 King Street West (1981–1984); and 296 Brunswick Avenue, known as the Poor Alex Theatre (1984–1986). Nightwood was very much affiliated with the Theatre Centre in its early years, and this status as a collective within a collective helped to define its place in the theatre community. However, after 1986, Nightwood no longer identified itself as part of the Theatre Centre and remained in the Poor Alex space even after the Centre had departed. After many interim years of occupying space in industrial, multi-use buildings, Nightwood moved in 2003 to its current location in the
Distillery District, a cluster of renovated warehouses now home to theatres, galleries, shops, and restaurants. The move marked a significant return to a specifically cultural environment and, for the first time, a noticeably upscale one.

Nightwood, Buddies in Bad Times, and the other resident Theatre Centre companies were characterized in the media as a “fringe of the fringe”—an even more alternative form of theatre than the alternates like Theatre Passe Muraille. Within the context of the Theatre Centre, the fact that Nightwood was run by women was not highlighted and the focus was squarely on the alternative and experimental nature of its work. For example, when Nightwood teamed up with Buddies to present the “Rhubarb!” annual festival of new performance for three of its years (1980–82), Nightwood’s program note read, “Nightwood Theatre operates as a collective to produce original or adapted material in a style which emphasizes the visual, musical and literary elements of the presentation.” Many of the artists involved with the earliest “Rhubarb!” festivals went on to work with Nightwood over the following years.

“Rhubarb!” was initially described as “a Festival of New Canadian Plays.” The program boasted, “Rhubarb! is a workshop production presented to give artists a chance to explore new works. Plays will be presented at various levels of performance from staged reading to fully mounted production.”¹⁸ The festival was sponsored as a Theatre Passe Muraille “Seed Show.” Two of Nightwood’s first contributions were a study in contrasts, demonstrating the founders’ wide range of interests. Psycho-Nuclear Breakdown by Cynthia Grant was a sombre piece that involved Grant, wearing a bathrobe and seated in a rocking chair, performing a monologue and reading from Nuclear Madness by Helen Caldicott. Her live reading was juxtaposed with a tape-recorded voice reading from another book, called The Denial of Death, and with a video, produced by Chris Clifford and VideoCabaret, showing Grant on the verge of a nervous breakdown. At the other extreme was the first of Renders and White’s charmingly comic Soft Boiled clown shows.
Sky Gilbert, the founding artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times, recalls, “When Nightwood joined us in the spring of 1980, the Rhubarb! pieces moved from scripts to directorial and conceptual pieces.” The emphasis was on allowing artists from one discipline to experiment in another, while avoiding financial pressures or the need to be aesthetically “slick.” Gilbert admits, “The cross-fertilization among the disciplines and the audience results in a happy though hectic experience.”

1983: “Women’s Perspectives”

Besides “Rhubarb!” Nightwood was involved with more explicitly feminist events, like the legendary “Women’s Perspectives ’83,” a month-long art exhibit sponsored by Partisan Gallery that included a weekend of performances from Nightwood entitled “Caution: Women at Work.” Two of the shows presented (Four-Part Discord and Psycho-Nuclear Breakdown) had previously been done at “Rhubarb!” but the third was the groundbreaking collective creation This is For You, Anna/ a spectacle of revenge, written and performed by Suzanne Khuri, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Banuta Rubess, Aida Jordão, and Maureen White. While The Anna Project collective had an arm’s-length relationship to Nightwood, the connections were always evident: Maureen White was one of Nightwood’s four founders, and Ann-Marie MacDonald and Banuta Rubess have been on its board of directors as well as directing and writing some of its best-known productions.

That 1983 performance event was part of an amazing spring in Toronto, as Women’s Cultural Building (a collective of women hoping to establish a building in Toronto as a central place for women’s groups and women’s cultural activities) presented a wide-ranging “Festival of Women Building Culture” at various venues. On 8 March, the first “FemCab” was held at the Horseshoe Tavern. Kate Lushington recalls, “There were line-ups around the block…it was just tremendous. And some things were started there that have gone on for the rest of peoples’ lives.” Jan Kudelka’s play American Demon was produced in March, and Pol Pelletier performed Night Cows by Jovette Marchessault and My Mother’s
Luck by Helen Weinzweig in April, both at Theatre Passe Muraille. American Demon, directed by Kate Lushington, went on to “Brave New Works” at the Factory Theatre and then a fully produced run at Passe Muraille, while Kudelka went on to be involved with the “Groundswell Festival” in later years. Nightwood’s contribution to Women’s Cultural Building had further consequences. First, the two groups began to produce “FemCab” together every year (until 1990, when it became solely Nightwood’s annual fund-raising celebration). Second, many of the women involved with Women’s Cultural Building continued to work for Nightwood, including Tori Smith, the stage manager for This is For You, Anna, and Kate Lushington, who became Nightwood’s artistic coordinator in 1988.

Nightwood is described as an exciting new theatre— but not a feminist one

In a 1983 article in Canadian Theatre Review, Patricia Keeney Smith discusses “the many expressions of Nightwood”: its adaptations from literary sources, such as The True Story of Ida Johnson or The Yellow Wallpaper; its use of visual art in Glazed Tempera; and its collaborations with the Latin American and Greek communities on Flashbacks of Tomorrow. Keeney Smith writes, “One of their latest shows, Mass/Age has been called McLuhanesque but, as [Cynthia] Grant readily acknowledges, it owes more to Mabou Mines, a New York company with which she apprenticed … The biggest problem with Nightwood Theatre is honing a piece; there are always too many ideas and never enough time for the experiments to gestate properly.” Nightwood’s imagistic style is conveyed through Keeney Smith’s detailed description of Glazed Tempera, a collective creation the company considered an unqualified success:

The piece used both taped commentary and original material worked up by the company. Slides of Colville’s paintings were juxtaposed with still figures behind scrims to produce a flat light effect uncannily similar to the artist’s.
They had some fun too; in one scene, actress Maureen White shoots her silhouette across a slide of Colville’s “Stop for Cows!” while Kim Renders looks fixedly out at the audience through binoculars; and in the famous “Horse and Train” painting, a little toy train comes chuffing along; the Canadian coin series evoked animal noises. There was magic in these colour-washed atmospheres that dabbled in fantasy, tinkered detachedly with perception and constantly surprised.23

Keeney Smith’s article was published the same year that Nightwood produced Smoke Damage, a project with an explicitly feminist message. Yet the focus in her article is on artists, rather than women artists. For example, Cynthia Grant is quoted as complaining that artists are not sufficiently recognized in Toronto: “She points out that we still lack both foresight and hindsight, a strong enough reason for doing, for seeing the potential of what we’re lucky enough to have happening here.”24 There is discussion of the lack of a practical division between commercial and experimental theatre in terms of government funding, but no mention of the specific problems or potential of a company run by women.

The early aesthetic

After The True Story of Ida Johnson and Glazed Tempera, Nightwood’s next big production was Flashbacks of Tomorrow/Memorias del Mañana, a collective presentation by Nightwood and the Open Experience Hispanic-Canadian Theatre, along with a musical group called Compañeros. Flashbacks of Tomorrow was presented as part of the Toronto Theatre Festival’s Open Stage in May of 1981, at the Toronto Free Theatre downstairs space (26 Berkeley Street), and was supported by the Ontario Arts Council and Theatre Passe Muraille. The program described it as

an original theatre production, presented in a mosaic of dance, ritual, personal experience and music, based on

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Compañeros and the bilingual company composed original music and based the text on their research about, and/or personal experiences of, Latin American culture. The form of the piece reflected the collective approach: “Flashbacks … celebrates a festival on the Day of the Dead, when the past may be told by the people who lived it. ALL are here…and their collective memory spans more than one hundred years.”

Nightwood took on the role of facilitator, providing a creative centre around which a large group of people could build their story.

The next summer, Nightwood mounted another large-scale collective piece. Mass/Age, subtitled “A McLuhanesque Look at our Lives,” a multimedia spectacle of life in the nuclear age, was produced 25 to 29 August 1982, in a tent at Harbourfront Centre. In the program, Nightwood is described as a B.A.A.N.N. Theatre Centre satellite; the “collaborative production” was performed by Jay Bowen, Kim Renders, Daniel Brooks, Allan Risdill, Gordon Masten, and Maureen White. The director was Cynthia Grant, choreographers included Johanna Householder (of the lip-synch trio The Clichettes), and the visual artist John Scott worked on the design. Also listed “for Nightwood Theatre” are administrator Anna Barron-Schon and publicity director Anne H. Kear. Nightwood is described as a professional company that operates within the jurisdiction of Equity — so at this early point, Nightwood was already employing short-term administrative personnel for its shows and operating as a professional company.

In the press release (“Nightwood Theatre presents Mass/Age, High-Tech Theatre in a tent”), Nightwood is described as “one of Toronto’s most innovative experimental theatre companies.” The press release also boasts, “Nightwood’s artistic director Cynthia
Grant has established a reputation as the challenging director of such productions as *The True Story of Ida Johnson* ... and *Glazed Tempera,*” and mentions Kim Renders’s Dora Mavor Moore Award nomination for her work in *Staller’s Farm* at Theatre Passe Muraille. These statements suggest that Nightwood wanted to be taken seriously as part of the Toronto theatre community: identifying Grant as artistic director signals a cohesive structure, and labelling her “challenging” suggests an avant-garde vision, while Renders’s Dora nomination communicates a recognized standard of quality. The credentials of the other collaborators were also celebrated, placing Nightwood within a creative community of equals.

Reviews of *Mass/Age* discuss it not only in terms of avant-garde theatre, but also in the context of an established Nightwood style. In his review, Ray Conlogue depicts the set as a runway with high platforms at each end. He mentions projections of da Vinci paintings, John Scott’s ghost figures (faces painted on dangling Styrofoam), and slogans and poetry blown up gigantically over the actors’ heads. A soundtrack of familiar popular music was used and action faded in and out as the audience’s attention was focused on different spaces in the huge playing area. Furthermore, Conlogue refers to Renders and White as “Nightwood’s customary actors.” Evidently, Nightwood was already identifiable in terms of its style and performers, building on the striking visual design and the attention garnered by its first shows.

Further documentation from this period reinforces Nightwood’s status as an experimental collective operating within the small theatre community of Toronto. Cynthia Grant, interviewed in *NOW* magazine, is said to be creating a theatre of images, broadening the theatre-going experience by bringing in other art forms. Jon Kaplan notes:

The opening of *Mass/Age* has a filmic quality typical of Grant’s work. A voiceover description of humanity’s coming into the cosmos glides into a personal monologue about coping with today’s world. Then the focus of the
play zooms out again to look at experiments on the brain, including memory distortion.

Grant wants to present the negative, alienating implications and contradictions of the individual in today’s high-tech society: “The work will try to evoke certain responses in the audience so that people can see themselves in perspective.” Kaplan comments that the work sounds reminiscent of Mabou Mines.\textsuperscript{27}

After discussing Nightwood’s aesthetic style, Kaplan and Grant turn to the company’s placement within the Toronto theatre context. Grant sees disappointingly small progress in Toronto theatre but believes “that the sort of collective, ongoing process of a group like Nightwood is important to the growth of theatre.” She is cynical about change because of the absence of funding and lack of support from the media: “Our area of theatre is research/development. Because those organizations that fund don’t distinguish between our area and that of commercial theatre, the pressure is on us to become more commercial.” Again, the shape of Nightwood is coming into focus in the public eye — that of an experimental theatre company with a strong visual sense and a collective way of working, but with Cynthia Grant assuming the role of leader and spokesperson.

The next large-scale production after \textit{Mass/Age} was \textit{Peace Banquet} (“Ancient Greece Meets the Atomic Age”), collectively written and presented in November of 1983 as an adaptation of Aristophanes’ play \textit{Peace}; it was produced and directed by Grant. Reviewer Carole Corbeil describes the structure of the play: in the first half of the show, actor Dean Gilmour visits heaven in search of Miss Peace and meets actor Sky Gilbert as the God of War, attended by Kim Renders and Maureen White as Corruption and Chaos. Gilmour is told that Peace is actually Force “in drag.” The second half of the play takes the form of a banquet in which the audience participates.\textsuperscript{28} Again, critics attempted to place the work on a continuum of Nightwood productions. In his review, Henry Mietkiewicz praises the coherence of the piece and the appropriateness of its broad tone, “unlike earlier Nightwood
efforts which have too often tended towards incoherence (Mass/Age) or verbosity (Hooligans) [a “Rhubarb!” show].”29 Except for the four Nightwood founders, there was no overlap between the other collective participants who created Peace Banquet and Mass/Age, and yet there is an attempt to find an identifiable Nightwood style in both.

The earliest Nightwood shows do demonstrate a consistent aesthetic vision: reviews of *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, *Glazed Tempera*, *Flashbacks of Tomorrow*, and Mass/Age speak of the innovative use of multimedia techniques and the fragmented, nonlinear structure. But by 1984, when Banuta Rubess and other women had become a strong presence at Nightwood, reviewers perceived a corresponding diffusion of the “Nightwood show.” In fact, one reviewer of Rubess’s *Pope Joan* (1984) comments that the plot is unusually linear for a Nightwood production, indicating that there had been a certain loosening of the established model for the company’s work.30 The obvious though unacknowledged difference, of course, is that *Pope Joan* was not a collective creation.

**1983 TO 1986: THE IMAGIST AESTHETIC MEETS FEMINISM IN *THIS IS FOR YOU, ANNA***

The twenty-minute version of *This is For You, Anna* was so well received at its Partisan Gallery premiere that the five performers were encouraged to expand it into a full-length play. Further workshops were held at the Factory Theatre Lab in Toronto and Playwright’s Workshop in Montreal; collective member Aida Jor-dão left to work as an actor in Portugal, and was replaced by Patricia Nichols. In 1984, funded by a variety of government grants, the collective added Tori Smith and Barb Taylor as stage manager and administrator and began touring to community centres, women’s shelters, law schools, and a prison. In 1985, Patricia Nichols left the collective and the play was rewritten for four performers. *This is For You, Anna* also toured in England, had runs at Theatre Passe Muraille and at the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa, and was invited to the 1986 “duMaurier Theatre Festival” in Toronto. It was published in *Canadian Theatre Review* in
1985, credited to the pared-down collective of four performers—Banuta Rubess, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Suzanne Odette Khuri, and Maureen White—as well as to Tori Smith and Barb Taylor. It was published again in The CTR Anthology in 1993.31

The process behind This is For You, Anna illustrates some important features of feminist theatre in general and of Nightwood’s work in the 1980s. The piece was created collectively, initially performed at a women’s event, and based on a real-life incident that provided the basis for further invented material and research into related issues. Beginning with a newspaper item about a German woman who took revenge against the man who killed her child, the collective members expanded their material through research on violence against women and consultations with police officers and rape crisis workers.32 This process was in keeping with the tradition of collective creation, but in a feminist context it also served as a kind of consciousness-raising around feminist issues; furthermore, it reflected a materialist feminist concern with analyzing the specifics of oppression.

Another important element in the collective method is the sharing of credit, demonstrated here by the inclusion of Tori Smith and Barb Taylor (stage manager and administrator) as collective members in the published version of the script. As Smith explains, the script was written by the performers, but “the theatrical experience was the work of the whole collective.”33 This demonstrates an awareness that a theatrical performance is made up of many elements and situates the script as just one factor. Awareness is further demonstrated by the collective’s decision to perform outside of traditional venues and to take their piece to an audience most directly affected by its subject matter.

In her essay “The Politics of the Script,” Ann Wilson agrees that the text should be viewed as only one element of a production and not its centre. She argues that feminist theatre should reflect a sense of flux and multiplicity; that it should reject the constraints of linearity and finality in order to convey the open-endedness of women’s discourse.34 Wilson also applauds The Anna Project’s emphasis on collective process: in order to be
truly feminist, a production must not only deal with women’s concerns and subvert the conventions of linearity and closure; it must also be born out of a politically conscious theatre practice. As Maureen White insists, “I think it is not coincidence that a lot of feminists are choosing to work collectively: in exploring new material and breaking down old structures, a new process also should be explored.”55 The Anna Project also included its audience in the play development process by holding a question-and-answer session after each performance and by remaining open enough to rewrite the script when collective members departed. The collective did not regard its play as a finished product but as an ongoing process, even when a version of the script was published in Canadian Theatre Review—a quality of openness that Wilson identifies as particularly feminist.

Many of the decisions regarding process and content in This is For You, Anna reflect a basis in materialist feminism. The materialist position concentrates on the specific nature of women’s oppression within their historical circumstances, and This is For You, Anna is specifically concerned with issues of class and sexuality. As Ann Wilson observes, the story of Marianne Bachmeier and her daughter, Anna, is used as a framework in which to explore women’s anger at the violence committed against them.36 The women onstage tell the stories of other women because the experience of violence is held in common, yet it is always placed in a social context. The anger of the women in the different interwoven stories—Marianne, legendary victims Agate and Lucretia, and the battered Canadian women Eena, Maria, and Jenny—is situated in relation to the economic and political organization of the societies in which they live.

In addition to socio-economic factors, materialist feminists also emphasize the necessity for change in male/female relationships. This is For You, Anna places Marianne within her particular social class, family history, occupation, and nationality, and explores her troubled relationships with men. Because we hear Marianne’s story in her “own” voice (and in some cases, her own words, taken from newspaper accounts of the trial), she acts as
the subject of her own experience in the play. While fragmented, the perspective is always from her point of view.

The combined talents of the collective resulted in a play that is unusually layered and aggressively nonlinear. The play’s subtitle, “a spectacle of revenge,” signals a heightened sense of theatricality and a certain detachment of tone. A number of stories are told, often in the third person; the actors do not assume the same roles throughout; and a single character is played by many different actors, either serially or simultaneously. The effect in performance is one of fragmentation, as the audience is prevented from identifying with one particular actor and instead focuses on the gradual buildup of detail and imagery. The audience is reminded of the separation between performer and role and is required to actively participate in bringing meaning and connection to the stories.

The deconstructionist tools of parody and satire draw attention to the distance between expectation and reality, particularly evident in the use of fairy tales to frame individual stories and to define Marianne’s relationship with her daughter. Throughout the play, Marianne communicates with Anna through stories—sometimes playful and reassuring, at other times more ambivalent. For example, in one scene she says:

**Marianne 3**: Alright, Anna. You want a story? I’ll tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a little girl and she was born and her mother was miserable.37

As collective member Suzanne Odette Khuri points out, fairy tales have traditionally been used to tell violent or extraordinary stories about women.38 In one way, the fairy-tale format suggests a commonality between the women onstage, a shared cultural vocabulary, but on the other hand, the characters are all too aware of the irony of their usage, the gap between their own material realities and the happily-ever-after promise of the fairy tale.

The deconstructive project is most clearly demonstrated in the treatment of motherhood. The set is a multi-levelled white playing
area that includes a refrigerator, a laundry line, a hamper, and
four red chairs, minimally representing the homebound environ-
ment of a traditional mother. Trapped within this space, Mari-
anne Bachmeier serves as a challenge to the one-dimensional
ideal of motherhood: she is not only the devoted mother, but also
a complex woman who can be selfish and neglectful. Her act of
revenge against her child’s killer exemplifies an extreme, even
grotesque, image of protective motherhood. The play suggests
that society (and perhaps the audience) is of two minds about the
act of revenge: the court punished it as a crime, but the general
public applauded it as the right action of a good mother. Later,
when details of Marianne’s troubled past and relationships with
men came out in the press, public opinion turned against her.
Her sexuality was somehow incompatible with her previous ide-
alization as a mother.

In the process of creating the play, The Anna Project collec-
tive became increasingly aware of the power of the motherhood
myth and the seductiveness of revenge. Banuta Rubess remarks,
“Whereas in 1983, we were angry and volatile, by 1984 we were
very concerned not to endorse violence, to make clear that we do
not idolize Marianne.” In the published text, a provision in the
copyright information forbids any “graphic depiction of violence,
weapons, or blood in any production of this script.”

The collective was very conscious of the signifiers they em-
ployed and rather than using concrete items (like a gun, for exam-
ple), they selected objects that could have multiple resonance for
the spectator. In the first scene, entitled “The Story of Marianne
Bachmeier,” the circumstances of Marianne’s life are related in a
series of short sentences delivered by the Narrator. With each sen-
tence, she places a nail on a piece of black cloth on the floor, form-
ing a circle. Marianne’s life story culminates in Anna’s death:

A man called Grabowski strangles Anna when she visits
him in his room. Marianne is away, driving around town.
He tells the court that Anna flirted with him. Anna was
seven years old. Marianne walks into the courtroom and
The Narrator picks up the black cloth full of nails and carries it offstage, cradling it like a baby and counting under her breath. Nails have a variety of connotations—crucifixion, construction, “hitting the nail on the head,” “a nail in her coffin,” “hard as nails”—but their specific meaning in the context of the scene and the play is left up to the spectator. There is a grim irony in the image of the infant represented not by a doll or even a soft bundle of cloth, but by nails, each of which signifies an event in the troubled life of the mother. The child, or the image of the child, is yet another cruelty in this woman’s cruel life.

Another powerful image in the play is the pouring of milk. At the beginning of the play, Marianne pours a glass of milk from the refrigerator and offers it: “This is for you, Anna.” At the end of the play, Marianne stands at the refrigerator pouring milk into a glass until it overflows and runs onto the floor. She simply states: “I did it for you, Anna.” As Khuri explains, the image is one of terrible absence: Anna does not take the proffered glass of milk because she is not there anymore. As with the baby bundle, a conventionally positive image is given a much darker undertone. Milk is an image or metaphor easily found in cultural feminist work, where it might represent the nurturing female body of the mother, but in this instance it resonates with grief, violence, and loss. The fragmented nature of the storytelling and the use of all the actors to portray Marianne preclude audience identification with a particular character throughout the play; instead, the emotional power of the performance comes from the repetition of visual imagery.

1986: Critical backlash

While This is For You, Anna was groundbreaking for Nightwood, it also provoked a response from one prominent male theatre reviewer that illustrates why the company might be reluctant to engage with the feminist label. The fear that one’s work will be
misinterpreted is very real for theatre practitioners in general, when the future of their theatre company relies on the box-office returns and favourable reviews that translate into grant money. In an article in the national *Globe and Mail* newspaper entitled “Cathy Jones Steals World Stage Festival Show,” the well-known theatre critic Ray Conlogue compares two productions by women at the 1986 “duMaurier World Stage Festival.”

Conlogue starts by praising comedian Cathy Jones’s show, but then warns that it is a “ready contrast” to the “victim fetishism” of *This is For You, Anna.* “Much has been written about this show,” he begins, “an incontrovertibly powerful piece of theatre created by a feminist collective in Toronto and revived for the festival.” Conlogue makes a number of factual errors in recounting the plotline of the show, and spends most of the review discussing not the play itself or its performance values, but his personal opinions on gender relations. He philosophizes at length:

> It is true that some men are physically violent to women, and that most women cannot respond in kind. But this does not mean women are helpless to fight back. They do so by other means, responding … with psychological sexual humiliation. Often they do so not toward the men who have abused them, but toward other men they meet at some subsequent time. Our society is engulfed in gender tension right now, and women are responsible for a good deal of it … Sexual violence in our society is a syndrome in which men and women alike are caught, and to which both contribute. Plays in which women are seen as incapable of any wrong action (or any action at all, a convenient by product of “victimization”) misrepresent women as well as men.

Conlogue concludes by stating that *This is For You, Anna* “is a negative image of shattered, crippled women and its implied message to any male viewer is one of blame.” Conlogue is entitled to his opinion as a theatre critic, but much of his argument has nothing to do with the play at hand, nor with its performance. Instead, he
uses his column to air his vitriolic take on a social issue, and as a forum to express his anger at feminism (and perhaps at women in general). The force of his condemnation and his high profile as a critic for a national newspaper could not help but negatively affect Nightwood’s potential audiences.

Given this experience of a hostile reaction from an influential reviewer, it becomes understandable that the women involved with Nightwood sound at times as if they are trying to avert criticism before it arises. A few months after Conlogue’s review, Mary Vingoe assured readers that, although Nightwood was a feminist collective, “We do not ask writers to toe any particular political line … We want theatre that has integrity and its roots in real experience, rather than just being doctrinaire.” In another article, Ba˘ruta Rubess elaborates:

Nightwood … never consciously set out to make a grand, feminist statement, let alone an angry diatribe … The point here is not to proselytize. Since we happen to be feminists, we ask certain questions, but this show isn’t meant as agit-prop. What we want to avoid is being ghettoized to the point where people say, “If it’s Nightwood, it must be feminist, so I probably wouldn’t like it.”

The author of the article in which this quote appears goes on to assure readers that Nightwood’s emphasis on “solid theatrical values rather than dogmatic statements” has resulted in Dora Mavor Moore Award nominations for best new play (War Babies, 1987) and featured male performance (Sky Gilbert in The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc, 1987). The message being pushed is that Nightwood produces high quality shows that have been given a seal of approval by arts organizations, and that the prospective audience member need not fear an experience like Conlogue’s. Ironically, Nightwood’s 1987 production of Margaret Hollingsworth’s play War Babies provoked at least one review that continues to illustrate the way critics write from biases that have less to do with the production at hand than with preconceptions.
of what a feminist show must be like. The critic comments, “After seeing a play of the quality of War Babies produced well by Nightwood, I am reluctant to see them do more of their traditional collective creation. It’s encouraging to see that Nightwood’s vision of feminism isn’t as dogmatically rigid as much of their previous output suggests.” Here, the reviewer implies that he was able to enjoy this particular production in spite of the expectations he had developed from seeing previous Nightwood shows (how many and which ones he does not specify). The reader of the review is led to assume, therefore, that Nightwood generally produces “dogmatically rigid” work (like This is For You, Anna, perhaps?) and may approach the next Nightwood creation with whatever prejudice this phrase brings to mind.

Another 1983 collective creation: Smoke Damage

Following This is For You, Anna, Nightwood’s next project, in the fall of 1983, was Smoke Damage, a play about the European witch hunts, written by Baquita Rubess with a collective cast that included Ann-Marie MacDonald. Susan G. Cole has described Rubess and MacDonald as part of the first wave of women who got involved with Nightwood and widened the sphere of the original four founders by creating This is For You, Anna, Smoke Damage, and Rubess’s Pope Joan. Cole writes, “These early ’80s productions used Nightwood as a collective laboratory, and emphasized the need for a feminist company on the theatre scene, for no other troupes were confronting such issues as church violence and hypocrisy from women’s perspectives.” These projects in particular helped to formulate Nightwood’s growing identification in the public eye as a feminist company. As we have seen, Nightwood was not without external detractors; unfortunately, it was also not free from internal challenges.

Nightwood’s early commitment to the collective process and its rejection of a strictly hierarchical structure can be seen to reflect cultural feminist values, as do a number of its productions, such as Smoke Damage. Cultural feminism is often associated with groups that operate as women-only collectives, such as At the
Foot of the Mountain or Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes, for example, and much feminist performance art expresses the female body in profound ways, which can be considered cultural feminism. The story of a group of women travellers who encounter the history of the European witch hunts, Smoke Damage draws explicit connections between the common oppression of women in previous and contemporary ages. The play links historical misogyny with the repression of a separate women’s culture and its traditional, oral transmission of women’s knowledge—the skills of the midwife, for example. Smoke Damage emphasizes that women were oppressed in the past and continue to be oppressed today precisely because they are women. At the end of the play, two of the characters plan to hijack an airplane in order to force the Catholic pope to stand trial at Nuremberg, accused of “the annihilation of three centuries of women.”

Smoke Damage employs an actual historical text about punishing witches, the Malleus Malificarum, and even represents that text’s authors, Kramer and Sprenger, onstage as chilling examples of misogyny. Interestingly, the same book was used by the British playwright Caryl Churchill when researching Vinegar Tom, her 1976 play about witches. Churchill developed her play while working with Monstrous Regiment, a company that initiated new work through a period of time in which the writer and actors “discuss central themes, read historical material, travel, talk to experts, and explore character possibilities.” This would be followed by a period of writing, then rehearsals and productions, as the work was shaped in a complex exchange between writer and actors. Churchill has expressed enthusiasm for this working method, which does seem particularly suited to the witch-hunt material. Like the women in the Smoke Damage collective, Churchill found that her research on the witch hunts led her to a cultural feminist conclusion: “I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes to women in general.”

The origins of Smoke Damage can be traced to the summer of 1983, when a collective called The Midnight Hags was initiated in...
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Toronto by Mary Ann Lambooy, a director from Ottawa. The collective created a play called *Burning Times*, which was performed at the Theatre Centre (then located at 666 King Street West) from 17 to 28 August, and produced with the assistance of the Canada Council Explorations Program and the Ontario Arts Council. The program for the production gives a good indication of how carefully feminist collectives try to assign credit for their work: the play is said to be written by Banuta Rubess in collaboration with Peggy Christopherson, Mary Ann Lambooy, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Mary Marzo, Kim Renders, and Maureen White. The play was directed by Lambooy in collaboration with the same names, including Rubess. The cast collaborated with both the writer (Rubess) and the director (Lambooy), and they also collaborated with each other. Furthermore, the project is stated to have been “conceived by” and produced by Lambooy, while the set and costume design is credited to “the company.” Midnight Hags was considered a professional company operating within the jurisdiction of Canadian Actors’ Equity Association. The connections between Midnight Hags and Nightwood are evident from the involvement of Renders, White, MacDonald, and Rubess.

The play’s source material is explained in a program note—an example of how collective creations often aim for internal authentication. The program note begins, “*Burning Times* is based on fact and fiction, poetry and personal anecdote.” It goes on to stress the authenticity of the quotations from the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Kramer and Sprenger (1486), mentions a 1927 edition of the book published by Montague Summers, which is also quoted, and cites other books of a similar nature. The program note concludes, “All the various individual case histories presented in this piece are based on documents.” The aim of this note is clearly to assure the audience that the examples of persecution and misogynist writing used in the performance are not inventions of the collective, and the tone implies that the audience should find the reality of these examples as appalling as the collective does.

In an interview in the collection *Fair Play*, Rubess explains that Lambooy invited her...
to work on a collective creation called *Burning Times*, which we were going to workshop. We did two weeks of improvisations in a search for characters for these five women in the company, gestural texts, story lines, etc. After these two weeks I took the loads and loads of notes that had accumulated and went off for about three weeks to write a first draft. We then got together and workshopped the script.55

According to Kim Renders, during the process of creating *Burning Times* there was some conflict between Mary Ann Lambooy and the rest of the company about how the collective should be run—a disagreement serious enough that it had to be resolved through an appeal to Equity.56

Shortly after the production of *Burning Times*, Cynthia Grant and Nightwood Theatre began arrangements to rework and remount the show with Rubess and the original collective, minus Lambooy, who had gone back to Ottawa. There was an immediate difference of opinion about the appropriateness of this action. In a letter from Lambooy to Grant dated 20 September 1983, Lambooy states that, in regards to their previous discussion about Nightwood’s interest in reworking and reproducing *Burning Times*, she has come to the conclusion that she does not want this done so shortly after its premiere. “Under the Copyright Act,” Lambooy writes, “I am the first owner of the copyright for *Burning Times* and am registered as such with the Copyright Office. Should Nightwood oppose my decision and reproduce any part of *Burning Times*, other than the sections open to public domain e.g. *Malleus Maleficarum*, such action would constitute an infringement of copyright. I do not wish to have to be put to the initiative of enforcing my rights but if I have to I certainly will.” Lambooy concludes by saying she regrets the severe tone of her letter, but feels she must avert a serious situation.

Grant’s response, dated 30 September 1983, is that all contractual arrangements for the new play, which was being called *Smoke Damage*, had been made with Bażuta Rubess, “whom we
understand to be the principal playwright.” If, Grant writes, after seeing the play, Lambooy still had a question about ownership, Nightwood would be willing to discuss it. The implication of Grant’s letter is that if Lambooy had a conflict, it was with Rubess and not Nightwood, which did not recognize the situation as problematic. Rubess has stated, “Smoke Damage marked the first time I began to think of myself as a real writer,” and certainly she was treated as such by Nightwood.

Smoke Damage was produced by Nightwood at St. Paul’s Square, 30 September to 23 October 1983. The program states that it was written by Rubess in collaboration with the cast: Peggy Christopherson, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Mary Marzo, Kim Renders, and Maureen White. The “direction consultants” were Rubess and Grant. The program uses the same “note of interest” regarding the source material as was used for Burning Times, and both the program and the press release acknowledge that the current play was developed from Burning Times (which was referred to as a “workshop”) and mention Lambooy’s involvement with that project. The program also stresses that the play was developed through a collective process. In 1985, when Smoke Damage was published by Playwrights Union of Canada, the same credits and information were used again, with a note that reads, “Smoke Damage develops several themes from the successful workshop of Burning Times, written by Bañuta Rubess and presented by Midnight Hags at the Theatre Centre, Toronto, in August 1983. Burning Times was initiated and produced by Mary Ann Lambooy. Smoke Damage was developed through a collective process. Although the main writer, Bañuta Rubess, gave the play its final shape, the five actors contributed largely to its content.”

Smoke Damage demonstrates many of the same qualities as This is For You, Anna, which Rubess, MacDonald, and White all worked on as well. There are repetitive actions, such as sweeping, washing, and the opening and closing of doors, and the play makes use of emblematic props such as a green cloth, a bouquet of flowers, and dripping water. There are symbolic costumes, such as men’s suit jackets as metonyms for Kramer and Sprenger, the figures

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of male authority. There are wild changes in tone, from comedy to horror, and changes in style, from realism to absurdism to musical theatre. Different time periods — Medieval, Renaissance, contemporary — are interwoven, as are dream sequences. Scenes are layered with images, an accompanying soundtrack, and simultaneous actions, all building to a cumulative effect. Finally, there are scenes that relate the persecution of Medieval witches to the persecution of contemporary women — as in, for example, the character of Madeleine, an abused wife.

Although *Smoke Damage* did not do particularly well at the box office, it received good reviews and was eventually published. In response to Ray Conlogue’s favourable 5 October review in the *Globe and Mail*, a letter to the editor was published on 26 October. The letter, signed by Roger Ware “and six others,” is headed “Reassessment of credit.” The letter writers were disturbed that Mary Ann Lambooy had not been mentioned in the review. They write that she had “conceived of the theme of the play, assembled the cast, hired the writer and directed the development of the play largely into its current form,” and that the review had incorrectly attributed these functions to Cynthia Grant. Grant responded in another letter to the editor, saying that Conlogue’s review was “positive and well-considered” and that if there was any reassessment to be done, “it would be in acknowledging the collective input of the company toward the creation of the script as well as the staging of *Smoke Damage.*” Grant acknowledges that the same writer and cast worked on both shows and that both were collective creations, so “it is natural that a stylistic and textual progression consistent with the intentions of the original workshop production would be apparent in the further development of *Burning Times* into *Smoke Damage.*” Grant also points out that the *Smoke Damage* program credited Lambooy for her work on *Burning Times* but that, since it was a collective work, it would be inaccurate to say she “largely directed the show into its current form,” or to attribute a final product to any one guiding hand.

At this point, the dispute became a legal matter, as both sides engaged legal counsel and sought some agreement over matters
of royalty and further production. Nightwood’s documentation included its contract with Rubess and her copyright for *Burning Times*, which was issued prior to Lambooy’s. The company’s correspondence to Lambooy (8 November 1983) summarizes Nightwood’s handling of the matter: it had credited *Burning Times* in the press release, and the program had credited *Burning Times* and Lambooy’s role as “initiator and producer” of that show. Grant also reiterates that Nightwood’s contract for *Smoke Damage* was with Rubess, the principal author, and that it was her responsibility if there was any copyright infringement. Copyright for *Burning Times* “was issued to Rubess on September 6, 1983, and *Smoke Damage* is in the process of being issued a separate copyright.” The tone of this letter is conciliatory, and a copy was sent to the Ontario Arts Council.

The response from Lambooy came on 11 November. In this letter, she refers to a conversation she had with Grant on 9 November, in which Grant made a verbal offer of $400 “as royalties for Nightwood Theatre’s production of *Smoke Damage.*” This was followed by a formal offer in which terms were set:

1. Nightwood agreed to pay Lambooy $400 “in settlement of any claim which she may have at this time or in the future for breach of copyright or for any other reason”;
2. Lambooy waived claims against Nightwood concerning its production of *Smoke Damage*;
3. Nightwood would continue to acknowledge Lambooy as “initiator and producer” of *Burning Times*;
4. Both parties acknowledged Rubess as the principal author of both *Burning Times* and *Smoke Damage*, in collaboration with the companies in each case.

The letter concluded by asking Lambooy to sign a copy and return it, upon which she would be issued a cheque.

Lambooy responded on 2 December 1983 by saying that she refused to sign the letter and accept the conditions. She states that she would not give up copyright for *Burning Times* in regards to
future productions, and she would not acknowledge a principal author of *Burning Times*. Lambooy wanted the Nightwood letter to be amended so that the payment of $400 represented a royalty fee and settlement for the recent production of *Smoke Damage*.

The last piece of correspondence on this matter, from December of 1983, came for the first time from the *Smoke Damage* collective — Peggy Christopherson, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Mary Marzo, Kim Rengers, Banuta Rubess, and Maureen White — and was addressed to Lambooy as a kind of position statement and final offer. They again offer a settlement of $400 for her to waive all present and future actions against them for the September/October 1983 production of *Smoke Damage*. For future productions, they had worked out a distribution of royalty payments (“We presume that you know that there were losses on the Nightwood production and no royalty payments,” they write). The agreement was that Rubess would receive all revenue up to $500 as playwright’s royalties; any amount above that would be split as follows: 51 percent to Rubess, 45 percent to the *Smoke Damage* collective, and 4 percent to Lambooy.

On the second page of the letter, there is an interesting paragraph that questions Lambooy’s status as the producer of the original production, even though she was credited as such in the program. The collective thought that the producer was the society “Midnight Hags,” for which Ann-Marie MacDonald had served as official secretary, and of which they were all members. They were under the impression that it had been this society (that is, their collective group) that had received the funding grant and held the bank account, and now they wonder if it was in fact some other legal entity of which they were not aware. In any case, the collective concludes, they are willing to credit either Lambooy or Midnight Hags as the producer — whichever she would prefer. The implication is that they are questioning Lambooy’s claim to having been the producer, or having had as much importance to the original production as she claimed.

This disappointing incident illustrates that collectives sometimes work better in theory than in practice. Part of the problem
may be inherent in the process of collective creation itself, in that “job descriptions” may be largely self-defined and therefore easily subject to dispute. Individuals who put a lot of time and effort into a project are not always able to give up a sense of personal “ownership” of that work for the greater good of the company, and there are many who argue that they should not have to. But the issues can be further complicated when the collective members are assumed to share the same feminist principles. Unspoken assumptions can be made that everyone is more in agreement than they really are, and individuals can be afraid of voicing dissenting views for fear of looking “not feminist enough.”

On the other hand, the majority of the women in this collective do seem to have worked well within the model. Reviews of Smoke Damage speak about the obvious energy and commitment to the material that the actors displayed, and the end result was one of the most successful plays of Nightwood’s early period. Apparently, collective creation may involve a discrepancy between process and product. In some cases, a beneficial feminist process does not necessarily result in a concrete product, while in the case of Smoke Damage, an extremely troubled feminist process still resulted in a valuable feminist play.

1984: New feminist developments

By March of 1984, in an application to the Laidlaw Foundation requesting funding for an upcoming production called Penelope, Nightwood’s status as a women-led company was given prominence. The application was written by Mary Vingoe, who notes that, over the previous five years, Nightwood had produced “original and innovative work for the stage” including plays that dealt with contemporary issues such as “the concerns of the women’s community,” the role of technology in our lives, and the “peace problem.” She mentions Glazed Tempera and Flashbacks of Tomorrow, but also the overtly feminist Smoke Damage. Vingoe even makes use of Rina Fraticelli’s report on the status of women in Canadian theatre, by attaching an article about it from FUSE magazine. She states that Nightwood had designed its 1984/85
season to specifically address the gender imbalance documented by Fraticelli. “We wish to fully educate the public on the status of the ‘invisible majority’ in the theatre while providing opportunity for many women artists,” she writes. Vingoe explains that the upcoming season would include *The Euguélionne*, adapted from the novel by Louky Bersianik, “which electrified Quebec women when it was first published,” as well as a play developed through The Women’s Immigrant Centre in Toronto. The fate of this particular application provides a good example of how decisions by funding agencies shape the direction of a company, and how projects that are proposed in one form may turn into something quite different. The immigrant women’s play did not receive funding, so it never happened at all; and Cynthia Grant did not direct *The Euguélionne* until considerably later, and then only as part of the November 1987 “Groundswell,” not as a main-stage production.

The main focus of Vingoe’s application, however, is the proposed production of *Penelope*. Nightwood planned to commission ten women writers to interpret female characters from *The Odyssey*, with some of their prospective participants to include Sharon Riis, Ann Cameron, Jan Kudelka, Jane Rule, Susan Musgrave, and Rita MacNeil. They then planned to challenge any of Toronto’s male-run companies to do the same, creating the “male version,” and to run the two works on alternate nights as *Pénélope/Ulysse* (sic). Nightwood would sponsor the production costs, but salaries were to be paid by the “male company” within strict limits. An external judge would interpret the “rules,” and neither company would be allowed to see the other’s rehearsals. Vingoe concludes that the project would provide “a unique forum and a good humoured context by which to explode some of the dark myths which exist about men and women in the theatre.” As with *The Euguélionne*, the proposed project did take place, but on a considerably reduced scale: *Penelope* was eventually staged 3 to 6 October 1985, as a workshop production at the Theatre Centre, with poetry by Margaret Atwood adapted by Cynthia Grant, Peggy Sample, and Susan Seagrove. Later, it was developed further and
performed in 1992/93 by the Company of Sirens, and published in Canadian Theatre Review. 59

Vingoe makes some significant statements in the application: “Our wider purpose is to stimulate a better awareness of the female aesthetic in the theatre, a field which even today is dominated (90%) by men,” and, “The theatre has always had the power to shock public consciousness into an awareness of our true social values.” The nature of the Penelope project and the use of the term “female aesthetic” clearly point to a theatre company coming to terms with its status as woman-centred, and feminism runs as an unspoken subtext throughout the application. As the journalist Meredith Levine has commented, “The artistic community’s diminishing resistance to feminism has enabled Nightwood to ‘come out’ as a feminist theatre.” 60

A similar willingness to push its role as a resource for women is evident in Nightwood’s promotional brochure for the 1984/85 season, which states that Nightwood chooses “programming that reflects the voices of women in Canadian culture. Over the past five years we have produced 20 new or adapted plays ... We focus on a broad spectrum of modern concerns. Using comedy, we provide our audiences with entertaining and thought-provoking evenings.” The 1984 summer tour of the collective creation Love and Work Enough and the fall 1984 production of Pope Joan by Banuta Rubess, which played an extended run at the Poor Alex Theatre (at that point, the home of the Theatre Centre), are highlighted. The brochure lists upcoming productions in Nightwood’s season, including The Woman Who Slept With Men to Take the War Out of Them by Deena Metzger; a piece about the artist Kathe Köllwitz; Penelope; and Before and Beyond Testubes by Amanda Hale, which dealt with reproductive issues. Obviously, the work was by that point consistently dealing with women-oriented themes and characters. This piece of publicity sums up what appears to have become Nightwood’s official strategy at this stage in its development: the Nightwood women never used the word “feminist,” but they did market themselves as being unique and they did start talking about things like a “female
In its application to the Toronto Arts Council for 1983/84, Nightwood applied for $4,000 for the period May 1983 to May 1984 (it had received $1,700 the previous year) and the company is described as “operating as a collective.” The application also provides some interesting statistics about the number of Nightwood performances: over the previous year the company had done 32 performances for an audience of 2,900; in the upcoming season it projected 40 performances for an audience of 3,500. The average audience per performance was 91 and the special audiences it addressed included women’s groups, the literary and visual arts community, and the Spanish-speaking community. In fact, the application form asked all companies to list which “special” audiences they might be addressing, so Nightwood was encouraged to include outreach in its mandate and to identify itself as a women’s theatre company because of the advantage of having a unique and identifiable niche in the eyes of potential funders.

1985: Reaching out to feminist theatre internationally

In May of 1985, Nightwood hosted two American theatre companies as a fundraising event. Both companies—Ladies Against Women and Time and Space Limited—gave performances, and TSL also conducted a workshop. These American connections exemplify not only Nightwood’s interest in establishing an international feminist context, but also how broadly motivated women-led companies can be. Ladies Against Women was a satirical performance troupe based in San Francisco, active throughout the 1980s and eventually disbanded in 1990. In addition to actual shows (*Plutonium Players in: Bad Mothers...The New Adventures of Ladies Against Women*), they staged various public demonstrations and protests, using outrageous costumes and slogans. Their favourite targets were the Reagans and other right-wing political figures. A still-active website archives the activities of Ladies Against Women, including their visit to Canada.
Time and Space Limited was established in New York City in 1973 to create and present adaptations and original works, which were performed in theatres and alternative spaces in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. TSL moved to Hudson, New York, in 1991, and is still active. The company’s founders, Linda Mussman and Claudia Bruce, converted an old bakery in Hudson into a multi-use building where two productions (by Mussman and Bruce) are presented per year, along with weekly film screenings and a lecture series. TSL’s mandate is to enhance the artistic quality of life in Hudson by creating opportunities for artistic expression, and to support the evolution of a community that embraces diversity.

Hosting these two American companies, Ladies Against Women and Time and Space Limited, remains a unique event in Nightwood’s history. It was both an innovative fundraising venture and a significant opportunity to position the company alongside and within an international feminist cohort.

The mid-1980s: Nightwood’s evolving administrative structure

As multiple projects developed and more people besides the founders became involved, as grants were applied for and received, a concrete organizational structure was being set in place for Nightwood. By 1982, a small board of directors had been created; in 1985, it was restructured as a volunteer board made up of approximately ten women, including a president, vice president, treasurer, and members, who met every month to discuss policy issues. Paid staff ran the organization on a day-to-day basis.

Like most theatre companies, Nightwood is associated with its artistic director, or with whoever is perceived to be fulfilling that leadership role. For the first decade, that person was one of the founding four, who rotated titles and responsibilities among themselves. By about 1982, Cynthia Grant was consistently referred to as the artistic director. In 1985, Mary Vingoe became the artistic coordinator and Linda Brown was hired in the important job of office administrator. Brown eventually
became the general manager and was a valued contributor for many years. In 1987, Maureen White took her turn as artistic coordinator. Of the founding four, only Kim Renders did not hold this position.

In its application to the Ontario Arts Council for 1985/86, Nightwood’s administrative structure was laid out explicitly: Rosemary Sullivan was the president of the board; Cynthia Grant was the artistic director; Christopher Bye was the administrator; Maureen White, Mary Vingoe, and Kim Renders were listed as collective members; and Brenda Darling was the fundraiser. The purpose of Nightwood is “to provide programming that speaks to the women’s community and to provide job opportunities for women.” This application represents the culmination of influences at work in Nightwood for some time — both the need to set up a more stable administrative structure, and the need to acknowledge the company’s significance within the feminist theatre community.

1986: Restructuring the Company

In many ways, Nightwood was moving more toward the mainstream by the late 1980s, in what could be seen as a transitional phase of its development. In 1986, Cynthia Grant left Nightwood to form the Company of Sirens, a feminist collective that works at a much more grassroots level than Nightwood, most often outside the framework of traditional theatre. In a retrospective article in FUSE magazine from 1990, Susan G. Cole suggests that the creation of the collectively based Sirens freed Nightwood to concentrate less on collective work and more on developing individual writing talents.

In Nightwood’s 13 February 1986 funding application to the Municipality of Metro Toronto, Mary Vingoe introduces herself as Nightwood’s new artistic “coordinator,” and Linda Brown as the first full-time office person. Their application emphasizes events that traditionally define success: the fundraising productions by Ladies Against Women and Time and Space Limited made $8,000 in one week; Love and Work Enough won a Dora
Mavor Moore Award; the tour of *This is For You, Anna* sold out in England, was voted one of the top fifteen shows in London, and was also invited to the “duMaurier World Theatre Festival.” Upcoming projects included the English-language premiere of *The Edge of the Earth is too Near*, *Violette Leduc* by Jovette Marchessault, and a 1987 production of *War Babies* by Margaret Hollingworth—two very literary scripts by individual authors with little previous contact with Nightwood.52

In her application, Vingoe mentions that the company began to reach out in 1985/86 to new audiences and artists through touring abroad and co-productions, and planned to continue working with Passe Muraille, Factory, and Toronto Free Theatre. In addition to a new artistic focus, the company had expanded its board of directors to include nine working artists. Furthermore, the creation of the two new positions—artistic coordinator and general manager, both part-time—“marks a significant change in the structure and organization of the company … Nightwood has gone through a major transition this year.”63

The adjustment of the title from “artistic director” to “coordinator,” adopted throughout Mary Vingoe and Maureen White’s terms of leadership, signalled Nightwood’s desire to retain its image as a collective. The position of coordinator was supposed to change hands every two years, further avoiding the perceived dangers of a traditional hierarchy.

In a letter to the Canada Council dated 17 March 1986, Vingoe explains the reasons for the new title:

> For this season at least, we have created the position of artistic coordinator, as an alternative to artistic director, in order that the day to day artistic concerns of the company can be efficiently handled, while allowing more “collective” input on major decisions such as company programming.

Vingoe also describes Nightwood’s decision to hire a staff person through the creation of a permanent, part-time administrative position as an important step for the company:
The subtext of Vingoe’s comments hints at a growing unease with the collective structure. Collectivity works when there is a committed core group, but Nightwood was becoming not one group but several, each working on different projects with different combinations of people. The collective ideal was no longer fashionable, and was gradually becoming a burden. Throughout the changes in leadership and board structure, Nightwood still continued to identify itself as a collective, although it might be more accurate to say that it had become a producing company that supported the creation of collective projects.

1986: “Groundswell”

Besides emphasizing Nightwood’s continuing commitment to collective creation, Vingoe also highlights the company’s attention to “innovation in theatrical form,” as evidenced by the workshop production of *Penelope*. Research and development is also mentioned as an important component of Nightwood’s work, which led to “two landmarks in the 1985/86 season”: the “Transformations” reading series, in the fall of 1985, and the newly created “Groundswell Festival,” to be presented in the spring of 1986.

The “Transformations” reading series consisted of public readings of four international feminist plays and received letters of praise from Susan Feldman, executive director of the Performing Arts Development Fund of Ontario; *Canadian Theatre Review* editor Robert Wallace; and Margaret Hollingsworth. While the reading series was very successful and resulted in a
further production for one of the plays (War Babies), it was con-
ceived as a one-time event. “Groundswell,” however, marked a
crucial development in Nightwood’s history because it became
annual.

A festival in which new works in progress by women are given
staged readings or workshop productions, “Groundswell” has
become the most consistent means by which Nightwood develops
new material for its mainstage productions and reaches out to
the wider community. This is a conscious choice to privilege an
in-house play development strategy rather than relying solely on
pre-existing, higher-profile scripts. The first “Groundswell” was
supported financially by the Jackman and Laidlaw Foundations
and involved an outside company, Montreal’s highly respected
Le Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes. Nightwood’s strategy was
to reach a wider audience by combining known and unknown
names and co-producing with other companies. In some ways,
this model is paradigmatic of the Nightwood method: finding
corporate sponsorship and mainstream audiences for works that
would not be produced otherwise. By 1989, only three years
later, more than fifty authors had already had work presented
at “Groundswell.”

Nightwood quickly realized how important and popular the
“Groundswell Festival” could be and applied for funding to make
it an annual event. In a letter to the Laidlaw Foundation, dated 10
October 1986, Vingoe explains how an in-house series over the
summer had given the company a head start on the festival for
the next year. It was already receiving submissions after putting
out a call in several publications, and actively soliciting material
from theatre artists it wanted to encourage. The letter also men-
tions that Nightwood wanted to invite outside writers and direc-
tors into the company to work with the many experienced people
on its board and in its “extended circle”:

Rina Fraticelli, Bañuta Rubess, Maureen White, Mary Dur-
kan, Peggy Thompson, Johanna Householder and Kim
Renders have all furthered their own development through
Nightwood and through Groundswell they will provide support for other theatre artists in kind. This involvement insures that the collective sensibility that we have built into our structure is carried through to the grass roots level. By sharing programming decisions among a group of artists Nightwood reaches a wider cross section of the community than could any one individual. By having within our number alternate approaches to new work we are able to offer not just one, but a number of perspectives.\textsuperscript{65}

This statement sums up how Nightwood hoped to continue its collective tradition through “Groundswell,” while still producing mainstage shows. In a 22 October 1986 application to the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, Internship Training Program, Vingoe explains, “Major decisions such as programming are made in conjunction with a programme committee from the Board. The new structure has allowed Nightwood to retain a functioning collective sensibility while evolving an efficient management structure.”\textsuperscript{66}

The critic Rita Much has heralded “Groundswell” as “a rare opportunity for women writers and directors and performers to present their work at an early stage in a celebratory and supportive atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{67} In only its second year, “Groundswell” provided a venue for important work such as Djanet Sears’s first play, the autobiographical \textit{Afrika Solo}. Another example, \textit{A Particular Class of Women} by Janet Feindel, was performed in excerpts at various locations, including the Theatre Centre (where Nightwood was still one of the managing companies), before the entire piece was featured in the January 1987 “Groundswell,” directed and dramaturged by Mary Durkan.

\textit{A Particular Class of Women} consists of a series of monologues by women who work as strippers, and attempts to portray the diversity of the individual women and their attitudes toward their work. Feindel portrayed all of the characters, which she based on women she knew, employing slight costume changes and music for each monologue. The intent was to convey a politicized
message about the derogatory stereotypes that strippers face; the audience finds itself implicated in the perpetuation of these stereotypes, since as theatregoers they are asked to assume the position of voyeuristic strip club customers. This dynamic would undergo substantial shifts depending on the venue in which it was performed and the configuration of the audience: Feindel presented the play at fringe festivals, feminist conferences, and at an actual Toronto strip club. In a performance context, Feindel’s body is displayed onstage, but for the purpose of celebrating other women in a positive way. Because the characters portrayed are engaged in the business of being sexually provocative, the ability of the actor herself to evoke that response is more than usually pertinent. It would be intriguing for a feminist theorist discussing the play in performance to consider Feindel as both skilled actor and sexualized female presence, and to speculate on the implications for her varying audience members. Were they expecting to be titillated or to disapprove? Was the play’s message what they thought it was going to be? And how did their experience reflect their own assumptions about what they might see at a feminist theatre festival like “Groundswell”?  

In many ways, the cross-fertilization that occurs in “Groundswell” is as important as any mainstage or full production Nightwood mounts. “Groundswell” commands a third of the company’s budget, and over the years has served a number of important purposes, including being an incubator for new work that finds its way into the season. The festival has been programmed during some periods by a specially designated committee; at other times by the Artistic Advisory or the Play Group; and at still others by a festival director. “Groundswell” has been the place for very new writers to see their work “on its feet,” often with experienced actors, directors, and designers, but without the pressure of being critically reviewed. It has been an opportunity for mentorship and a door through which many women have entered the company and stayed on. It has also been the place where celebrated playwrights such as Judith Thompson and Linda Griffiths have been able to connect with Nightwood, lending their support and

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credibility to the company by having their new work done while still in progress, and offering their own considerable wealth of experience to emerging artists. The festival has been a venue for work from across the country, as well as for occasional entries from the United States, and a place where a greater range of genres, such as performance art and physical theatre, can be incorporated. In many ways Nightwood’s commitment to diversity, in all the ways that diversity can be interpreted, is most vibrantly embodied in “Groundswell.”

1987: Moving away from collective creation

With a growing interest in reaching a wider audience, Nightwood became increasingly concerned with marketing itself to potential sources of funding. Nightwood launched an aggressive fundraising campaign at the beginning of 1987. A package was developed to send out to potential sponsors with an introductory letter signed by Carlyn Moulton, a member of the board of directors. Nightwood is defined as “a successful and growing Toronto theatre company; a critical success in many of its 30 productions in past seasons; a strong commitment to developing new work and new talent; a charitable organization; a theatre company without a deficit! Maturing fiscal management, developing talent, critical acclaim and popular success — the combination feels terrific.” In describing Nightwood’s mandate, the letter reads, “In addition to creating and adapting our own plays, we are committed to encouraging the development of contemporary material from a women’s point of view. New York Times Magazine critic Mel Gussow refers to the recent emergence of women playwrights as ‘The most encouraging and auspicious aspect of the current theatre.’”

The letter emphasizes the range of topics dealt with in Nightwood productions, and argues that Nightwood is uniquely important because it was founded by, and usually produces plays by, women, and because its artistic, technical, and administrative staff was seventy-five percent female. “We are committed to the collaborative process,” the letter states, and “committed to working with women whose individual vision challenges the way we see
society through their politics and their dramaturgy. Nightwood is a feminist collective with an active board of directors who advise on matters of policy and programming.” In this instance, Nightwood’s commitment to collectivity is centred in its administration, while the creative focus is on individual women playwrights. The quote from the *New York Times Magazine* and references to fiscal management indicate a company attempting to appear legitimate to potential funders.

The founding members were well aware that the introduction of single-author texts was a new direction for the company. In an article published in 1987, Kim Renders acknowledges that the production of scripted works was a new development for Nightwood: “The promotion of female talent is still one of the company’s strongest features. But in the past two and a half years, Nightwood has been putting on fewer collectives and become more script-oriented. This is a broadening of the group’s method, since previously it had been adamantly opposed to scripted material.” And in a later article, Maureen White and Mary Vingoe comment on their working relationship as director and playwright for the 1989 production of Vingoe’s play *The Herring Gull’s Egg*:

“This is the first time we’ve worked together in this configuration,” says White. “In our earlier days at Nightwood, collective creations were more common. It’s exciting to see Nightwood now, at a time when more input is coming from outside people, those who weren’t founders. It’s good,” she smiles, “that the company can exist without its mothers.”

We can see the accident and intention dialectic at work here: when company members and related groups were interested in creating collectively, collective creation was defined as part of Nightwood’s mandate. But as the founders became more interested in writing and directing conventionally scripted plays, the mandate changed to emphasize the production of Canadian work.
and the creation of opportunities for women, while shifting the collective ideal to aspects of the company's administration.

**1987: A final collective creation — The Last Will and Testament of Lolita**

In her letter to the Canada Council of March 1986, Mary Vingoe makes it clear that Nightwood was not quite ready to give up its collective status entirely:

While we have begun seriously to work with writers and scripts, we have not abandoned our commitment to the more innovative, collaborative way of play-making which has been our strength in the past. Both *This is For You, Anna* and *Love and Work Enough* were created through painstaking collective work, refined over a number of workshops and productions.

Vingoe explains that this commitment would be demonstrated through “a collective, comic collaboration on the theme of female eroticism, inspired by photography by Marcia Resnick.” The creative team working on this project included Banuta Rubess, Maureen White, Louise Garfield (a member of The Clichettes), and the playwright Peggy Thompson. Collectively they were called The Humbert Humbert Project. Although some of the presentations at subsequent “Groundswells” were by collectives,73 *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita* was Nightwood’s last mainstage collective creation.

The show started out with great promise, receiving ad hoc funding from the Canada Council as one of only seven applications out of sixty to receive grants, and winning special funds from the Ontario Arts Council multidisciplinary jury and $5,000 from the Woodlawn Foundation for development of its visual component. The piece was inspired by a book of photographs entitled *Re-Visions* by the New York artist Marcia Resnick, published by Coach House Press in 1978 and dedicated to Humbert Humbert, the central character in Vladimir Nabokov’s famous novel *Lolita*. 
Images and text in the book depict “the life of a bad girl from 10 to 19.” The play takes her further, to the age of thirty-one.

The project application describes a collective effort: “From the very start the project has been an exchange of skills—[Louise] Garfield’s studies in movement have offset White and Rubess’s improvisation games and [Peggy] Thompson’s insights in writing techniques and semiotics. Since the scenario is developed collectively, the initial process constituted a learning process in and of itself.” In an interview published in the book *Fair Play*, Rubess recounts an incident in the creation of the piece that illustrates their collaborative method:

The very funny and erotic bread image in *Lolita* ... evolved in a curious way. It was inspired first by a picture in Marcia Resnick’s *Re-Visions* ... of a girl crushing a loaf of white bread between her thighs with a caption reading something like, “She learned the facts of life from a friend during a trip to a bread factory.” The choreographer, Louise Garfield, asked Maureen White to do a movement study with the bread and without her pants, and she did, bless her. The movement study was very abstract, though, so we decided we would not use it. We also didn’t like the nudity. Yet, the picture stayed with me and when we were trying to resolve a different section of the work, I took the bread and said, “Look at this,” and I began playing with it in a way that was inspired by watching Maureen ... it was a most successful image.74

As part of the development process, a twenty-minute, multimedia version of the project was presented at “Groundswell” in March of 1986. In Nightwood’s subsequent application for funding, this version is described in detail. Four slide projectors allowed images, text, and action to integrate. For example, as a male voice crooned, “You’re leaving me baby,” a slide of a hand holding a candy cigarette swooped and slid across the entire space of the theatre, and selections of text were projected on a sleeping...
figure and a closing door. The slides were not intended to function merely as an addition to the theatrical scenery, but as active agents of the performance.

In the final version of the play, the multimedia component was represented by a five-minute film, created by director Peter Mettler. Lolita appeared on film to address the characters onstage, representing the past interacting with the present. The onstage characters—stereotypical “bad girls”—were former students in an acting class once taught by Lolita, reunited at her death to explore her legacy. *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita* ran from 2 to 21 June 1987 in association with Theatre Passe Muraille. Subtitled “A vile pink comedy,” the play was advertised with the lines: “Four bad girls steal, revise and reconstruct the Lolita Myth,” and “created and performed by the strange and wild feminist theatre collective of Louise Garfield, Banuta Rubess, Peggy Thompson, and Maureen White,” with Jim Warren as the Sandman and Jackie Burroughs on film as Miss Lolita.

Despite its promising beginnings, *Lolita* was not well received, and even its creators came to regard it as a failure. Rubess comments:

> The only collective creation that I’ve worked on that really didn’t achieve its potential was *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita*, a work I frequently forget is a part of my career. The circumstances surrounding it weren’t the most favourable. I think we were collectively under an emotional dark cloud. When I watch the videotape of the production, I feel quite regretful, because it’s so clear where the piece is strong and where it suddenly comes apart. We were trying to wed madcap humour with strong image work, and thereby alienated some part of the audience most of the time. Either they just wanted to laugh, or they just wanted to be mesmerized. I do want to say that there was a substantial part of the audience which accepted and appreciated the thing as a whole. But we knew we could have done better. It was a heartache.

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*THE BEGINNING OF NIGHTWOOD THEATRE, 1979–1988*
In the interview, Rubess uses *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita* as an example of what she considers to be a gender bias among theatre reviewers. “What I resent about much male criticism of writing by women is the grudging tone,” she says. “For example, *Lolita* got ‘terrible with flashes of brilliance,’ which makes no sense to me. It should have read ‘Brilliant with some major flaws.’ In general, our critics are terrible. Most aren’t at all versed in theatre language and they look for failure. Their focus is on why things fail and not why they succeed.” She is most likely referring to the review by Christopher Hume, in which he writes, “Despite occasional flashes of brilliance, the play doesn’t hold together.”

Reviewers in general seemed to have difficulty critiquing a play with no one writer or director; they frequently comment that a director was needed to “whip *Lolita* into shape” and to give the play focus and cohesion.

Despite professions of interest in its funding applications, Nightwood’s commitment to collective work had clearly diminished. Combined with resistance to collective work by reviewers, and the members’ own “emotional dark cloud,” *Lolita* had a lot working against it. The combined efforts and enthusiasms (or lack thereof) spark the creative process in a collective. Individual moments of genius may not add up to an overall production, but the effort and its multifaceted result may convey something about the process and the feminism of its participants. Rubess admits that it was at about this time when she lost interest in writing about women’s issues, and her comments to the media about *Lolita* reflect a fear of being “ghettoized.” One of the motivating factors behind the decision to work collectively is the desire to communicate with the audience in a new way; however, as in the example of *Burning Times*, the process is fraught with pitfalls. Rubess’s comments suggest that The Humbert Humbert Project was unable to fully connect with its audiences — possibly because they, too, had lost faith in the collective process.
**1987: Changing perspectives, entering the mainstream**

In the spring of 1987, in *Theatrum: A Theatre Journal*, an article by Meredith Levine appeared entitled “Feminist Theatre—Toronto ’87.” In an attempt to explain the more conservative programming choices at Nightwood for the 1986/87 season, Levine hypothesizes that Nightwood had always been relatively conservative and that its recent choices were consistent with the company’s latent tendencies. Levine allows that a feminist sensibility was always evident in Nightwood’s choice of politically controversial plays and nonlinear, imagistic forms, but argues, “The cautious rhetoric of the early years, and the long-standing desire for mainstream recognition reveal recent changes at Nightwood to be more consistent than it may first appear.”

Levine observes that, by 1987, Nightwood had an eleven-woman management board and operational funding, and that Cynthia Grant had been replaced by Mary Vingoe as artistic coordinator. She concludes, “Nightwood is pursuing the middle-class, main-stream audience which involves using larger, more expensive venues. These are not fundamental changes, but a reflection of recent structural and financial abilities to realize their original goals.” Levine quotes Vingoe as saying that Nightwood felt pressure from the government to achieve greater box office revenue, “but the pressure towards the mainstream is coming from the inside too, the artists want to reach a broader audience.”

In the article, Vingoe is unapologetic about the company’s desire to appeal to a larger audience. “We don’t say mainstream is bad,” she says. “We want to have an influence in the mainstream. We don’t want to be ghettoized .... Still it remains very important in the work that I do that I challenge the status quo.” She contends that to survive in the centre while presenting work with political content is an act of subversion: “I guess what we are trying to do this year is create sophisticated pieces of work that are attractive to mainstream audiences. And imbuing them with a feminism the audience didn’t expect. We are still looking for different ways of redefining the images we see around us. We are
just using a different means of snaring people.” Levine sums up by questioning the type of feminism Nightwood will reflect. She notes that the board “represents a range of feminist perspectives” and wonders how much commitment to the most political aims of feminism will remain intact.

Levine contrasts Nightwood with the Company of Sirens, conceding that while most feminists would applaud the presentation of positive female images in highly visible places, not all share Nightwood’s view on how this is to be done. She writes, “Perhaps one of the more notable dissenting voices is its former Artistic Director Cynthia Grant, who left Nightwood last June [1986] to form the Company of Sirens with Lina Chartrand, Shawna Dempsey, Peggy Sample and Lib Spry.” Part of the impetus for forming this new theatre group was a difference of opinion about the definition of theatre and its audience. The mainstream is not such a bad place to be, but Grant and the Sirens were unwilling to have it become a major focus of energy, preferring to concentrate on non-traditional audiences and performance venues.

Levine structures her comparison of the companies around the kind of audiences they attract, writing, “One must ask: which post-isolation audience is the group trying to reach and what venues are being used to reach them? The choice both of public and of public space indicates a particular concept of feminism and therefore feminist theatre.” She concludes, “Ultimately, it is not the particular public space and audience that tests the validity of each group’s work, but rather their ability to be heard beyond their own parlours.” Levine sets up an opposition between the “mainstream” Nightwood and the “grassroots” Company of Sirens that was perhaps not as sharply divided as she makes out. Both Diane Roberts and Alisa Palmer, future artistic directors of Nightwood, worked with the Sirens early in their careers. But Levine does point to the differing routes companies calling themselves feminist may take. Her article suggests that there was a spectrum of possibilities ahead, even in the limited context of Toronto theatre in the late 1980s.
In an article by Malene Arpe entitled “Feminist Theatre,” which appeared in Bark magazine, Cynthia Grant is quoted regarding her work with the Company of Sirens: “We see ourselves as part of a larger feminist movement, which I think is very important in terms of feminist artists—that they work within the larger feminist movement. I think sometimes artists end up sort of ‘out there on their own.’” In the same article, writer and performer Diane Flacks responds to the criticism that feminist theatre only “preaches to the converted”—that is, attracts an audience that already agrees with a feminist philosophy. Flacks contends that such “preaching” is in fact valuable because it reinforces those ideals and gives the audience more things to think and talk about. She states, “I think the media has done a really good job of turning feminism into a dirty word. But the theatre community is wonderful, because the theatre community is conscious and not interested in buying into that.” The same article contains a quotation from Kate Lushington:

There are a lot of lines drawn. Maybe it’s Canada, maybe it’s art, maybe it’s theatre. It’s either political or it’s purely aesthetic. It’s either popular or it’s non-professional. It’s either academic or it’s practical. And it seems to me that there is a lot that feminism can offer in joining together all these either/ors. With them we fall into too many traps of exclusivity.

All three of the women quoted illustrate how feminist theatre practitioners understand themselves to be part of the larger feminist social movement, and how this understanding is important not only as a source of strength, but also as an impetus for ideas and creative inquiry.

Another overview: Issues at an early stage
Feminist theatre practitioners in Toronto, like their international counterparts in the 1970s and ’80s, were coming to terms with the possibilities and the limitations of their careers. Despite
Nightwood’s growing appeal to a wider audience, the fact remains that women are not as welcome in the theatre world as their male counterparts, their careers not as encouraged; unfortunately, the situation has not changed much today. Concerns with being pigeonholed as a particular kind of writer, different communication styles as a director or within a collective, fear of hostile reviewers, and the common pressures of personal relationships and childcare all compound the perception. Perhaps no other American woman director has enjoyed as much acclaim as Julie Taymor, the Tony Award–winning creator of *The Lion King*, and yet Taymor can remark:

There is an excitement about the 20-year-old male director, and women directors have not really been part of that club. A woman who’s that young and doing that much is “risky,” rather than the next bandwagon everyone wants to hop on. When it was JoAnne Akalaitis or Anne Bogart or whoever, they never got that kind of attention. Neither did I until I got *Lion King*. And yet look at what I’ve done.85

In 1970, JoAnne Akalaitis and Ruth Maleczech of the experimental company Mabou Mines included child care expenses as part of the production expenses for their shows, insisted that children be welcome on their tours, and ensured that tours would be limited to three weeks “so as to be minimally disruptive to family life.”86 More than thirty years later, such provisions still seem radical and remain the exception.

The dilemma of the talented woman balancing a successful career with the demands of a family is a frequent theme in 1970s and ’80s British, American, and Canadian feminist writing. In her discussion of contemporary women’s plays, Michelene Wandor concludes that political activism and a personal life cannot go together, or at least cannot be represented together on the stage.87 The British director Pam Brighton came to the same conclusion while working in Canada in the late 1970s. She spent

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time at the Stratford Festival, but also worked in Toronto, where she directed *Dusa Fish Stas and Vi* by the British playwright Pam Gems. Brighton reminisces:

> Women’s theatre up until that point in Canada had had a very low profile and this was the play that could (and in fact did) open up that area of work ... The women of Toronto practically stormed the theatre; we played to 103 percent capacity, and the show had to be transferred.  

The play is based on the suicide of Buzz Goodbody, a feminist director whom Brighton had known well. In Brighton’s assessment, Gems’s play is about the central contradiction in contemporary women’s lives: the apparent impossibility of being both independent, with a successful career, and also maintaining an equal relationship with a man.

In the American context, Wendy Wasserstein won a Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1989 for *The Heidi Chronicles*, a play that deals with the same dilemma. Wasserstein was acclaimed for her comedy and was compared to Neil Simon for her farcical situations and snappy dialogue, but she herself believed the work to be political, revealing deeper truths about the crises of an intelligent, independent woman. The problem is addressed again in the hugely successful play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* by Jane Wagner, which premiered 26 September 1985 at the Plymouth Theater in New York City, starring Lily Tomlin. Among the many characters that Wagner writes and Tomlin portrays, one of the most developed is Lyn, who struggles with wanting to pursue a career while also keeping her husband and family content. Lyn utters the memorable line, “If I’d known this is what it would be like to have it all, I might have been willing to settle for less.”

The play from Nightwood’s repertoire that best addresses this theme of professional versus private lives is *War Babies* by Margaret Hollingsworth. In association with Toronto Free Theatre, Nightwood presented *War Babies* 26 February to 29 March 1987,
directed by Mary Vingoe. The production of War Babies was nominated for a Dora Award for best new play, while the playtext itself was nominated for a 1985 Governor General’s Award for Drama. The press release for the production reads:

War Babies centres around a couple in their early forties, she a playwright, he a war correspondent, as they await the birth of their first child. Slowly they are overshadowed by their fictional doubles, characters from a play Esme is writing. As Esme creates her play within a play, the distinctions dissolve between past and present, real and imagined, private and public.

In War Babies, as in no other play produced by Nightwood until Mathilde in 2006, the dynamics of a marriage are dissected and interrogated. The main character, Esme, is a playwright who worries that the horrors her husband has witnessed as a war correspondent will distance him from her and will poison their ability to be good parents. Her world is private and imaginative, while his world is public and descriptive. The contrast between the two gendered realities infects the couple’s ability to communicate and ultimately undermines Esme’s mental stability.

Twenty years later, in Véronique Olmi’s play Mathilde, the title character reacts to a stultifying “career” as the perfect doctor’s wife by having an affair with a teenage boy. The play begins with her release from a correctional facility, and her return home to confront her husband. Here, to an even greater degree than in War Babies, the playwright offers a psychological portrait of a very strained private relationship at the point when the public façade has been breached. In this French play, translated by the Canadian playwright Morwyn Brebner, staged by Nightwood and performed by two of Canada’s most respected actors, Tom McCamus and Martha Burns, we find the perfect example of international congruence—a dialogue among women of different nations that has been going on for as long as feminist theatre. From its inception, Nightwood has been part of the dialogue, reflecting—in its
organizational structure, its working methods, and its struggle to define its feminism—the preoccupations of women working to create a new theatre.
Goodnight Desdemona
Tanja Jacobs as Constance Ledbelly in Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet).
Photograph by Cylla Von Tiedemann. Nightwood Theatre archives.

Charming and Rose: True Love
Djanet Sears and Kristina Nicoll as the Fairy Godmother and Rose in Charming and Rose: True Love.
Photograph by Greg Tjepkema. Nightwood Theatre archives.

Princess Pocahontas
Left to Right: Alejandra Nunez and Monique Mojica in Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots.
Nightwood Theatre publicity.

A Fertile Imagination
Kate Lynch and Robin Craig as Del and Rita in A Fertile Imagination.
Photograph by Liz Kain. Nightwood Theatre archives.
Random Acts

Leaders

Leaders
Left to Right: Diane Roberts, Leslie Lester, and Alisa Palmer at a VideoCabaret event. Photograph by VideoCabaret. From the personal collection of Leslie Lester.