

Three

New Leadership Models, 1994–2000 and 2001–2009

1994: A NEW LEADERSHIP TEAM

Despite Kate Lushington's efforts, Nightwood continued to be thought of as a collectively run organization, perhaps because of the existence of the Artistic Advisory and the presence of artists on its board, and perhaps because it was perceived by some people as a "community theatre."¹ Because of its inclusive mandate and the wide variety of women working on projects at any one time, Nightwood was sometimes dismissed as a social service agency rather than a professional company. This perception may have been inadvertently reinforced when a leadership team of three women took over from Lushington in 1994, even though each had a title and separate responsibilities. Alisa Palmer and Diane Roberts were named as artistic co-directors, and Leslie Lester was named as producer.

The search committee had actively looked for a new management model, a way to spread the responsibility beyond just one artistic director. While the idea of a triumvirate was appealing and effective in terms of dividing the labour, practically speaking it necessitated a financial sacrifice, since the three women had to share two salaries.² Diane Roberts had worked with Lushington as an artistic associate and had a long history with Nightwood, so she provided continuity for Alisa Palmer and Leslie Lester in their new positions. Palmer and Lester, on the other hand, already had

a close working relationship as co-artistic directors, along with Banuta Rubess, of another small company called Froth.

As part of a Montreal-based improvisational group, Hysterical Women, Palmer had participated in the 1987 “Groundswell,” and it was there that she met Mary Vingoe and Ann-Marie MacDonald for the first time.³ She went on to direct “Groundswell” shows during Kate Lushington’s tenure, and to work as a movement coach on shows like *A Fertile Imagination* (1991) and *The Wonder of Man* (1992), where she met Diane Roberts. The eventual pairing of Roberts and Palmer two years later as artistic co-directors was mutually determined. As Palmer recalls:

When this opening came up to run Nightwood, both of us had been approached to apply, and both of us had the same thought — that we wouldn’t apply without the other one. And I had initially thought that she should be the AD and I would be an Associate, because she had been with the company already, but she was positive ... she wanted to go into a co-directorship. It made sense at that time politically and artistically, because I’d had more independent directing experience and she had a lot more experience with the company. And then I introduced her to Leslie.⁴

Roberts stayed on as part of the trio until the spring of 1996, and when she left, the company reverted to a more traditional model, with Palmer as the sole artistic director. Lester continued as producer, and two other women, Soraya Peerbaye and Jay Pitter, worked as their associates.

Despite the initial team approach, however, Alisa Palmer did succeed in finally shaking the inaccurate collective label. Because she had been associated with companies other than Nightwood, and because she maintained a strong profile within the theatre community as an award-winning playwright, director, and actor, she was most successful in finally establishing Nightwood as a “legitimate” theatre company — one with an artistic vision, not just a political mandate. As Leslie Lester observes, “That’s sort of the

funny thing about a company. A company this small, anyway, does become very personal and [defined by] who you bring in with you and what artists you attract.”⁵ Diane Roberts acknowledges the importance of individuals, too, when she muses, “That’s always been the thing of Nightwood, projects that have gone forward have been usually driven by an individual’s, or a group of women’s, passion.”⁶ The Palmer-Roberts-Lester term was notable for the number of panels, workshops, and co-productions they sponsored, and for their concentration on “Groundswell” as a venue for new play development, which spread Nightwood’s presence far beyond the mainstage shows produced during their tenure. Further, the triumvirate hosted a number of high-energy fundraising parties, produced regular newsletters, and encouraged women to become supporting members and donors to Nightwood, thereby building a sense of celebration and community.

Other, practical changes influenced Nightwood’s profile as well. Nightwood moved to a multi-use, industrial building at 317 Adelaide Street West in the fall of 1990, and this was the space that Palmer, Roberts, and Lester inherited. In addition to office space, Nightwood had its own rehearsal/performance studio; renting it out to other arts groups generated some income, and also made it a busy hub of activity and interaction. In the fall of 1999, Nightwood moved again, this time to 9 Saint Nicholas Street. The space was more attractive and comfortable, with hardwood floors and another large area for rehearsals and events, which gave the company a more genteel image. But with a buzz-in entry system and no elevator, the downside to the new space was less accessibility.

The board structure evolved, too, with the board of directors taking on administrative tasks and a separate Artistic Advisory in place, but with considerable overlap between the two groups. For example, for the 1996/97 season, the board of directors was Clare Barclay, Shirley Barrie, Dawn Carter, and Dawn Obakata, and Sierra Bacquie and Ann-Marie MacDonald served as co-chairs (rather than use the title “president,” the board designated one or two women to serve as co-chairs). Dawn Obakata was also part of the Artistic Advisory; of the Advisory’s remaining

six members (Alex Bulmer, Marium Carvell, Jani Lauzon, ahdri zhina mandiola, Sheysali Saujam, and Sarah Stanley), three had been board members in previous years. It is illegal for a person to sit on the board of an organization if she is employed by or receives remuneration from that organization. The Artistic Advisory was created to accommodate this stipulation; advisors could be paid as artists and still offer their assistance to the board without actually being on it. The Advisory was eventually phased out in 2003. Nightwood also, at various points, hired associate artists and producers, a general manager, and some combination of business managers and administrators, as well as a variety of temporary personnel, interns, and apprentices employed through various project grants, summer employment programs, and the like. A rotating roster of women — board members, volunteers, and staff — bring their energy and ideas to the company, and in turn spread awareness of Nightwood out into their many respective communities.

1994: ADJUSTMENTS TO THE MANDATE

When the new leadership team took over, they inherited a specific mandate statement: “Nightwood Theatre’s mandate is to develop, promote and produce original, innovative works by Canadian women theatre artists creating alternative visions of the world from diverse cultural perspectives.”⁷ The statement goes on to list “values we consider important,” which are:

- a commitment to anti-racism as a visible and significant priority in the interpretation of our mandate;
- a determination to increase the opportunities for women from all cultural communities to work in all aspects of the creative process;
- a commitment to paying all artists to affirm that women’s work is of value;
- a commitment to new voices;
- a commitment to the long range development of women artists as well as to specific plays;

- a commitment to artistic self-determination (e.g., hands-off dramaturgy);
- a desire to mount more shows in production in addition to our workshop activities;
- an interest in the international feminist repertoire, and also new feminist interpretations of the classics, in addition to the mandate to develop and promote original Canadian work;
- a firm commitment to finding a theatre space for Nightwood Theatre which we will operate as a women-run, woman-centred focus point for our own work and the work of like-minded artists.

The statement concludes with the slogan: “Unique feminist theatre from diverse cultural perspectives.” The emphasis is on involving women of colour and women from diverse cultural communities, within the ongoing context of new play development and the creation of job opportunities. The word “feminist” is used, but not prominently, and not at all in the actual mandate statement.

The new leadership team placed special importance on the “commitment to the long range development of women artists,” manifested in the many workshops and even training courses offered by Nightwood over the following few years. In 1995, for example, “The Female Body” series ran parallel to the regular “Groundswell” process, offering weekend-long workshops on voice, movement, dance, and performance.⁸ Producer Leslie Lester acknowledged that the desire to function as something of a resource centre for women artists runs as a kind of subtext to the mandate. She also confirmed that the ongoing practice of downplaying the word “feminism” was a conscious choice, motivated in part by the desire to be inclusive, and in part by the ambivalent and somewhat contradictory feelings about feminism among the women running the company.⁹

That ambivalence reflects what was happening in feminism as a movement in the 1990s, as it was challenged by women of colour, lesbians, working-class women, and other women seeking

redress for their exclusion from what was perceived as a white, middle-class women's movement. As feminism struggled to come to grips with the force of this critique, and as the structures of "institutions" like Nightwood opened up to women who had been on the outside, the terms and philosophy of feminism had to be treated cautiously; a redefinition was taking place. Part of the problem was that fewer women, especially younger ones, were calling themselves feminists. While the current resurgence of feminism in the Third Wave has allowed for a younger, hipper image, back in the mid-1990s, it was unfortunately more common to hear talk of a post-feminist consciousness.

Erica Sessle interviewed Alisa Palmer and Diane Roberts in 1995 for a university student newspaper called *The Varsity*, introducing them as Nightwood's new artistic co-directors. In the interview, Palmer explicitly addresses the complexity of their historical moment for defining feminist theatre:

Women have disagreement as to what feminism is, what power for women is, and what equality for women is. But for these disagreements to be stifled in an attempt to present a unified feminist front is dangerous. Discourse must happen and should be encouraged. And that encouragement is the most radical thing that a woman's theatre company can do.

She goes on to admit that the word feminist is "no longer satisfying, because feminist is not a clear enough word."¹⁰

Sessle compliments Nightwood for being able to preserve aspects of its original mandate and still evolve within the theatre community. In response, Palmer observes, "There was a very clear need for Nightwood to have a clear political mandate 15 years ago. But things are different now and it is necessary to have a clear set of artist demands." She believes that the three women of the team at that time fit into the model of the four founders in being

a collaborative group of women who are each interested in different areas of innovation. We have, of course, issues

in common, such as the direction of the future of Nightwood as a theatrical resource centre for women artists. But 15 years after the start of Nightwood, the context of the theatre scene in Toronto is different. Now there are a lot more women artists as recognized artistic directors and playwrights. But it is largely white women who have garnered this recognition. It's a different story for women of colour.

Palmer emphasizes that Nightwood provides a space for women of different ages and cultural and artistic backgrounds to come together and find support to do their work the way they want to, even if it is not explicitly feminist work.

Yet elsewhere — in the Nightwood newsletter, for example — the word “feminist” is used with pride and enthusiasm. In the first newsletter published after Palmer, Roberts, and Lester took over in 1994, they included a joint statement to outline their conception of how Nightwood functions:

We're enthusiastic to take up the challenge of maintaining Nightwood's dual role as a leading producer of feminist art and as an important resource for women artists ... Nightwood Theatre has provided a forum for women to explore the complexity of our relationships to each other, to society and consequently to history. Its identity today is a culmination of accident, serendipity and willful efforts to have a say in the development of women's culture. We are intrigued by the challenge of seeing the whole pattern, Nightwood's past, present and future, in order to support the contribution that each individual constituent, each artist or script or decision, can make to the whole.¹¹

The mainstage shows produced over the next six years clearly aimed to publicly promote Nightwood's mandate as its leaders saw it. The mainstream acclaim and appeal of plays such as Djanet

Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997) and Ann-Marie MacDonald's musical *Anything That Moves* (2000) provided a high-profile contrast to the more grassroots development work of projects like "Groundswell" and "The Female Body" series.

1995: TEN YEARS OF "GROUNDSWELL"

To mark the tenth anniversary of "Groundswell" in March of 1995 (and perhaps to receive some guidance in their roles as artistic co-directors), Diane Roberts and Alisa Palmer organized and hosted a panel presentation at the Theatre Centre called "Art in Your Face: what is women's theatre development and what should it be?" The playwright Sally Han moderated, and the panellists, all theatre practitioners, were Diana Leblanc, Sandra Laronde, ahndri zhina mandiola, Baḡuta Rubess, Judith Thompson, and Jean Yoon. Alison Sealy-Smith and Kim Renders also participated by performing short readings that panellists had selected for them.

At the panel discussion, the playwright Jean Yoon asked the pertinent question, "How do we, within a developmental process, accommodate the fact that we are living in a multilingual culture, where I can walk down the street and hear twenty different languages?"¹² ahndri zhina mandiola commented that much work had already been done in small, specific communities, but wondered, "in defining our collective experience, how do we begin to cross these borders, invisible as they may be sometimes? How do we begin to not just be community pockets of women artists producing out there... black women, aboriginal women, white women, etc ... How do we begin to amalgamate our processes into ... our collective process?"¹³ These were the questions that Palmer, Roberts, and Lester continued to grapple with throughout their terms. The process of inclusion that marked Lushington's years at Nightwood became an even bigger cultural issue, as the city of Toronto grew and became increasingly multicultural; as feminism changed and lost its currency in the mainstream; and as the voices of performers spoke from ever more situated and diverse perspectives.

1997: HARLEM DUET

One productive aspect of multiculturalism is increased international cross-fertilization. As an example, one of the most outstanding and influential plays to appear in the United States is Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975), which has in turn inspired many other theatre pieces, including Diane Roberts's *The Coloured Girls Project* at Nightwood in 1995. Another example in the same Black, North American, cross-border context is the play *Harlem Duet*. In 1995 and '96, Djanet Sears was in residency as an international playwright at the New York Shakespeare Festival, working on what was then called *The Madwoman and the Fool*, which would later become *Harlem Duet*. Her work in progress received a public reading and workshop at the Joseph Papp Public Theater. Nightwood then presented *Harlem Duet*, directed by Sears, at the Tarragon Extra Space in Toronto in May of 1997.¹⁴ *Harlem Duet* won four Dora Mavor Moore Awards—for best production, direction, outstanding new play, and female performance (by Alison Sealy-Smith)—and was remounted at the Canadian Stage Company's Berkeley Street stage that fall. So despite the fact that *Harlem Duet* takes as its basis Shakespeare's *Othello*, is set in Harlem (at the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King boulevards), features African-American characters, and draws from time periods in American history, it was received as a brilliant Canadian play and won the Governor General's Award, Canada's highest honour. In 2006, the prestigious Stratford Festival generated a second production of *Harlem Duet*—another exceptional achievement in the context of feminist (and, in this case, Black feminist) theatre. Obviously, plays—and these plays in particular—do speak across borders.

New voices were not only coming from diverse racial perspectives. At the turn of the millennium, Alisa Palmer encouraged and directed *Smudge*, another important play that came from yet another fresh direction: it addressed inclusion based not on gender, race, language, or ethnicity, but on disability.

2000: SMUDGE

Smudge began as a series of poems written by Alex Bulmer, a writer, actor, and teacher residing in Toronto. Bulmer had a solid history with Nightwood, beginning with her term on the Artistic Advisory from 1995 to 1999. She had input into Diane Flacks's one-woman show *Random Acts* in 1997, performed at the March 1999 "FemCab," and worked as apprentice producer with Leslie Lester in 2000. After *Smudge*, Bulmer went on to participate in events including Nightwood's 2002 International Women's Day panel, "The Hourglass Symposium: A Roundtable."¹⁵

When she began losing her vision as a result of a degenerative eye condition (recessive retinitis pigmentosa inversa), Bulmer chose to document the process in poetry, because, as she explained, "I needed the words to keep going. The sounds, the images, the heightened emotions and the absurdity of each day felt like a surreal epic comedy about falling down."¹⁶ The poems eventually became a play, workshopped at "Groundswell" in 1997 and 2000, and also at a 1998 Buddies in Bad Times festival called "Under the Gun." In association with Bulmer's own company, S.N.I.F.F. Inc., Nightwood produced her play from 18 November to 10 December 2000 at the Tarragon Extra Space. It was directed by Alisa Palmer, and the cast was made up of Diane Flacks as Freddie; Kate Lynch as her girlfriend, Katherine; and Sherry Lee Hunter as Blindness and a number of other characters. The program states that the story was "developed and edited" with Flacks, Lynch, and Palmer. It was the penultimate show for Palmer and Leslie Lester before they left their positions with Nightwood.

In the course of the hour-long play, Bulmer's alter ego, Freddie, interacts with doctors, nurses, technicians, and therapists, but also with various people on the street who represent the many strange ways she is treated as an increasingly blind person. For example, in Scene Thirteen, entitled "Denise's Cane Lesson," Freddie moves through the world practicing her technique in using a white cane. She accidentally bumps into a character called Heroin Girl, who, once she realizes Freddie is blind, feels so sorry for speaking harshly to her that she makes Freddie take

her cigarettes. Other people she passes give her descriptions of her surroundings or offer assistance that she does not require. The scene culminates with an elderly man on a streetcar who tells her, "Can't think of anything worse than what you got." Freddie, always quick with a witty retort, responds, "Well, maybe you're not thinking hard enough. There's death."¹⁷

At the same time that Freddie is dealing with the loss of her sight, the play is also about her developing relationship with her new lover, Katherine. From their first meeting in a café, their relationship is inexorably shaped by Freddie's disability. The two women meet because Freddie has a big smile on her face, pleased that she has managed to find a chair and sit down without mishap in the busy café. She does not realize that she is smiling at and staring into the eyes of a stranger, but Katherine takes these as signs of interest and introduces herself. In a subsequent scene, Katherine and Freddie watch a movie together, and as Katherine describes the sex taking place on screen, her erotic narration sparks the next step in their mutual attraction.

There are scenes in which Katherine tries to persuade Freddie to use her cane more consistently when she goes out, and another scene in which Katherine becomes more resigned as Freddie stubbornly refuses to make accommodations for her degenerating ability to manage the world. Katherine tries to comfort Freddie after a particularly awful incident in which she is harassed by a man in the street. But ultimately, there is a scene of confrontation, as Freddie tries to put some distance between them and cannot see Katherine's tears to gauge her response. The play ends on a poignant and somewhat uncertain note, as Freddie first tries to hide from her blindness, and then imagines a future in which she descends into madness, another form of disability. Finally, she is able to say goodbye to her sight.

Nominated for a Chalmers Award and three Doras, *Smudge* was published in *Canadian Theatre Review*.¹⁸ It toured to Halifax in September of 2001, and then to Vancouver the following spring. The play received mostly excellent reviews. Entitling his assessment "Smudge has Clarity,"¹⁹ the influential *NOW* reviewer

Jon Kaplan characterizes the play as episodic. Kaplan explains that the sound, set, and lighting for *Smudge* gave the audience a sense of Freddie’s fragmented world; describing it as an “almost surrealistic setting,” he writes that at times, “characters are indistinct behind a hazy backdrop.” In her review, “Lifting the blind,” Elisa Kukla reports:

Bulmer chose Nightwood Theatre as the appropriate place to produce *Smudge* because the feminist company is committed to giving more than just lip service to the artistic value of diversity. The playwright was not interested in a moralistic or didactic mounting of her script. Bulmer’s goal, rather, is to incorporate diversity into the artistic process as opposed to simply showcasing it ... When someone’s difference is a given instead of the subject matter of a play, their identity becomes normalized.²⁰

Kukla makes an excellent point, in that not only Freddie’s disability, but also her lesbianism is taken as an integral aspect of her experience. The play may be said to display a materialist feminism in the way it highlights the differences between women’s experiences. For Freddie, her blindness is as much a part of her identity as her gender and sexuality — each are the “givens” of how she must deal with the world.

Alex Bulmer could usefully be defined as part of the growing international movement of activist, disabled artists. According to Kelly Thornton, there has been interest in *Smudge* from arts and disability groups in other countries, such as England and Australia. But as Kukla points out, Bulmer’s play also fits in with Nightwood’s commitment to facilitating diverse women’s voices. *Smudge* is a great example of the complicated intersection of identities and identifications — disabled, lesbian, artist, feminist, and much more — that are relevant to that mandate.

2001: CURRENT MANAGEMENT

Artistic director Kelly Thornton took over at Nightwood in 2001,

along with Nathalie Bonjour as the new producer. Bonjour left her position in October of 2005, and Monica Esteves became the artistic producer in 2006. (In 2007, Thornton took a year of maternity leave, and was temporarily replaced by Maja Ardal as the interim artistic director).

As is common for new artistic directors, Thornton took over a 2001 season already in place, dominated by an ambitious production of Djanet Sears's play *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* at the duMaurier Theatre at Harbourfront — a production with a cast of twenty-one and a quarter-million-dollar budget. It was a risky venture, but one that paid off with packed houses and six Dora nominations. Thornton's own first contribution was to initiate a strategic planning phase by employing a fundraising consultant and a board-restructuring consultant, and to build a three-year plan.

Thornton's tenure since 2001 has been marked by a number of such bold strategic moves, designed to position Nightwood not as an alternative or marginal company, but as Canada's "national women's theatre." One of the most important of these manoeuvres was, literally, a move — in March of 2003, Nightwood transferred to its current location and, for the first time since leaving the Theatre Centre, is once again situated within a specifically cultural space. The Case Goods Building is part of Toronto's new Distillery District, an enclave of beautifully renovated historical buildings that has been conceived as a dynamic, upscale cultural destination, made up of theatres and other performance spaces, a college, art galleries, boutiques, and restaurants.

A letter sent to members on 20 September 2002, asking for membership renewal, made the big announcement:

This year the leadership went into a period of Strategic Planning. In these sessions we created a 3-year Business Plan, revitalized the Board of Directors and initiated a Development Plan which strengthens our foundation, corporate and private sector support. We are also pleased to announce that we've secured a new home with Artscape in

the arts complex on the heritage site of Gooderham and Worts Distillery; we will move in February.

The Case Goods Building is run by Artscape and houses a number of other theatre organizations, including Tapestry New Opera Works; the two neighbouring companies share the Tapestry/Nightwood New Work Studio. The Distillery District is also the site of the new Young Centre for the Performing Arts, where Nightwood has begun producing some of its mainstage plays.

In the summer of 2005, Nightwood made a further announcement: that it had been “accepted to Creative Trust, a unique program that supports and strengthens Toronto’s mid-size music, dance and theatre companies by assisting them in achieving organizational and financial balance, and acquiring and maintaining a fund of Working Capital.” Nightwood was able to declare itself “in a debt free position.”

2002–2003: FINDING REGINA

Finding Regina, by Shoshana Sperling, signals an openness of another kind for Nightwood: its willingness to produce a play in a Canadian city other than Toronto when the subject matter clearly calls for such an alliance. The play began as *The Regina Monologues* at Buddies in Bad Times’ “Rhubarb! Festival” in 2001, and was then produced with the title *Finding Regina* by the Globe Theatre in Regina, Saskatchewan, in association with Nightwood and Theatre Passe Muraille. It premiered at the Globe on 8 October 2002, directed by Kelly Thornton, and then went on to a run at Passe Muraille in early 2003.²¹

The cast featured Sperling herself as Annabel, with Jeremy Harris as Josh and Teresa Pavlinek as Rae. Sperling is better known as a stand-up comedian than as a playwright, often performing character-based comedy at Toronto venues like “Fem-Cab” and on television.²² Sperling describes *Finding Regina* as a love letter to her hometown: “this play is really an homage to Regina because I have this love for the place that I just can’t quite shake.”²³ In fact, the published play is prefaced with a list of

acknowledgements written in the form of a letter to Regina, which begins, “I miss you so much when I’m away from you.” Further along, she writes, “This play is for me and also those still finding Regina way out in Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal.”²⁴ Sperling has received many comments that “the play could be set anywhere in Canada as it is such an honest depiction of going home.”²⁵ As Sperling implies, to find one’s Regina is a metaphor, meaning to reconnect with where you come from and who you are, and therefore suggests the intersection of geography with gender in the construction of feminist identity.²⁶

The play focuses on the fortunes of a generation that grew up together in Regina, and the disproportionate number of them who have committed suicide. High school pals Annabel, Rae, and Josh have gathered at the hospital in Regina to wait for news about their friend Clarky, who has attempted to kill himself. Through conversation and confrontation, many of the negative aspects of their high school experience are unearthed: Clarky was afraid to reveal his homosexuality; racism against the Aboriginal population is addressed; and the spectre of substance abuse and suicide comes up repeatedly. The three characters have a love-hate relationship with their hometown, blaming it for their distress, yet at the same time intensely aware of how it has shaped their identity and sense of belonging. Josh, in particular, plays the role of unofficial historian, recounting the stories of the marginalized and keeping his strong sense of community alive.

The situation does not immediately read as explicitly feminist, yet feminist concerns—particularly those of the Third Wave—underline all the themes of the play and culminate in the relationship between the two female characters. Annabel, played by Sperling, has moved to Toronto and is doing a master’s degree in women’s studies, “with a specialization in concepts of male and female archetypes in Western Civilization.” This allows Annabel to deliver a lecture on how classics written by women have been “misinterpreted by patriarchal society.”²⁷ She tries to explain her thesis, but the other characters are unable to follow her argument,

which is dense with academic jargon, especially after they share a joint or two in Josh's car. Thus, Annabel's feminism is positioned as something that is vital to her new life in Toronto, but irrelevant once she comes back home to Regina.

The character of Rae, a pretty and popular girl in high school, has moved to Vancouver and become a wife and mother. She is now thirty and, like Annabel, she has been back to Regina a few times — often for the funerals of friends — but this is the first time in ten years that all three have been together. Rae is a proponent of self-help books to explain her troubled marriage, but Annabel cynically rejects such popular theorizing. Annabel declares, "It's all about looks. We're conditioned to believe that if we find a mate with ideal physical beauty, then we'll fall in love."²⁸ She argues that marriages based on looks alone will end up being empty and devoid of intimacy, concluding, "Most people who grow up being splendidly beautiful might find themselves in a relationship that might be splendidly empty."²⁹

Annabel is obviously referring to Rae, and the roots of her hostility become apparent when Josh inadvertently admits that he does not remember having had sex with Annabel in high school. This prompts an angry Annabel to reveal that she was in fact very promiscuous throughout high school, "but not looking as girls should look, it was kept a secret. Boys tell their adventures. Unless they're embarrassed."³⁰ Unlike popular and sought-after girls like Rae, whom Annabel describes as "tall, thin and perfect," Annabel never had a "public" boyfriend, but she did have sex with many guys in secret simply because she made herself available. She explains: "Girls wanted to have sex but they were so worried for their reputations. I never worried about any of that because ... No one ever told. They just came back for more. I practised this behaviour into my university years until I finally moved out of Regina."³¹ By the end of the play, Rae and Annabel have managed to tentatively mend their friendship and admit how much they have missed each other, but societal ideals of beauty have clearly taken their toll on both women's lives and identities. The intensity of their high school friendship is treated

seriously, as is the female competition that ultimately drove them apart. The focus on a complex and unequal relationship, and on the differences between women, marks the play as post-modern and Third Wave in its feminism.

2004: CHINA DOLL

Just as *Finding Regina* was inspired by, and produced in, Saskatchewan, *China Doll* is another example of an increasingly national outlook at Nightwood. Marjorie Chan's play was developed in a three-week intensive workshop at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts in Alberta in the spring of 2003. In addition to its ongoing development with "Groundswell" (since 2002), *China Doll* had originally been commissioned as a CBC radio play before attaining a stage commission from Nightwood. After the Banff residency, Kelly Thornton directed a full production in 2004 at the Tarragon Extra Space, featuring Chan as the lead character, and with a cast made up of Jo Chim, Keira Loughran, and John Ng. The Toronto production was nominated for three Dora Awards in the General Theatre category, for outstanding costume design (Joanne Dente), production, and new play. It was also nominated for the 2005 Governor General's Literary Award. Nightwood's involvement with *China Doll* was prescient, as it cultivated artists from, and awareness in, the burgeoning Asian theatre community. On 8 March 2004, Nightwood presented an International Women's Day panel discussion called "First Steps: Chinese Canadian Women Leaving Their Mark."³²

Set in 1918 in Shanghai, *China Doll* follows a young woman named Su-Ling as her grandmother attempts to find her a husband. Because her parents died in dishonourable ways, Su-Ling has few prospects. One of her only redeeming qualities is the extreme smallness of her bound feet. Marjorie Chan has explained that her play was inspired by a museum exhibit of the tiny "lotus" shoes worn by women in traditional Chinese culture, and there is much emphasis in the play on the work involved in binding, caring for, and adorning these symbols of female erotic beauty and oppression.

Another character, Merchant Li, teaches Su-Ling to read and gives her a copy of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll House*, which eventually inspires her to unbind her feet and walk away from the house of her fiancé. Like Nora in *A Doll House*, Su-Ling chooses to reject her fate as a woman in a patriarchal house; this direct analogy would seem to indicate a cultural feminist equivalency in women's oppression across historical periods, racial differences, and national boundaries. However, appearing ten years after *Charming and Rose*, *China Doll* presents a similarly complex intersection of cultural and materialist elements. The playwright is careful to focus on specific historical details of Su-Ling's situation — the political changes sweeping through China, the intricacies of foot binding, and the tensions between women of different classes and generations — allowing materialist elements to complicate its feminism.

Rather than mere exotica, the material specifics of Chinese culture inform the way the play makes meaning for its audience through visual layering in production. Rather than a straightforward, naturalistic telling of Su-Ling's dilemma, the play employs many theatrical effects to communicate her world. For example, there are magical stage effects, as when a carp and an orange appear when she wishes for them, or when letters and drawings are projected across the set. Her rebellion against sewing her confining shoes takes on physical reality: the script states, "A tantrum of fabric flies across the stage."³³ Most poignantly, Su-Ling's wedding dress is suspended in a manner reminiscent of her mother's suicide by hanging.³⁴ Cleverly, Chan finds many tools to evoke the ways that generations of women are diminished by a patriarchal society, but also the ways they find to remember and support each other.

2005: RAISING THE CELEBRITY FACTOR

Kelly Thornton has used some of Nightwood's traditions in strategic new ways. For example, the "Five Minute Feminist Cabaret" was not held in 2004, but the following year it was relaunched as a major gala fundraising event to celebrate Nightwood's twenty-fifth anniversary. The American feminist icon Gloria Steinem was invited as the guest of honour. Similarly, in 2007, Michele

Landsberg, a board member and influential feminist newspaper columnist, along with her husband, Stephen Lewis, a respected politician and activist, sponsored “FemCab.” The guest speaker was Carol Off, host of the popular CBC radio program *As It Happens*. In 2008, the special guest was Eve Ensler, the celebrated creator of *The Vagina Monologues*. Thus, “FemCab” has become a new kind of event for Nightwood: entertainment from the theatre community combined with a famous feminist name to attract media attention and make money.

Thornton has done a good job of consistently emphasizing Nightwood’s critical and artistic successes and working to solidify its legitimacy at a national level, to garner the company the respect and recognition it deserves. She comments, “The mandate obviously is political. It’s a really strong mandate and it allows you to be very fierce and clear in your programming, but the business is theatre, and all the money that comes into this company from all the governments, that’s to make theatre, and it’s not about social programs. I want to bring more money into the company so I can produce more women, that’s the bottom line.”³⁵

In 2006, Nightwood produced a sophisticated marketing brochure with a timeline of past productions and a statement regarding the structure of the season. Entitled “Delivering on our mandate,” the statement is worth quoting in full to give a clear sense of where the company’s priorities are placed today:

1. Mainstage productions — We produce a minimum of two Mainstage Productions each year (including premieres, touring and presenting).
2. Play development — We produce the annual Groundswell Festival of New Works by Women, for plays in development from our playwright’s unit. We also commission playwrights and offer residency programs.
3. Mentorship and Youth — Our youth initiatives include Write From the Hip, for novice playwrights; the Emerging Actor’s Program, training recent graduates in play development; and Busting Out!, our theatre training

program for teen girls. Each year we also support numerous young women, through mentorships in direction, dramaturgy, design, and producing.³⁶

4. Special Events and Initiatives —

- On International Women's Day we celebrate with Fem-Cab: the Five-Minute Feminist Cabaret.
- We host Panel Discussions bringing communities together for lively debate inspired by our play productions.
- We are spearheading a national campaign, *Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women's Initiative*, examining the present status of women in theatre (in partnership with the Playwright's Guild of Canada Women's Caucus and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres).

Our Mission: Developing and producing essential theatre by women.

Nightwood Theatre forges creative alliances among women artists from diverse backgrounds to develop and produce innovative Canadian theatre. We produce original Canadian plays and works from the contemporary international repertoire. We advocate for women, provide a training ground for emerging talent, promote diversity and engage artists in play development and theatre production.

Our Vision: Putting women centre stage.

Nightwood's overriding vision is to work towards a society free of discrimination and to cultivate a Canadian theatre ecology that recognizes and celebrates the excellence of its female practitioners.

Our Values: Using theatre as a tool of empowerment.

- Nightwood Theatre promotes artistic innovation and diversity of expression.
- We operate with a firm belief in women's equality and use theatre to challenge stereotypes and social assumptions about gender, race and sexuality.

- We believe theatre is a communal experience wherein differences can be shared and celebrated.
- We are driven by creative exchange not exclusivity.
- We see mentorship as essential, sharing knowledge with emerging talent, and seeding a new generation of female artists in Canada.
- We think theatre should be entertaining but also believe in its ability to challenge society.
- At the very core, we believe theatre is a tool of empowerment, both for the individual and for the collective as a whole.

This is a fascinating document for what it says and does not say. On one hand, the word “feminist” is not used (although it is used in many other company statements), but at the same time, the document clearly and adamantly outlines a feminist vision of the world. In fact, it can be read as a culmination of all the previous mandate statements, incorporating new play development, new artist development and mentorship, commitment to diversity, political advocacy, Canadian culture, and theatre’s place in the international feminist movement.

2006: CAST IRON

One thing that has remained consistent at Nightwood is the opportunity for individual movement and growth within the company’s framework. *Cast Iron* by Lisa Codrington, a finalist for the 2006 Governor General’s Award, provides a pertinent example of how a play (and people) may develop within various contexts and programs. *Cast Iron* grew out of Write from the Hip and was workshopped at both the 2002 and 2003 “Groundswell Festivals.”³⁷ It received a full production in the spring of 2005, produced in association with Obsidian Theatre, directed by ahdri zhina mandiola and starring Alison Sealy-Smith, and went on tour to Barbados that fall. Not only does this example demonstrate how plays continue to flower at Nightwood, but it also illustrates the long-term commitment artists have made to the company. ahdri zhina

mandiela directed, and Alison Sealy-Smith acted in, a play called *One Bedroom With Dignity*, written by Lillian Allen and produced at the 1987 “Groundswell Festival.” Since that initial involvement, the two women have been involved with Nightwood in a multitude of capacities. For example, mandiela’s own play, *dark diaspora... in DUB*, first appeared at the 1990 “Groundswell,” and Alison Sealy-Smith has acted in and directed many Nightwood shows, including *The Wonder of Man* and *Martha and Elvira* by Diana Braithwaite, both presented as part of *The Wonder Quartet* in 1992. They each founded their own companies—mandiela’s b current and Sealy-Smith’s Obsidian—, which have done co-productions with Nightwood. As for Lisa Codrington, the creator of *Cast Iron*, she has become the current coordinator of Write From the Hip—another instance of artists nurturing the next generation of artists in turn.

2006: PRODUCING FEMINIST THEATRE — MONICA ESTEVES

In a 2006 interview,³⁸ producer Monica Esteves detailed some of the recent funding challenges Nightwood faced. Its high-profile production of *Mathilde* garnered rave critical reviews but did not reach its box-office target. Furthermore, at that time, the company was in the process of restructuring the board of directors and staff. On the upside, Esteves was pleased with the new website and other new marketing initiatives, but she expresses concern about broadening Nightwood’s audience base:

The organization has a limited amount of programming, one–two mainstage productions per year. An arts organization needs a sufficient amount of programming in order for the public to understand the breadth of work, to stay in their memory annually, and to build a kind of relationship that is meaningful—meaningful enough for them to return and support us, either as audience members, financial supports or ideally as both. It’s challenging. We need to diversify our revenue base in order to move toward increased programming. For next season, we’re launching season passes (subscriptions, essentially), so you buy the

tickets in series. We're going to publish season brochures, even with only one to two productions per year, so our patrons feel part of something bigger, rather than a one-off show. So they can see the scope of the company's activities, new this year is Future Femme Fridays, so that they can see the breadth of the work that we're doing and things that we have in development and "Groundswell." We need our patrons to be return patrons, to create a more reliable earned revenue base. We need them to have a relationship to all aspects of the company, not solely when they incidentally see a little ad, because that's not relationship building. Also in the mix: we're nomadic. Sometimes you want to bang your head (or their heads) against a wall when patrons continually identify our productions to the theatre venue, i.e. "it must be a Tarragon show because it's at the Tarragon theatre."

As a producer, Esteves's main concern is funding, and the first level of that support comes from the ticket-buying public:

Our first objective is to have our audience connect to Nightwood via the art. Without that, additional appeals for donations and other support are extremely difficult. Nightwood has tons of potential to significantly increase our earned revenue (box office) base. From there, we would be better positioned to increase our private sector revenue. At this time, only 11.7 percent of our annual revenues come through the box office and sales. Public sector funding is competitive and underfunded. The [arts] councils certainly won't increase our base operational funding unless our activity is also going up. At this time, Nightwood is 53 percent funded by the public sector. We need to lower this percentage, perhaps to 30–35 percent. We're ready to grow...there will be growing pains, but I think we set up a really good plan for ourselves for the next five years. It's a strong blueprint or map with many checkpoints: this is

where we need to be by here, the size of our board, what kind of women are on it, our supporters, what's on our mainstage, what's in development. But all growth requires some managed risk.

Esteves's comments reflect the ongoing influence of arts councils and funding organizations, when she remarks, for example, on the requirements by the Ontario Arts Council that boards be made up of percentages representing certain sectors: artists and fundraisers.

According to Esteves, the budget for Nightwood has floated between \$400,000 and \$500,000 for the last few years, depending on the level of activity and production. For 2007, it was estimated to be at almost \$600,000.³⁹ But only about \$170,000 of that comes from funding sources, including foundations and the three levels of government arts councils. The remainder must be raised by Nightwood—a daunting prospect even for an experienced and energetic producer like Esteves. She relies on the success of certain high-profile shows to raise awareness of Nightwood among theatregoers and patrons. Frustratingly, that challenge has less to do with the specifically feminist mandate of Nightwood's shows, and more to do with theatregoing trends in Toronto in general; according to Esteves, when people are regularly going out to see theatre, they see all types, but when the trend falls off, the mid-sized and smaller companies suffer the most.

2006: AN INTERVIEW WITH KELLY THORNTON

Kelly Thornton has taken on a unique challenge in piloting Nightwood into the twenty-first century. The following is an interview from 2006, conducted prior to her maternity leave, and represents a bold vision of where the company is headed.

Was the move to this new location as smooth as you had hoped?

KT: Well, it's fantastic to be in this building. Certainly we felt very isolated over at 9 Saint Nicholas, six flights up. Plays like *The*

Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God couldn't even rehearse there because it was so inaccessible and you couldn't get seventy-year-olds climbing six flights without an elevator. The [Distillery] District took about a year to wake up in terms of getting people down here, but it's been great to have our studio and our offices in an arts district, working with other arts organizations in the Case Goods Building. And the plan has always been to bring the work home to the Young Centre for the Performing Arts so that our office and performance venues are together in the same district... But ultimately I think where Monica [Esteves] and I are going, is to start talking about the possibility of actually having our own venue.

Somewhere in the Distillery District?

KT: I'll give you my big dream. When I took over I had a dream of starting a national women's cultural centre. It would have like-minded organizations, like Women in Film and Television, Toronto Women's Bookstore, female-driven recording studios, a national gallery, the gamut of women in culture. Because in every discipline we're under-represented. Monica Esteves, our new producer, was stage managing "Groundswell" during my first week at Nightwood and I told her about this little dream, and she was a very feisty stage manager at that point, and she said "Let me at it, I'll help you do that. That would be great, let's do it!" And, you know, five years later that whole dream has been reignited, and she's making a lot of headway into trying to cultivate those philanthropic relationships so that we can actually start a capital campaign.

Is part of the motivation to network, and to build Nightwood's profile?

KT: I really feel like it would be an opportunity to cross-pollinate audiences, share with people that are interested in women's stories, as I think we all have kind of existed on our own islands. It kills me, after twenty-six years, people don't know, so many women say, "Oh, I've never heard of Nightwood." Or, "I thought that was a Tarragon show." Since I started in 2001, I remember

talking to the board of directors that were hiring me and saying, we just need to take up more space, we need to really put it out there. I think we've had a huge impact over the years on women's careers, and yet we aren't getting the bang for our buck in terms of our profile.

Has any of this been related to the Women's Initiative that you've been involved with, along with Hope McIntyre and the Playwright's Guild?

KT: They're not completely connected, but that's an important initiative and I was one of the people that spearheaded it. Hope [McIntyre] and I really took it on and started the national committee and the report is coming out. The numbers are now more concrete, statistically proven. I always felt like Nightwood's mandate is, in part, to develop and produce Canadian artists' work, but I also feel like we should be advocates for the status of women in Canadian theatre, that we have a bigger mandate than some [other] theatre companies. Bob Crew from *The Toronto Star* [newspaper] asked me in one of my first interviews for Nightwood, "What's the point of a feminist theatre company in the twenty-first century?" And I said, "That's right Bob, it's a done deal. Boy, this liberation's been fantastic for all of us!" It's a façade of equality that people read as part of a whole post-feminist era. They think it's passé, not something we should be focused on.

Have you been having face-to-face meetings with the national committee for the Women's Initiative?

KT: Because they're from all over Canada, we engage in a variety of things. We do a lot of email. That's generally how we communicate. And Hope is really the engine behind keeping the national committee together and organized. With the survey, for instance, the committee was trying to lobby people in their regions to make sure that the surveys were filled out. You know, Rina [Fraticeilli's] numbers came out and it changed for a time and then everybody fell back to sleep and nothing really changed.

You know, they changed by five percent, small increments of success. But what we are trying to do with so little funding—we have literally carried it on our backs, Hope and Rebecca [Burton] and I—is to now try and put into place an action plan so that there are specific actions that we can take instead of just ranting about the inequity. We have to look at the trends and what they mean and how can Canadian artistic directors take it on and not let this issue fall asleep. A lot of it has to do with mentorship and getting women into training positions in those theatres and giving them opportunity in the theatres where they haven't previously enjoyed opportunity. You'll see that there's different regions that the women's profile is higher, but often it still is rooted in companies that have women artistic directors, that were founded by the female artistic directors. The numbers show: the richer the theatre, the less women there are. Where there's more money, for instance in the big regionals, there's not as much presence. And it's got to change in a way that our male peers don't feel like they're under attack and they don't spend all their energy being defensive, and they actually engage in the process of changing the landscape. I'm just saying, look at these numbers, and look at last year's numbers. People know that they have to wake up and recognize the rest of Canada's population. I think we have to start talking to the granting bodies about discussing gender as an issue, because it IS an issue and these numbers can now prove our point.

What have you determined through your strategic planning process?

KT: We were strategic planning the year of the second ["Hysteria"] festival, and we were looking at our centers of activity and suddenly realized that "Hysteria" didn't quite fit. What we determined was that, given our resources, our two main centres are play development/production, and youth initiatives. The youth initiatives actually feed into play development because many of the graduates from the youth programs move into "Groundswell." That's generally the idea, to develop young artists so they can enter the

professional field. Ultimately, if I have more resources, I'm going to grow the company, I would prefer to produce more plays.

What is the mandate now of "Groundswell"?

KT: I made it into a playwrights' unit, so it's six plays in development yearly. They sit in a playwrights' unit from January to August and we give them very clear attention dramaturgically for those six months and then we hold a festival of play readings. And they're music-stand play readings. Unless they're a collective creation and then we do it differently. Generally, each playwright produces at least two or three drafts. I accept scripts at different levels of development, but if it's a full-length play, you want an intensive dramaturgical relationship for eight months. So, that is about going through the process of page to stage. The playwrights get a thousand dollars each.

Speaking of moving from Write From the Hip to "Groundswell" to doing a production, can you talk about Cast Iron? That seems like a really good example.

KT: Lisa Codrington was still a student at Ryerson going to theatre school, and when we outreached for Write From the Hip, we outreached to all the schools as well. And so Lisa submitted and she got in, and she was developing this piece, I think she started it as a monologue exercise for theatre school. She performed it herself in the "Fringe Festival." So basically what had happened is, she developed it in "Hip." And Lisa Silverman, who started Write From the Hip, said, "This writer's incredible...!" ahndri zhina mandiola directed the "Hip" play, which was a fifteen-minute excerpt, but Lisa continued to develop it and then produced it in the "Fringe Festival," acting in it. And then she submitted it to "Groundswell" and I immediately programmed her in "Groundswell" because I thought it was pretty powerful. During the development in "Groundswell," at one point she started talking about mak[ing] it a multi-character play. She was going to go forward,

but then she kind of hit the wall when she started writing; she said, “I really think it’s Libya’s story in the nursing home.” And then, as we got closer to “Groundswell,” we started talking about the authenticity of the character. Lisa’s only in her early twenties and maybe the weight of having an older actor play that role might be good. So we thought about a variety of different actors, and came upon Alison Sealy-Smith, who’s Bajan-Canadian. That was fantastic, and we decided to cast her in “Groundswell,” and the audience was in awe. She sat in a chair with a music stand to her right and went into multiple characters just by the twist of her body. She did a brilliant job and people loved it. Strangely enough, after several public workshops, where nobody ever said a word about dialect issues, some of the reviews for the production [were quite harsh]: how dare we put a play in dialect on stage, you can’t understand a thing. Other reviewers retorted, if you’re willing to listen, you can understand completely. We had big discussions around this and cited the challenge of comprehending Shakespeare as an audience member when one has a virgin ear, yet no reviewer would implore boycotting that.⁴⁰ But the central focus was definitely for a community that was not necessarily the predominant community.

And did that community come?

KT: The Black community did come. And basically, both dailies, *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, directly said, “Don’t go.” The theatregoing audience that is predominantly white didn’t attend the way they should have, I think, and that’s kind of tragic. And I kept running into people during the run who said, “I went to it last night. I understood everything!” So, you know, that’s the challenge, and that’s the risk. I think that one thing *Nightwood* is known for is taking risks and putting difficult work on stage and challenging its audience. So in that way I was incredibly proud to do it. We did a panel during International Women’s Day called “Talking Black: Canadian women speak out on the politics of language.” It was made up of a powerhouse cast of Canadian

women and they all had a very, very exciting discussion. Lisa's play then went on to Barbados this year. I think it's an important piece of Canadian theatre because it broke ground. [There is a] huge Caribbean population in Canada and certainly they deserve theatre that's focused toward them.

Nightwood seems to be developing a relationship with the Banff Playwrights Colony [play development program]?

KT: I applied to Banff with *China Doll* and we got in, and then the same thing happened with *Cast Iron*. With *Cast Iron*, I thought the best person to go is Alison, because she can speak [the dialect, and] Alison also has dramaturgical skills and she certainly contributed to the dramaturgical process of that play's development. So she and Lisa went, but it was under the banner of Nightwood. I think Banff respects Nightwood and sees that we're developing good work and they want to help support that work. And certainly *Mathilde* came out of Banff too. I was there with *China Doll*, and *Mathilde*'s author, Véronique [Olmi], was brought in through Canada Council. There's a France–Canada cultural exchange that they do at Banff, where they bring writers from France and get Canadian translators to translate them. So Morwyn Brebner was out there with Véronique and I was there with Marjorie, and you're allowed to go and sit in on other readings and so I sat in on a reading and I was amazed at what an intense play it was. It was several years later, when I took *The Danish Play* to Edmonton for the "Magnetic North Festival," that On the Verge [a play development program at the "Magnetic North Festival"] asked me to direct *Mathilde*.

So after Mathilde in 2006, what's next in 2007?

KT: [Because some shows in development are not ready] what we're going to do is plays in advanced development as showcases on our mainstage. We're also going to remount *The Danish Play*. It was supposed to come back to Toronto. It played a hundred-seat

theatre in 2002 and sold out and people couldn't get in. People all along have said, "What happened to *The Danish Play*, we wanted to see it." So now, almost five years later, we've decided we're going to bring it back to Toronto, also because we're trying to build an audience for a two-hundred-seat house. And it's challenging, like, *Mathilde* is not—surprisingly enough—not selling as well as you think it should. We're trying to build that venue for ourselves and build an audience for it. I think *The Danish Play* is a great Canadian play—it kind of breaks my heart that nobody picked it up across Canada. [And] we're also going to do *Crave* by Sarah Kane.

And what about the play development work?

KT: We're calling it "Future Femme Fridays," where we take one [Friday] during *The Danish Play* and two during *Crave* and present advanced plays in development that are previews of our following season. Because we have three plays that are in development that we just want to take a little bit longer with, and show our audience, in a theatre setting, what's coming down the wire.

Thornton touches on a number of themes here, and the examples of *China Doll*, *Cast Iron*, and *Mathilde* are illuminating in terms of the play development process, the objective to reach new communities of audiences, and the frustrations of unsupportive critical response. As both Esteves and Thornton acknowledge, their challenge is to produce enough work and generate enough notice that Nightwood remains consistently in the public eye. The audiences and practitioners who have discovered and remained loyal to Nightwood over its long and fascinating history will continue to look forward to whatever is coming next, but the challenge is to broaden and strengthen that base of support and influence.

2007: "EXTREME WOMEN"

In 2007, the "Extreme Women" reading series introduced Toronto audiences to an array of plays by women writers from outside of Canada: *Bites* by Kay Adshead, and *Behzti (Dishonour)* by

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, both from the United Kingdom and both directed by Maja Ardal; and *The Princess Dramas* by the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, directed by Bea Pizano. The series harkens back to “Transformations” in 1985 — staged readings at the Theatre Centre that included *Masterpieces* by Sarah Daniels, directed by Mary Durkan; *War Babies* by Margaret Hollingsworth, directed by Mary Vingoe; *Portrait of Dora* by Hélène Cixous, directed by Banuta Rubess; and *Signs of Life* by Joan Schenkar, directed by Svetlana Zylín.

Nightwood took the inclusion of international work further by producing Sarah Kane’s *Crave* in the 2007 mainstage season. Thornton justified the mounting of a British play by arguing, “Nightwood’s mandate actually is new Canadian plays as well as works from the international contemporary repertoire, work that would otherwise not be done.”⁴¹ There was one precedent: Alisa Palmer had directed *One Flea Spare* by Naomi Wallace, an American, as part of Nightwood’s 1998 season. Furthermore, Thornton points out that, even when staging a non-Canadian work, the company’s focus is still on women’s writing, and that, to compensate, more emphasis can be placed on the Canadian woman director — and/or the translator, as in the case of Morwyn Brebner’s translation of *Mathilde*. With Sarah Kane’s *Crave* in 2007, as with *Mathilde*, there were no other professional Canadian companies at that time tackling non-Canadian plays that were also feminist, contemporary, challenging, and risky. As Thornton observes, Kane is a celebrated female playwright, and while her provocative work is produced in Europe, her profile has remained relatively low in North America — so it was up to Nightwood to take her on.

2007: AGE OF AROUSAL

Age of Arousal is another unique example to consider within Nightwood’s production history, as it is one of few plays that actually takes the history of the women’s movement as its subject matter. Written by Linda Griffiths, *Age of Arousal* premiered in Calgary at Alberta Theatre Projects’ “playRites Festival” in February 2007,

and was quickly picked up by Nightwood for a production in Toronto in November and December of that year. Griffiths had previously participated in “FemCab” in 1987 and “Groundswell” in 1990, and *Age of Arousal* was read as part of the “Future Femme Fridays” reading series in March 2007 before Nightwood’s full production.⁴²

The play is set in London, England, in the year 1885, although according to Griffiths, the action does not happen “in historical reality but in a fabulist construct—an idea, a dream of Victorian England.”⁴³ Although she was first inspired by the novel *The Odd Women* by George Gissing (published in 1893), Griffiths says that her “own research on the women’s suffrage movement and the Victorian age took precedence over the novel.”⁴⁴ The central character is Rhoda, a New Woman who runs a secretarial school with her lover, Mary, a heroine and martyr of the suffrage movement. While the play takes place over a single year, Griffiths notes that it encompasses “important points in Britain’s struggle for women’s rights” that happened over a period of forty-five years, from 1869 to 1914. An outstanding experimental device is a technique that Griffiths calls “thoughtspeak,” the external vocalization of subtext: in the midst of otherwise realistic dialogue, suddenly “characters speak their thoughts in wild uncensored outpourings.”⁴⁵

In the extensive notes and essay that accompany the published version of *Age of Arousal*, justification is provided for considering its Victorian subject matter through the lens of contemporary concerns. In his foreword, Layne Coleman suggests, “Linda has chosen the Victorian age as the ship that will carry her richest cargo, and she has chosen well. This age is the one Linda would be most comfortable in. But this is not a look back in time. This play is a cry to race towards the present.”⁴⁶ The play may be about another era, “but inside it is an age remarkably like your own, an age when women have to fight for everything.”⁴⁷ After conducting research into the early women’s movement and reading books by Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Kate Millet for the first time, Griffiths concluded, “Above all, I saw that the suffragettes were frighteningly contemporary.”⁴⁸

The suffrage movement is considered to be the First Wave of feminism, while the 1960s through the early 1980s was the Second Wave, and we are currently in the Third. As we have seen, identity, representation, and cultural production are issues particularly pertinent to Third Wave feminism, a movement sometimes criticized for its preoccupation with personal choice, popular culture, and sexual freedom. In this construction, a supposedly unified feminist agenda of the earlier Waves has been fragmented by an individualized feminism, nearly unrecognizable to those earlier, more serious struggles. But *Age of Arousal* refutes this construction. What Griffiths accomplishes in *Age of Arousal* is a kind of reversal, taking us back to the First Wave with a cast of characters who are as passionate, contradictory, rebellious, and sexually aware as we might imagine ourselves to be in the Third Wave. *Age of Arousal* reminds us of earlier incarnations of contemporary feminist problems, and asks us how far we have come.

As its title suggests, *Age of Arousal* concentrates more on the struggle for women's sexual liberation than on the right to vote. Griffiths writes, "The themes and characters of that age came bursting out of the keyboard, not as dry historical figures, but sexual and lubricious, explosive and contradictory."⁴⁹ Griffiths's preoccupation with sexuality works especially well onstage in production, embodied in her actors. The characters they play struggle to reconcile their biology with their newly won freedom to pursue education, careers, and independence. All of the characters are grappling with their sexuality in one way or another. The main character, Rhoda, is caught between her love for Mary and her attraction to the male doctor, Everard. One of the secretarial students, Virginia, embraces her celibacy gladly, while her sister Alice chooses to travel to Berlin and dress as a man. But it is their youngest sister, Monica, for whom sexuality is the greatest key to political awakening; Griffiths uses Monica to voice the philosophy of emancipation through sexual freedom, or "free lovism," as the character calls it. To her first lover, Everard, Monica proclaims, "Physical liberty is the personal expression of revolutionary change" and then continues in the "thought-

speak” subtext: “*I know the glory of my quim.*”⁵⁰ To her rival, Rhoda, Monica is unabashed: “Physically awakened women are a force to be reckoned with—I am beginning to see this power, to know its strength, its reality.”⁵¹ Her sister Alice takes a much dimmer view of the value of sexual liberation: “This is the future, emancipated women claiming their bodies in order to frig as many men as they possibly can.”⁵² But Monica is as much a pioneer in her way as the suffragists, reforming her culture and, ultimately, our own, through her political promiscuity.

Each Wave of feminism has been about choices for women, often won through the pleasures and hazards of female friendship. As Alice says, “The bonds between women are laughable to the world, but they are marriages in a sense, and they may be betrayed.”⁵³ Most explicitly, Third Wave feminism has not been afraid to address questions of conflict between women, particularly when conflict arises over differing opinions of what constitute good choices. This is summed up in an interesting way between Mary and Rhoda, as they debate bringing in new pupils to their school:

Rhoda: I shouldn’t have invited them. Suddenly I hate them —

Mary: Then you hate women, then our struggle is for nothing.

Rhoda: So sick of prompting and praising, only to have them put the shackles back on their own wrists.⁵⁴

Griffiths acknowledges an acute awareness of these issues when she writes of her subject matter: “Here were the contradictions, hypocrisies and bizarre scenarios of the sex war. I felt it was a good time to admit all the flaws of the struggle while still popping the champagne.”⁵⁵ What makes this play most exciting for Nightwood’s audience is Griffiths’s understanding of the way issues continue to resonate, still unresolved, from the awakening Victorians to the conflicted couples of today: “These are our ancestors. These long-forgotten laws continue to have an impact on

us. Behaviours and beliefs echo for generations after, reverberating into the perfect condos of young married couples, sneaking into the air systems of family homes, polluting the atmosphere as we all attempt the oh-so-delicate balance of love, sex and the outside world.”⁵⁶

2008: EXPANSION, REFLECTION, MENTORSHIP

As we have seen, Nightwood has always aimed to reach a wide audience. *Mass/Age* was performed in a tent at Harbourfront; *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* went on a national tour; “Groundswell” has nurtured playwrights from coast to coast; and recent shows like *Cast Iron* and *The Danish Play* have even gone international. Thirty years into its history, the language used by Nightwood’s producer and artistic director continues to articulate a desire for growth and expansion.

In the 11 March 2008 newsletter, Monica Esteves wrote, “At a time when Nightwood has been growing in every direction, I’m delighted at this opportunity to broaden our reach, and expose a new audience community to bold theatrical excellence by women.”⁵⁷ She was referring to a partnered production of *Wild Dogs*, part of a “Berkeley Street Project” in which Nightwood and two other contemporary theatre companies—Studio 180 and Necessary Angel—would each produce a play as part of the Canadian Stage Company’s subscription season. There is a nice sense of history behind this announcement, since Necessary Angel was one of the companies that founded the original Theatre Centre with Nightwood. *Wild Dogs* was produced in association with the Canadian Stage Company at the Berkeley Street Theatre, in October and November 2008.

In fact, Esteves announced in the same newsletter, all of Nightwood’s 2008/09 programming activity would be “presented within the Berkeley Complex—a comfort to our nomadic company until we get a home of our own.” Despite its relatively new office and studio space in the Distillery District, and easy access to the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located in the same complex, Nightwood clearly feels the need to bring its shows out into the

larger city, to theatres with a subscription audience and a national profile. After producing *Mathilde*, *Crave*, and *The Danish Play* at the Young Centre, *a nanking winter* and *Age of Arousal* went offsite to the Factory Theatre, and *Wild Dogs* went to the Berkeley.

In his 2007 book *City Stages: Urban Space in a Global City*, Michael McKinnie argues that for a theatre company to own a building, or at least to occupy one for a long period of time, is an important sign of authority and maturity.⁵⁸ Interestingly, McKinnie uses the examples of Buddies in Bad Times and Necessary Angel, two companies that started out with Nightwood at the Theatre Centre. While Buddies in Bad Times only leases its space at 12 Alexander from the city, the proximity of that address to Toronto's Gay Village establishes a strong sense that the company is in its natural home, and this in turn gives the theatre legitimacy.⁵⁹ McKinnie also cites Necessary Angel, in that the company has cleverly created theatre spaces where none existed, converting buildings in order to stage site-specific, environmental productions — *Tamara* at Strachan House, for example, or *Coming Through Slaughter* at the Silver Dollar Tavern — and making that innovative use of location integral to its identity.⁶⁰ Since the 1980s, when Women's Cultural Building initiated the "Five Minute Feminist Cabaret," feminists in Toronto have wanted a building, too. But unlike the example of Buddies and the Gay Village, no neighbourhood was an obvious natural home for a women's company. And unlike Necessary Angel, Nightwood did not require such innovative spaces for its shows. Particularly since Nightwood markets itself as a "national" company, it needs a mainstream, accessible, reasonably comfortable location. In the Distillery District, Nightwood has an office space, but no claim to any one theatre space — it shares its studio with Tapestry, and the Young Centre with George Brown College, Soulepper, and others. One could argue that the Distillery District itself — with its retail shops and restaurants, a brewery, and so on — is too diverse and maybe even too "entertainment"-focused to be a place for political theatre. Maybe Thornton and Esteves are right to suspect that true recognition and authority will only come with

owning and inhabiting one visible property, exclusively mandated for women's art.

Another document from March of 2008 marked the first time that Nightwood had released an "Artistic and Financial Mid-Season Review." In the accompanying letter, Thornton and Esteves write, "We have experienced a 27% growth in our annual operations over the past three seasons" and project that the collaboration with the Canadian Stage Company "will further raise our profile and contribute to a 44% increase in our earned revenue (box office)."⁶¹ The review includes a graph that shows the increase in fees to artists against programming expenditures: in 2005/2006, fees to artists were just over \$100,000, with programming expenditures coming in just under. In 2008/2009, the programming expenditures are shown at just over \$100,000, while artists' fees have shot up to over \$200,000.

Another graph shows the percentage of revenue from box office, private sector fundraising, public support, and other earned revenue. A related chart explains that the 2008/2009 "Organizational Priorities" include a triad revenue formula, comprised equally of private, public, and earned revenues; the chart predicts a forty-five percent increase in box-office revenue (accomplished through the collaboration with the Canadian Stage Company and a focused passholder campaign), a twenty-nine percent increase in corporate sponsorship, and a nine percent increase in overall private support. This same chart explains that another objective is to expand governance and resources structures to include broader community representation, which is to be accomplished by increasing the board membership to ten or twelve; establishing an advisory council of five to seven; and establishing an Emeritus Board of Directors, which would include Maja Ardal, who served as interim artistic director during Thornton's maternity leave. Again, the chart articulates the priority of increasing Nightwood's profile among larger and broader communities through increased attendance and partnerships with other organizations.

On the last page of the review, further graphs provide comparative statistics from the 1982 and 2006 national studies on

women in Canadian theatre, and a pie chart on how Nightwood combats the under-representation of women through mentorship programs. The review observes, “Every week, we receive inquiries about internship opportunities and there is rarely a day when an intern is not in the office or studio. In 2007, over 35 young women participated in an internship or mentorship at Nightwood for periods spanning one to twelve months in various fields” – direction and performance; playwrighting; production and management; and others.

To put a public face on some of the young women it has mentored behind the scenes, Nightwood has offered profiles in newsletters and in fundraising letters. Of course, Lisa Codrington is a success story – someone who began in a mentoring program, which she now runs. Another example is Ruth Madoc-Jones, profiled in the 7 December 2007 fundraising letter. Madoc-Jones enthuses, “I began my relationship with Nightwood Theatre as an artist, as a feminist, and as a fan.” She was the associate festival coordinator for the 2002 “Groundswell,” funded by a Theatre Ontario grant. She was then an associate artistic director to Kelly Thornton, assistant directing *The Danish Play* and *Finding Regina*, this time through a Canada Council grant. Madoc-Jones “worked as a dramaturge with the playwright’s unit and was the associate producer for Groundswell that year.” Finally, she took on the task of directing *a nanking winter*. This progression illustrates the careful way that Nightwood helped her develop her professional skills. As Madoc-Jones sums it up, “The support I received early in my career from Nightwood was immeasurable,” and in turn, she is committed to providing mentorship as a workshop leader for Nightwood’s youth programs.⁶²

Another example of this increased emphasis on mentorship comes in the form of new plans for “Groundswell.” According to the review, in 2009, “Groundswell” would take on a greater focus: “double the amount of workshop time with actors, a production designer, focused marketing, and six additional months of dramaturgy leading up to the staged readings.”⁶³ In the mid-season review, Thornton and Esteves speak of a desire to maximize the

annual investment in new work and to provide playwrights with a more public context for the readings. The playwrights represented at the 2009 “Groundswell” would come from Vancouver, Calgary, and Saskatoon, as well as Toronto. Again, the emphasis at Nightwood is clearly on raising profiles – of the women they mentor, the playwrights they produce, and of the company itself. Esteves and Thornton project an ambitious and energetic optimism, an attitude that takes credit for their past accomplishments and insists that Nightwood will be recognized for all of its initiatives in the future.

SELECTING THE PLAYS; COMING FULL CIRCLE

If expansion and profile-raising have been ongoing administrative concerns for Nightwood since the beginning, the concomitant artistic challenge has been to create or select plays that will promote women’s views and experiences of the world. Creating theatre from other sources, such as poems, visual art, and even newspaper articles, has been a recurring thread in Nightwood’s history – a way to connect theatre to discoveries by women artists and activists in other fields. Nightwood is not alone in turning to literary adaptation: England’s Shared Experience, for example, is a company run by two women (Nancy Meckler and Polly Teale), who stage adaptations of novels. Nightwood’s very first production was an adaptation of a novel, and *Wild Dogs* is the latest example. Described as being “arranged for the stage” by Anne Hardcastle, the play was adapted from the Canadian novel by Helen Humphreys, and was directed by Kelly Thornton.

Wild Dogs also highlights Nightwood’s commitment throughout its history to experimenting with form. In the company newsletter, *Wild Dogs* is described as following in the footsteps of *Crave* because of its experimentation: “When Nightwood produced Sarah Kane’s *Crave* last season, we were inspired in the departure from a traditional narrative form.” Playing with form and presentation began with Nightwood’s first collectives; in a way, an eagerness to embrace innovative form has been a way for the company to distance itself from the “social issues only” stereotype

that could accrue to the feminist mandate. So while the content might come from a factual source, it is equally important that the substance be transformed into art. As one of Nightwood's most recent productions, *Wild Dogs* is a particularly nice amalgam and illustration of all these concerns: the desire for a wider audience base (through staging the play at the Berkeley Street Theatre); the connection to literary adaptation; a willingness to experiment with form; and, of course, a commitment to promoting women's work and exploring feminist ideas.

