

# Four

## Nightwood and Feminist Theory

### CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMINIST THEATRE

As we have seen in previous chapters, at its inception Nightwood participated in a widespread English-language women's theatre movement that had already been well established in the United States and Britain. As Phyllis Mael points out in an article about American feminist theatre published in *Chrysalis* magazine in April 1980, over two hundred plays by women were published between 1960 and 1980, and many more unpublished works were produced by the dozens of active feminist theatres throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> Mael describes the wide variety of plays found within this movement, observing that "the voices of the resisting writers reflect – in both content and form – the broad spectrum of opinion and expression of women's culture." She specifically highlights the difference between feminist theatres that wish to portray women in positions of strength and those that refuse to show only positive images because they want to spur their audience toward social change. She also categorizes the difference between women writers who embrace the feminist label and those who reject it; those who espouse the unique perceptions of women and those who deny the existence of a specifically female sensibility; those who state that their goals are primarily aesthetic and those who insist that all aesthetic choices are also political; those who wish to depict the female condition and those who want to change it; and those who want to speak only to women and those who seek an audience of both men and women.<sup>2</sup>

By 1980, scholars studying the phenomenon of feminist theatre were already well aware of the diversity within the genre, although perhaps reluctant to start labelling those divisions as such for fear of undermining what was still a new movement. The emphasis was instead on celebrating the quantity of plays being created by women and noting the emergence of common themes that had previously been ignored, such as the exploration of various kinds of relationships between women.

In Part Two of the same *Chrysalis* article, Rosemary Curb focuses on some characteristics of the feminist theatre companies she surveyed, claiming that “all across this continent, there are probably forty or fifty theaters that call themselves ‘feminist’ rehearsing and performing right now.”<sup>3</sup> Like Mael, she points out that not all these companies necessarily use the feminist label publicly, some preferring “anti-sexist” or “humanist” or “lesbian,” and so on.<sup>4</sup> She also observes that some of the companies sprang up to do one show and dissolved afterwards, while others became well established. An interesting distinction is made between theatres that grow out of consciousness-raising efforts, which tend to see their aims as more political than theatrically ambitious, and those “formed in response to the artistic frustrations of women, and which serve as showcases for female talent in the performing arts.”<sup>5</sup>

Nightwood clearly belongs in this second category, but also illustrates Curb’s belief that there is considerable overlap between the two kinds of theatres, especially once a company has been around for a while; she claims that “feminist theaters which have been thriving for more than two or three years see artistic and political commitments as interconnected and interdependent.” Certainly, Nightwood’s awareness of itself as a voice for women developed alongside its establishment as an artistic presence in the Toronto community.

Curb goes on to enumerate other traits common to the theatre companies she surveyed, all of which are also applicable to Nightwood at this early stage. She points out that at least half of the feminist theatres in operation were run as collectives, with members taking turns fulfilling various roles and functions: “About

two-thirds of the theaters create some plays through collective improvisation and list the theatre or all members of the collective as playwright. Most often a resident playwright provides an idea and a partial script which the group expands.”<sup>6</sup> This is an accurate description of many of Nightwood’s earliest productions and working models, from the *Glazed Tempera*, *Mass/Age*, and *Peace Banquet* collectives to the collective with a single author that produced *Smoke Damage*.

The companies Curb surveyed showed a marked similarity in the kinds of plays they produced, even in collective creations. For example, retellings of Greek myths were common, as were shows that dramatized the lives of women pioneers. Nightwood fits the pattern with its productions of *Antigone* and *Peace Banquet* (subtitled “ancient Greece meets the atomic age”) in 1983, and *Love and Work Enough*, which celebrated Ontario pioneer women, in 1984. *Love and Work Enough* demonstrates similarities to an American play called *Time is Passing*, the story of Minnesota women at the turn of the twentieth century, which was developed by the Minneapolis-based company Circle of the Witch to celebrate the United States Bicentennial in 1976. An hour-long documentary-drama, *Time is Passing* incorporated vignettes about women’s history, historical songs, and slides, and was based on actual documents from the period, such as letters, newspaper articles, and journal entries, giving it a strong sense of historical authenticity. Like *Love and Work Enough*, *Time is Passing* played for a variety of groups and toured to schools, bringing a form of feminism to what might be assumed to be more conservative audiences.<sup>7</sup>

In her article, Curb notes that “feminist theaters which present plays on social or political issues do primary research into the problem.”<sup>8</sup> Nightwood again follows this pattern, particularly in the case of *This is For You*, *Anna* and *Smoke Damage*, but also with many of its other shows, such as *Re-Production*, which was written by Amanda Hale, dealt with reproductive issues, and was performed in 1984 at an Ottawa conference for the National Association of Women and the Law. In cases where there was a single author for a collective creation, she would usually do considerable

background research, which was then passed on to the actors as material to spark improvisation before taking a final written form.<sup>9</sup> Collective members would educate themselves on the issues and context of their project — a dramaturgical technique especially appropriate for feminist consciousness-raising.

About a quarter of the companies surveyed had men participating in the creation of works, often because they had valuable theatre skills and were personally committed to feminism. Some of the early Nightwood collectives, such as *Mass/Age* and *Peace Banquet*, included men, and men have almost always been involved in various capacities on productions throughout the years.

Like most women's theatres in the United States, Nightwood does not rely on ticket sales as its primary source of funding. Curb states that for most women's theatres, "major sources of income are grants, donations from members and friends, tours, fees, ticket sales, workshops, and classes."<sup>10</sup> According to Curb's study, in the U.S. in 1980, only about a quarter of women's theatres paid any salaries at all. Nightwood, however, has always insisted on paying salaries to its theatre workers. In its applications for funding, Nightwood has frequently addressed the need to pay artists a decent wage for their work and the struggle to find a balance between artists' fees and administrative costs. For example, in a 1992 application to the Canada Council for an operating grant of \$60,000, artistic director Kate Lushington included a breakdown of administrative costs: artists' fees for the 1990/91 season were \$50,695, while administrative salaries were \$48,340; in 1991/92, the figures were \$69,765 and \$42,200 (plus a grant from the Ministry of Culture and Communications for an administrative intern position). For the 1992/93 season, Nightwood was projecting artists' fees of \$92,079, while administrative salaries were reduced to \$30,000, since there would be only two staff members, both on ten-month contracts. In 1995, the Nightwood board, in a document entitled "Values We Consider Important," declared "a commitment to paying all artists to affirm that women's work is of value." Another source of financial instability, which Curb bemoans, is the fact that most women's

theatres do not have their own performance spaces and must rely on rented or donated spaces; Nightwood has always had its own space, although not always fully adequate ones, as we have seen. Nightwood has operated primarily through grants and fundraising efforts and, in some years, revenue generated from its rental facility and workshop offerings.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LONGEVITY**

In 2009, Nightwood celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. The very fact that Nightwood has existed for so long makes it a kind of stalwart touchstone for women theatre-makers in Canada and assures its influence. In England, one of the first all-women theatre groups to gain national recognition was the Women's Theatre Group (WTG), founded in 1974. Goodman argues that groups such as WTG, Monstrous Regiment, and Siren have made a significant contribution to women's theatre simply because of their longevity. Like Nightwood, "WTG was one of the first groups to identify feminist issues as appropriate for representation in the theatre" and described itself as "a collective of six women who jointly implement the artistic and general policy of the group, to produce theatre about the many aspects of women's position in society and to create more work and opportunities for women."<sup>11</sup> Also like Nightwood, WTG adapted its mandate to "positively discriminate in favour of Black women and Lesbians," and struggled with the effects of government funding cuts to the arts in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> It is wonderfully helpful to have companies like WTG to compare with Nightwood, to illustrate that mandates, procedures, and priorities reflect the changing time periods in which these long-standing theatres exist.

### **WHAT TYPE OF FEMINISM DOES NIGHTWOOD REPRESENT?**

Nightwood's mandate and productions have explored and demonstrated many aspects of "feminisms," as defined by Sue-Ellen Case in her groundbreaking 1988 book *Feminism and Theatre*. Case thoroughly defines and explores three different kinds of feminist theatre: liberal, cultural, and materialist. Although much

has been written about feminist theatre since Case's book was published, many theorists have adopted her categories to some degree — even if only to disagree with them — in order to define the position from which they are beginning.<sup>13</sup> This continues to be true despite the fact that, recently, it has become more common to distinguish between the First, Second, and Third Waves of feminism as historical periods and sites of concern.

Many feminists, including Case, will caution against seeing these categories as strictly exclusive, since they can overlap considerably, and since a feminist might find that one perspective may be appropriate in certain cases, but not in others. As Gayle Austin points out, "In compensating for a past in which political biases were generally not clearly expressed and therefore 'invisible,' there is a danger of creating a present in which political lines are too clearly drawn."<sup>14</sup> In fact, many feminist theatre practitioners would not employ Case's terms at all, preferring a more generalized conception of a "feminist" as anyone interested in and supportive of their work. This might be a particularly appropriate attitude in the context of theatre, which is by nature collaborative, and which draws together a variety of people for their artistic skills more often than for their politics; anyone reasonably open-minded and compatible might be considered "feminist enough." In such a practical context, the Wave model can also be seen as unnecessarily divisive. Evoking a generational divide between Waves may be especially problematic for a company like Nightwood that works hard to foreground the continuity of its lineage and longevity, especially in its publicity materials.

Still, categories of feminism are useful analytical tools for discussing Nightwood's work, how it achieves particular aims, and why those aims change. Feminism, and feminist theatre, can sound like terms that represent a monolithic, coherent belief system, rather than a broad amalgamation of many positions and creative endeavours. The development of feminism has been a process of acknowledging and embracing the differences between women as well as their common causes; using adjectives such as "liberal" or "radical" serves as a qualifying and cautionary

reminder that quite differing attitudes and opinions may all claim to be feminist. Since Case's categories represent the first theorizing of feminist theatre, in the 1980s, when Nightwood was getting started, they are appropriate lenses with which to begin looking at Nightwood as a feminist company, and charting the process by which definitions become increasingly complex. The idea of process is particularly important, since the creation of theatre, the working out of feminist issues, and the act of defining oneself as an artist and a feminist are all very much ongoing. In a sense, these categories serve more to suggest the particular direction and nature of the process, rather than necessarily describing a finished product.

### **NIGHTWOOD AND LIBERAL FEMINISM**

Many aspects of Nightwood's operations and philosophy have demonstrated a predilection for what Sue-Ellen Case has termed liberal feminism. According to Case, liberal feminism developed out of liberal humanism and stresses women's parity with men, basing its analysis on "universal" values. Liberal feminism can be defined as an attempt to alter the existing social system from the inside, without dismantling the system as a whole. Typical liberal feminist projects involve getting more women politicians elected, improving access to jobs and education for women, and working toward legal reform. The liberal feminist position emphasizes equality between the sexes and downplays difference, aiming instead for a more equitable distribution of power within the current social order. In terms of theatre, a liberal feminist approach would involve creating more job opportunities for women theatre workers and pointing out inequities between the sexes in positions of power. The Equity in Canadian Theatre report is an example of a liberal feminist approach.

Theatre that adheres to a liberal feminist philosophy might be concerned with criticizing the portrayal of women characters in plays by men, with an eye to exposing stereotypes and bias and highlighting the paucity of strong roles for women actors. The theatre historian Heather Jones writes from the liberal position

when she argues that encouraging production of any and all plays by women, regardless of whether or not they could be defined as feminist, serves an inherently feminist aim.<sup>15</sup> Especially in its early years, Nightwood emphasized its commitment to women and women's work without highlighting the word "feminist" when describing the company. Some of its early productions, while issue-oriented, could not be described as specifically feminist, either: in 1981, for example, *Flashbacks of Tomorrow (Memorias del Mañana)* dealt with Latin American history, while the 1982 production *Mass/Age* was billed as "a multi-media spectacle of life in the nuclear age." Nonetheless, Nightwood was unique in being run by women and employing a large number of women. Kate Lushington has opined that there will only be real change in theatre when mediocre women have as many opportunities as mediocre men — her implication being that the minority of women who are employed and produced must be exceptional in every sense of the word.<sup>16</sup> Nightwood is significant as a place where women can find increased opportunities, including economic ones. In an article entitled "Alternative Visions," Janice Bryan, an actor involved with the 1988 "Groundswell Festival," praises feminist theatre because "it provides support for women economically and moral support. It is not necessarily political but it is economical."<sup>17</sup>

Mary Vingoe takes a slightly different, but still liberal, perspective when she argues that women's theatre should be judged by the same criteria as men's:

There's a point in the continuum where you need to fund something to get it off the ground, to make it healthy, and then there's a point where you hope that it could be thrown into the mix. If it is left outside for too long, that's not good. I mean, I would hate to see Nightwood theatre go to a different [arts council funding] jury than anybody else — that would be weird.<sup>18</sup>

Cynthia Grant remembers, "As a group we brought together aesthetic concerns which immediately took us into the realm of a

theatre of images ... we formed, through our shared concern, an innovative theatre company which would devote itself to explorations in style and content. Everyone should understand this today because our role, over time, has evolved into something quite different.”<sup>19</sup> The accident/intention dialectic was at play from the beginning: women who considered themselves feminists, but who saw their work as part of an international avant-garde, were defined by others because of the makeup of the company, not because of the nature of their work. Through the persistence of the feminist label, and the women’s own growing commitment to feminist politics, the label became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Meredith Levine has argued that Nightwood’s very formation was a radical act because it “affirmed that women writers and directors did exist and that women’s creative work had a right to be valued on par with men’s.”<sup>20</sup>

### **NIGHTWOOD AND CULTURAL FEMINISM**

Some aspects of Nightwood’s production record and collective structure align more closely with cultural feminism. In contrast to the liberal approach, cultural feminism bases its analysis on sexual difference and the separation of gender categories. In Case’s paradigm, cultural feminism (which is also sometimes called radical feminism) addresses a “female aesthetic” and seeks a separate women’s culture in order to provide feminist alternatives in theatre and other art forms, often in the belief that such a culture has existed throughout history, originating in ancient matriarchal societies. Radical feminist theatre seeks to bring women’s biological and sexual experiences to the stage, allying this biology with spiritual states that are believed to bring women closer to nature than men. Radical feminist theatre often involves rituals that celebrate biological cycles, women’s intuition, fertility, bonding, and nurturing. Women’s experiences and qualities are cast in the spiritual arena, rather than in the context of socio-political history.<sup>21</sup>

Those who do not subscribe to the theories of cultural feminism charge it with being “essentialist”: that is, operating under

the assumption that there are such things as essentially female qualities rather than merely learned and reinforced behaviours. The differences between women and men can be interpreted in either a liberal or a cultural way. For example, Julia Miles, the founder of The Women's Project in New York, has noted that a playwright must launch a "campaign to obtain a production," then deal with a team of other artists—directors, designers, and so on—and that for a female playwright, "this necessitates aggressive behavior on her part that is alien to most women."<sup>22</sup> At first this appears to be a cultural argument about innately feminine tendencies. But then Miles goes on to suggest that some women's discomfort in these situations could be due to the fact that, until fairly recently, girls did not have the same opportunity to participate on school sports teams and therefore have not had the experience of operating within a competitive unit.<sup>23</sup> So what appears to be a cultural feminist philosophy turns out to be a liberal argument for equal opportunities for girls. Post-modern feminist theorists such as Judith Butler have adamantly rejected what they see as essentialism, arguing that "female qualities" are learned behaviours, constructed and maintained by a system of binary opposition, which cultural feminism upholds rather than dismantles.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, certain techniques demonstrating a cultural feminist philosophy can provide powerful theatrical moments. In her study of American feminist theatres in the 1970s, Dinah Luise Leavitt has commented, "It may be premature to name ritual as an original or unique aspect of feminist theatre, yet one cannot avoid noticing the many elements of ritual in feminist drama and the many women's celebrations and rites being performed by theatre groups."<sup>25</sup> The element of ritual can be found in a number of Nightwood productions, most notably in the staging of *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*.

As the director of *Princess Pocahontas*, Muriel Miguel connects Nightwood with another strand in the lineage of experimental theatres. The historian Charlotte Canning has commented that many women who went on to found or work with feminist

theatres started off with one of the famous American experimental companies, such as Open Theater; this certainly includes Miguel, a founder of Spiderwoman Theater. As Canning points out, the women involved with early experimental companies learned two contradictory lessons. One was the value of acting and process techniques that reject a traditional, linear, Method-based paradigm. The other was the painful realization of sexism and discrimination within these companies, prompting the impulse to work on feminist theatre instead.<sup>26</sup> As with Nightwood, the awareness of sexism also led to a commitment to some form of collective structure, as a conscious disavowal of the patriarchal structures that had been rejected; Curb writes that “at least half of feminist theaters in existence in 1979 were organized as collectives and over two-thirds used a collective/collaborative process to create works for performance.”<sup>27</sup> The commitment to collectivity was an affirmation of the process of creation, on the means to an end rather than the end itself.<sup>28</sup> So the choice to work collectively comes out of a liberal desire for equal opportunity, but lends itself to a cultural feminist agenda of female sameness and solidarity.

### **NIGHTWOOD AND MATERIALIST FEMINISM**

As identified by Sue-Ellen Case, the third type of feminism is materialist: a system of analysis that places an emphasis on the material conditions of women’s lives, examining how factors such as race and class intersect with gender to determine the position of different women in different historical periods. While cultural feminism tends to be trans-historical (as in *Smoke Damage*), materialist feminism is very much rooted in the specific circumstances of women within their own cultural milieu. Materialist feminist theatre could include issue-based theatre that situates its debate within a specific set of references, identifying itself as socialist or Marxist-feminist, for example, or defining itself in terms of the race or ethnicity of its practitioners. Materialist feminism might also tend toward what has been called post-modern feminist performance: a style which points out and plays with questions of

subjectivity and gender identity, defining them as constructs and fragmenting much of what is traditionally considered theatre. Materialist feminism, to quote Jill Dolan, “deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations.”<sup>29</sup>

There is no clear linear progression in the three types of feminism Case outlines, nor can they be equated with particular time periods in Nightwood’s history. Elements of all three might be identifiable within a single Nightwood production. Because there are many people active within Nightwood at any given time, the women who make up Nightwood could easily encompass different attitudes and beliefs and never articulate that they are, in certain respects, in conflict.

### **APPLYING OTHER MODELS**

Of course, Sue-Ellen Case is not the only theorist to propose helpful categories of feminist theatre. Gayle Austin, in *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*, identifies three models for looking at stages in feminist criticism.<sup>30</sup> In stage one, the emphasis is on compensatory or contribution history, devoted to the work of “notable women” and women’s contributions to movements in male-written history. A Nightwood example would be the 1981 stage adaptation of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a short story written by the pioneering American feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892. Directed by Cynthia Grant and performed by Mary Vingoe, this one-woman show was one of Nightwood’s earliest productions and went on to be adapted for radio. It is a good example of how a feminist theatre may recover a neglected work by a “notable woman” of the past that deals directly with female consciousness.

*The Yellow Wallpaper* also relates to stage two of Austin’s model: an inquiry into women’s actual experiences in the past, exploring such primary sources as diaries, autobiographies, and oral history. An example here is Sonja Mills, who based her 2002 hit *The Danish Play* on the journals and poetry of her great-aunt, Agnete Ottosen, a member of the Danish resistance movement during

World War II. The third stage in Austin's model challenges the basic assumptions of historians regarding the division of historical periods. For example, in both the 1983 productions *This is For You, Anna* and *Smoke Damage*, trans-historical comparisons are made as the action moves back and forth between time periods and countries, in order to suggest the parallels in women's experiences of oppression.

Another three-stage model identified by Austin follows a similar progression. Here, the first stage critiques negative aspects of men's work about women. The 1987 collective creation *The Last Will and Testament of Lolita*, which attempts to reassess the character of Lolita from Vladimir Nabokov's classic novel, is a good example. The second stage focuses on the tradition of women writers; an example is Nightwood's 1986 production of *The Edge of the Earth is Too Near, Violette Leduc* by Jovette Marchessault. The publicity and program materials for this production featured extensive information about the real-life Violette Leduc, her writings, and her relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, as well as about Jovette Marchessault as an important lesbian feminist writer from Quebec. This was not the first time Nightwood had dealt with lesbian themes (*The True Story of Ida Johnson*, its very first production, implied a lesbian relationship), but it could be viewed as the first occasion where its work was placed explicitly within a lesbian feminist literary context and marketed to the gay and lesbian community. In Austin's model, the third stage begins to look at the differences between women writers, rather than just their differences from men. This important idea — that our experiences of gender can be endlessly complicated and problematized — runs as a theme throughout feminism and feminist theatre in the twenty-first century, and forms a central principle of contemporary Third Wave feminism.

### **DEVELOPING A DISTINCTIVELY FEMALE FORM OF THEATRE**

Practically speaking, many of the staging techniques commonly employed by Nightwood and other feminist theatres can be traced to the experimental and political theatres of the 1960s

and 1970s: episodic, circular structures; the use of songs; and transformational acting techniques. However, in their discussion of Megan Terry's work, for example, Breslauer and Keyssar identify her willingness to "exploit theater's liberty with time and place to conjoin previously disconnected elements of culture and history" as a technique particularly employed by feminist theatre. They argue that by subverting conventional representations of history and chronology, the spectator is allowed alternative ways to view the past and the present. Caryl Churchill's classic plays *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* provide ready examples.<sup>31</sup>

Breslauer and Keyssar argue that these kinds of techniques — "unprecedented historical representations and explicit intertextual gestures" — constitute a kind of dangerous history. Feminist artists simultaneously address what has gone on before — the absence of women from the stage, or what they perceive as women's misrepresentation — and attempt to sort out their own positions. This means acknowledging potential collusion or resistance to perpetuating stereotypes, and a constant attempt to imagine and create a new self without the old obstacles and inhibitions.

One of the strategies frequently employed by feminist (and other types of) theatre is to allow the *actor* to emerge as the speaking subject, hence the prevalence of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works dealing with the creation of personal identity, performed by the author. In the afterword to her 1990 play *Afrika Solo*, Djanet Sears uses a term attributed to the African-American feminist poet Audre Lorde, "autobio-mythography," in an attempt to describe the process by which she finds her place in the world through a combination of fact and fiction. The play is not strictly autobiographical, yet it is very much about Sears's struggle to define herself, and to represent this struggle and self onstage. For example, one of the specific ways the character grapples with identity is to change the spelling of her name from "Janet" to "Djanet." The submersion of self within a role could be seen as a loss of subjecthood. But when the actor is performing a statement about her own creative process and

belief system, the performance becomes less a submersion than a powerful act of personal communication and an affirmation of self.

Jill Dolan concludes that “giving up the notion of theater as a place to image those who are elsewhere erased is difficult, even as feminists debate the efficacy of theater as mimesis.”<sup>32</sup> Whether those who have been erased are lesbians, women of colour, or some other marginalized group, Dolan’s point is important: those who have yet to be adequately represented onstage and who have seldom had the opportunity to see themselves as subjects in the theatre will not be willing to give this up as a goal, no matter how theoretically problematic the construction of subjecthood may be. There is both pleasure and power in seeing oneself represented. This is not to say, however, that the theatre created from these perspectives will employ a naive realism or an essentialist insistence on identity. On the contrary, the experience of women of colour, for example, as doubly or triply erased in mainstream culture, may well provide an analysis based in personal experience that at the same time takes into account the constructed nature of identity. A good example here might be Nightwood’s 1992 production of *Do Not Adjust Your Set* by Diana Braithwaite, in which the theatre audience watches a day of role-reversal “television” in which all the people who are usually white are Black, and vice versa. Behind the parodic comedy is the acknowledgment that how we see ourselves represented affects how our identities are constructed.

In all of Nightwood’s productions, regardless of their form, the significance of the women onstage — as performers, feminists, and members of a women’s theatre company — informs the audience’s experience, and the particular nuances, of the representation. The presence of a female body onstage has always been erotically charged and therefore significant — for its novelty value, the suggestion of impropriety, the implications of voyeurism, or perhaps because of the weight of collective sexual signification — but only within the context of feminist theatre does female presence become synonymous with identity and subjecthood.

## **ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON FEMINISM: POST-MODERNISM**

In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that feminism has had a great impact on post-modernism, in that it has affected our understanding of aesthetic and political interactions at the level of representation. Feminism has influenced the way we understand the political to have an impact on the private and the public, changing the way we think about culture, knowledge, and art.<sup>33</sup> Feminism and post-modernism are most often conflated at the level of representation, especially when defining their cultural expression in art forms like theatre. The same characteristics are used to describe both feminist and post-modern theatre because both use techniques that denaturalize and question the dominant ideology.

While post-modernism is often criticized for its lack of a political agenda, Hutcheon argues that the existence of a critique is part of its very definition. She situates post-modernism as part of the “unfinished project of the 1960s” because it promotes a distrust of “ideologies of power and the power of ideologies.”<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, post-modernism is also less oppositional and idealistic than earlier movements and must acknowledge its complicity with the values it comments upon. Post-modern art, for example, may criticize and parody popular culture, even as it depends on references to popular culture for its own substance and simultaneously celebrates them on some level. According to Hutcheon, this dual nature, containing both critique and complicity, defines post-modernism, although one is always reminded that post-modernism, like feminism, is a shifting and multifaceted condition rather than something definite and monolithic.

Post-modernism and feminism become more alike as time goes on. Just as post-modernism continues the project of the 1960s without the same idealism and oppositional understanding that characterized those earlier movements (that sense of “us versus them”), so too does feminism move on from its rebirth in the sixties with ever more complexity and fragmentation. This is most evident in the current practice of distinguishing the Second Wave feminism of the sixties from the Third Wave that

is upon us now. Complicity is not full affirmation or adherence, and theorists such as Shannon Bell and Janelle Reinelt, among others, have embraced acknowledgment of complicity as a move toward opening feminism to its own “others.” Bell argues that the post-modern influence, by acknowledging complicity and incorporating parts of the dominant discourse, actually “improves” feminism by allowing it to explain the ideological loopholes in patriarchy—those occasions when patriarchy enables its own subversion. It is not simply “knowing one’s enemy,” but rather using one’s enemy against itself, or in the case of much Third Wave practice, actually embracing and reclaiming aspects of popular culture that were rejected by earlier feminists. The practice of reclaiming certain problematic labels comes to mind: embracing “girl,” “lady,” or “bitch,” for example, as ironically affirmative identifiers, and actively celebrating and recasting denigrated aspects of traditional feminine work, such as crafts and sewing.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the characteristics that are defined (by Hutcheon, Reinelt, and Bell) as post-modern can also be applied to much feminist theatre, but the feminist insistence on truth, meaning, and a message of social equality tends to prevent feminist theatre from being post-modern in an uncomplicated way. Some of the most obvious post-modern qualities are the transgression of discrete boundaries between genres, and the blurring of distinctions between private and public. A good example is ahdri zhina mandiel’s play *dark diaspora... in DUB*, which began as a “Groundswell” piece and was sponsored by Nightwood for the “Toronto Fringe Festival” in 1991. The play is actually a series of poems, which are spoken and danced in performance, much in the manner of Ntozake Shange’s profound work *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976). Like that earlier work, *dark diaspora... in DUB* is performed by a group of women, rather than by an individual, which serves to break up the unitary subject position. Furthermore, the play blurs public instances of racism and economic hardship with personal issues of identity and emotional development, transgressing the strict

separation between public and private spheres, the personal and the political, in order to show how they are interrelated.

The work has a fragmentary, nonlinear form that seeks to communicate a vision of society from the standpoint of gender, race, and lesbian sexuality, thereby challenging a definition of feminism that does not consciously acknowledge all of these identities. It is also post-modern in the sense that it is localized, understood as an act of identity formation in progress, while it is very much feminist in its implicit call for a world in which this process can be carried out with fewer constraints and less violence. As Bell explains, “Postmodernity revalues the aesthetic as a site for the intervention of little narratives; it is in little ‘ephemeral stories’ that the assumptions of the great, institutionalized narrative(s) are questioned, (re)presented, challenged and undermined.”<sup>36</sup> The performance text is a work in progress that changes with each production; the audience is drawn into interaction with the performer, and spectatorship is a part of the work.

Post-modernism is very much applicable to performances of plays like *dark diaspora ... in DUB*, Djanet Sears’s *Afrika Solo*, Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, and other Nightwood-sponsored productions by women of colour. While the women onstage are not necessarily portraying themselves (or at least, not all of the time), the fact that they have written and are performing the piece, that the piece is about being a woman of colour, and that they themselves are women of colour all have a crucial impact on the piece’s effect and how it is received by an audience. The very fact that a Black woman, for example, is speaking her own words onstage in Canada is charged with cultural importance: *Afrika Solo*, published by Sister Vision Press in 1990, was the first play by a Black woman to be published in Canada. Lisa Codrington’s play *Cast Iron*, written in the Bajan dialect, is another example of how the authenticity of voice is integral to a play’s power.

Hutcheon criticizes post-modernism for not taking the next step into political action, but this is less of a problem or a goal for feminist theatre, at least in Nightwood’s case. Unlike the kind of political manifesto or document of social policy Hutcheon

seems to be advocating, the plays done by Nightwood portray a situation and make it recognizable, but seldom include a direct command for specific action for fear of appearing too didactic. Part or most of the social action has already occurred in the very creation of the piece of theatre: who made it and how. The empowerment of women, whether as characters or authors, and the act of telling their stories creatively, is in itself both feminist and post-modern. Feminism is a politics and post-modernism is not, but all representation is political.<sup>37</sup>

### **THIRD WAVE FEMINISM**

The difficulty of capturing definitions of feminist theatre is very apparent in the range of ways that terms are used; this is abundantly illustrated by the use of “Third Wave” and “post-feminist” to describe contemporary feminism. At one extreme, Suzanna Danuta Walters disavows the term post-feminism as being too much associated with the work of certain conservative American writers, and believes that it “encompasses the backlash sentiment ... as well as a more complex phenomenon of a recent form of antifeminism.”<sup>38</sup> Other writers, such as Sophia Phoca and Sarah Gamble, use the terms post-feminism and Third Wave feminism almost interchangeably to denote a scholarly understanding of “an alignment with postmodernist theory in destabilizing notions of gender.”<sup>39</sup> Still others, such as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, Baumgardner and Richards, and Gillis and Munford, specifically adopt the term Third Wave in order to signal a generational shift, but one that does not entail a rejection of what has come before, insisting that “third wave feminist politics allow for *both* equality and difference.”<sup>40</sup> Heywood and Drake, the editors of *Third Wave Agenda*, maintain that the biggest difference between Second and Third Wave feminism is a Third Wave comfort with contradiction and pluralism. They identify the Third Wave as originating with critiques of the women’s movement by theorists of colour such as bell hooks, ensuring that Third Wave feminism is intrinsically pluralistic and hybridized, and that it is linked with activism and not just theory.<sup>41</sup>

This activist element seems to be what differentiates the use of the term post-feminist from the label Third Wave. Sarah Gamble, for example, defines post-feminism as “more theoretical than actual”<sup>42</sup> and argues that those calling themselves post-feminist “support an individualistic, liberal agenda rather than a collective and political one.”<sup>43</sup> This is contrasted with her definition of the Third Wave as “a resurgence of interest in feminist activism on the part of young women who wish to differentiate themselves from the postfeminist label ... characterized by a desire to redress economic and racial inequality as well as ‘women’s issues.’”<sup>44</sup> So while Gamble defines post-feminism as an attitude that “attacked feminism in its present form as inadequate to address the concerns and experiences of women today,”<sup>45</sup> Heywood and Drake insist that they are not distancing themselves from the Second Wave, which they characterize as being concerned with gaining opportunities for women. Rather, they embrace “second wave critique as a central definitional thread while emphasizing ways that desires and pleasures subject to critique can be used to rethink and enliven activist work.”<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, the points of tension seem to accrue around issues of self-definition, the relative status of popular culture, and a Third Wave insistence on pluralism. Rubin and Nemeroff argue that “though the form (personal narrative rather than group consciousness-raising) and content (examining, often celebrating difference rather than seeking commonality) of personal expression in the third-wave may differ from that of the second wave, we believe their functions are quite congruent.”<sup>47</sup> It has been suggested, in a poetic turn of phrase, that “the third wave can come to view itself as indivisible from the ocean of feminism.”<sup>48</sup> At the same time, feminists who may have considered themselves somehow outside of the Second Wave, by virtue of their colour, age, sexual identity, or experience, have a real interest in exploring how the shift to a Third Wave consciousness can be of benefit to them; as the Muslim feminist Sherin Saadallah writes, for her, “the pluralities embraced under third wave feminism offer a more welcoming space than previous feminisms.”<sup>49</sup>

Any definition of Third Wave feminism must foreground its relationship with popular culture, and its emphasis on “the contradictions and conflicts shaping young women’s experiences.”<sup>50</sup> All of Nightwood’s current youth programming, including support for Buddies’ “Hysteria Festival,” and its own Write From the Hip and Busting Out! initiatives, are clearly targeted at a new generation.<sup>51</sup> Most importantly, Third Wave feminists “often take cultural production and sexual politics as key sites of struggle, seeking to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice.”<sup>52</sup> Central to this understanding of the Third Wave is the refusal of guilt and the revolutionary acknowledgement that feminist meaning can be derived from the most unlikely of sources—including theatre. Third Wave feminism is yet another theoretical label that can, and does, shape the way that Nightwood practices art into the twenty-first century.

### **CONCLUSIONS/BOTTOM LINE: WHAT MAKES A COMPANY FEMINIST?**

Lizbeth Goodman has written, “‘Feminist theatre’ is itself a form of cultural representation, influenced by changes in the geographies of feminism, women’s studies, economics, politics, and cultural studies.”<sup>53</sup> The fact that Nightwood Theatre has continued to redefine its mandate, policies, and practices over the years reflects the practical nature of feminism: it must be provisional and changeable, adapting to social forces and the evolution of thought within the movement, in order to remain relevant. A feminist theatre that did not change, evolve, and constantly work on redefining itself would not be very feminist. In addition, the collaborative nature of theatre and the large number of people and projects that have been associated with Nightwood all contribute to its direction. And finally, external forces like granting agencies and the media can have a significant influence on the way a company develops.

The potential and relative value of being considered “marginal” leads to the question of assimilation and separatism, the fear of being either co-opted or ghettoized that comes up so

frequently in discussions of women's theatre. Rina Fraticelli has written persuasively about this dilemma:

Why, we are asked, can't women simply bring their aesthetics, sensibility, vocabulary and even politics to bear on the cultural community through existing art institutions—in a non-compliant and direct way, of course? Why, when there are no longer formal barriers to full and equal participation, do we choose to ghettoize ourselves and our work in such a “restrictive manner”? ... Women's lack of authority in the Canadian theatre does not stem from our lack of positions of authority. It is the reverse: we do not hold or have no access to positions of authority because patriarchal society views women as *intrinsically* lacking in authority. And to believe that the full emancipation of women will be accomplished through the fulfilment of affirmative action quotas is a little like believing racial integration will rid the world of racism.<sup>54</sup>

In her view, women's contributions cannot merely be added on to pre-existing androcentric structures, since the structure will alter the work but not be reformed in turn. Women have always made, and continue to make, culture, but it is erased, suppressed, marginalized, and appropriated by a theatre industry that is overwhelmingly male-dominated.<sup>55</sup> The existence of a company like Nightwood, which is run by women for the express purpose of encouraging women's work in a supportive environment, allows the work to develop in a very different (and much healthier) context.

We learn something about the multiplicity of feminist theatre by extrapolating from the example of Nightwood, by drawing some conclusions about what a feminist theatre company is or might be. Some productions consistently reflect and grow out of a stated philosophy, while others might be accused of contradicting and changing the philosophy. Nightwood's artistic directors and board members see themselves as different “kinds” of feminists, which shapes the projects they choose, their working

methods, and the audiences they seek. Nightwood has been a feminist theatre — or rather, a series of constantly shifting feminist theatres — throughout its history, despite its changing mandates and relative levels of commitment to the feminist label.

Feminist theorists do not intend to create monolithic categories into which all feminist work must be divided. But a company like Nightwood, which has occupied shifting positions in the definition and implementation of feminism, illustrates the importance of constantly redefining one's terms and goals. For example, a newspaper reviewer considering the significance of a particular Nightwood production might try to take into account the "kind" of feminism it most clearly espouses in order to determine how effectively it fulfills both political and aesthetic agendas. Unfortunately, critics (of all kinds) can have their own, sometimes narrow, understandings of feminism, and may then apply their definitions to any production by women without attempting to position it along a wide spectrum of possibility.

I find that speaking from the perspective of what I consider to be the most current and contemporary form of feminism (what has been dubbed Third Wave) is relevant, because this is where the company sits in 2009. Nightwood's youth programming, its embrace of mainstream visibility, and its willingness to be both bolder and, in some ways, less consistent in its programming choices are all congruent with Third Wave feminism. At the same time, the only way to look back on Nightwood's long history is with a "playfully plural" open-mindedness. There are plays that, I argue, were successful in the past precisely because they were prescient in anticipating where feminism was going. There were other plays that chanced upon potency — not so much because of their gender politics, but because of their racial politics. Still others were very much plays of their time, but I have tried to be scrupulous in not implying that they were somehow more "primitive," or that one feminist experiment led to another, better feminism.

Nightwood tends to promote its standard of excellence by highlighting the shows that have won awards. In the program for *Cast Iron* in March 2005, for example, the company description

read in part: “Nightwood is the premiere professional women’s theatre company in Canada. For twenty-five years it has produced, developed and toured landmark, award-winning plays about outspoken Canadian women.” The statement goes on to list shows such as *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, *Harlem Duet*, *The Danish Play*, and *China Doll*, and to describe “Groundswell” and the Write From the Hip and Busting Out! programs. It concludes, “As a feminist theatre company, from our beginnings, Nightwood has broken new ground in gender and cultural representation on Canadian stages.”

As always, the “trick” is to position the company in such a way that neither downplays its feminism, nor alienates by the use of that highly charged, yet potentially galvanizing word. Just as *Age of Arousal* reminds us of the struggles of earlier generations of women, I hope that this book about Nightwood brings together material that might otherwise have remained scattered and disconnected. Articles from journals, reviews of plays, selections from interviews — much has been written about Nightwood and its work, some of it by the women artists themselves, but what I hope to have done here is to collect it all in one place and to give the subject the focused attention it deserves. So many women have worked so hard, not just at Nightwood, but in feminist theatres internationally, and in journalism, and in scholarship. All that can easily be lost, especially in the ephemeral world of theatre production or in the peripatetic nature of a nomadic theatre company. I find it fascinating to notice the recurrences of literary adaptations, for example, or of themes that come up repeatedly, or references to people who have been involved in the company over and over.

Nightwood has been around for so long that it might almost be taken for granted, but it really is a unique and remarkable company. I often feel it does not get the attention or recognition that it deserves — but then, we all tend to have short memories! If I have accomplished anything with this study, I hope it is to have taken the weight and measure of an enduring Canadian phenomenon, and to have done something to preserve its contribution.