CANADIAN FEMINIST WOMEN DIRECTORS:
USING THE CANON FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how five Canadian women directors who define themselves as feminists have engaged with work from the traditional Western theatre canon. However, that world actually is created by the social expectations, cultural mores, and theatrical conventions of its time. Audiences have been indoctrinated to accept unquestioningly the value of these texts while the plays’ valorized status masks social constructs that are continually reinforced and surreptitiously naturalized through their repetition. At the crux of this thesis is the notion that while repetition is used as a tool for social instruction, it can also be used as a tool for social change. Therefore, I explore how the Canadian feminist women directors whom I have interviewed use the uniqueness of performance in different ways to challenge social structures within canonical texts.

In the individual chapters, each director first shares her education, training, experience, and influences; then she articulates her own feminist perspective and discusses its impact on her career and work process; and finally she reflects on how she directed a text from the Western theatre canon and used the liminal space of performance to challenge the text’s embedded gender constructs. At the end of each chapter, I present the critical response I found for each production, including reviews, individual statements, and academic investigations, and assess the extent to which the director’s intent was understood by her audience and reviewers.

In the final chapters, I examine each individual director’s interview responses in the context of the others’ and situate them within the spectrum of feminisms. In general, the directors used liminal space to expose gender as a construction and destabilize social
expectations based on gender. However, what also emerged from these interviews is that while there is no broad consensus of what constitutes ‘feminist’ work, each director must temper her feminist perspectives if she wants access to the upper echelons of directing in Canada and the benefits that it entails.
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Dedication

For my children, my sisters, my family
INTRODUCTION

If a director doesn’t think through where she stands politically, she is likely to wind up serving the interests of a dominant ideology, whether she intends to or not.

Donkin & Clement (6)

In the summer of 1985, Canadian Theatre Review (CTR) released a special issue entitled “Feminism and the Canadian Theatre.” Lynn Fernie describes this title as “depressingly accurate” because “the substantial amount of theatre based on feminist analyses produced over the past decade has not been incorporated in any significant way into any level of the institution of Canadian theatre” (59). She feels that the use of the conjunction ‘and’ rather than the preposition ‘in’ places feminism outside and apart from Canadian theatre. In the summer of 2007, D.A. Hadfield’s book Re:Producing Women’s Dramatic History: The Politics of Playing in Toronto was published. In it she exposes the specific difficulties Canadian feminist playwrights face when they try to move their work from stage to published page. She contends that the “accretion of texts creates the aura of merit for a playwright” (44). Therefore, feminist playwrights are less likely to achieve that aura and its consequent economic benefit. It appears that after more than twenty years, many Canadian feminist theatre practitioners are still on the edges of Canadian theatre practice and still “fighting the intransigence which inhibits change in our cultural institutions” (Grant 46).

However, Canadian feminist explorations of theatre practice are gaining a foothold in academic circles. There have been articles in CTR: “Opting In: Theory, Practice and the Workshop as Alternative ‘Process’” (Herst 1995) explores the difficulty feminist playwrights
have working within the current hierarchical theatre system; “Bad Girls Looking for Money: Maenad Making Feminist Theatre in Alberta (Maenad Theatre)” (Bennett and Patience 1995) speaks to the obstacles with which this feminist theatre company grapples in order to receive government funding; “Making it Happen: A Commercial Model for Self-Production” (Dempsey 1995) shares the commercial efforts of two feminist performance artists; “On the Edge: Revisioning Nightwood” (Glen 1995) is an interview with then co-Artistic Director Diane Roberts about Nightwood’s evolving mandate to involve women of colour at all levels of their productions; “Goodnight William Shakespeare (Good Morning Ann-Marie MacDonald)” (Dvorak 1994) highlights the increase of women’s influence in Canadian theatre; and “Deconstructing Dames: Women and a ‘New Poetics’” (Lamie 1994) shares the creative process of several Canadian theatre artists. Theatre Research in Canada’s Spring/Fall 1992 issue looks at shifts in Canadian theatre research including several articles that speak to Canadian feminist theatre research such as Susan Bennett’s “Feminist (Theatre) Historiography Canadian (Feminist) Theatre: A Reading of Some Practices and Theories” in which she underscores key issues that surface from feminist approaches to theatre research, and Barbara Godard’s “Between Repetition and Rehearsal: Conditions of (Women's) Theatre in Canada in a Space of Reproduction.” As well there have been books such as Hadfield’s and the latest volume of Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English, Susan Bennett’s Feminist Theatre and Performance, which is a compilation of previously published articles from 1985-2004. Bennett hopes her collection will “spur dialogue … nourish each other’s feminisms … celebrate women’s theatre and performance, and … foster one site where cultural change can happen” (xvi).
This growth in academic exploration of Canadian feminist theatre, however, has not often spoken to the work of Canadian feminist directors. First let me say that writing about Canadian directors of any gender has been sparse, especially considering the growing influence of the director on theatrical performance in the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. There have been articles on Herbert Whittaker (Rittenhouse 1982), Carroll Aikens (Hoffman 1986), and Roy Mitchell (Usmiani 1987) among others, but they tend to be career overviews and not in-depth directing analyses. George F. Walker’s direction of his play *Zastrozzi: The Master of Discipline* was explored in depth by Chris Johnson in a 1988 article and Herman Voaden’s work as both playwright and director has been analyzed by Anton Wagner in print and on-line (http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/Theatre/voaden/index.htm).

Twenty years ago *CTR* published a special issue entitled “Directing and Theatrical Creation” (Fall 1987), but has not revisited the topic in any substantial way since then. *CTR* articles about alternative theatres such as Toronto’s feminist Nightwood Theatre and the lesbian and gay company Buddies in Bad Times focus on their dramaturgy and not on the work of their directors per se.

Some books have been written about individual Canadian directors such as Keith Garebian’s *George Bernard Shaw and Christopher Newton*. There are books and numerous book chapters about Robert Lepage and his work as both playwright and director: for example, *Theater Sans Frontières: Essays on the Dramatic Universe of Robert Lepage*, edited by Joseph I. Donohoe and Jane M. Koustas, and *Robert Lepage: Connecting Flights* by Remy Charest. Lepage is also the only Canadian included in Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage’s text *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre*. However, no text addresses Canadian directors comprehensively except *The Directors Directory* compiled by
Canadian Actors’ Equity Association which is, as the title suggests, simply a listing and nothing more.

As may be inferred from the limited commentary on Canadian directors in general, critical or even biographical writing about Canadian women directors is even more infrequent. Paula Sperdakos’s book *Dora Mavor Moore: Pioneer of the Canadian Theatre* gives an extensive history of Moore’s life and career, detailing every project she undertook including her marriage and divorce. However, little is said about her philosophy or technique of directing beyond, “[s]he had no ego as a director; she saw her role as the provider of opportunity to others, and not necessarily as a prime creator” (245). There are books that deal with women directors specifically such as *In Other Words: Women Directors Speak* by Helen Manfull and *Women Stage Directors Speak: Exploring the Influence of Gender on Their Work* by Rebecca Daniels. However, these texts deal with women directors from the UK and the United States, respectively. One cannot forget, of course, Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement’s seminal book, *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, which offers essays on various aspects of directing under the headings “Interpreting the Text,” “Subverting the Text,” “Constructing the Text,” and “Rehearsing the Text,” written almost exclusively by women. One essay within the collection even speaks of Canadian Sharon Pollock’s work: “The Split Subject of Blood Relations” by Susan Clement and Esther Beth Sullivan. Otherwise, scholarly writing on Canadian women directors appears to be limited to occasional journal articles such as Sharon Rupp’s “Kathleen Weiss Experiments with Tamahnous,” and Mary Vingoe’s “In Pursuit of Process: Reflections on Directing for Canadian Theatre.”
Again, as the area of investigation becomes more specific – feminist Canadian women directors – scholarly work within this area becomes even rarer. Writing of any kind on feminist Canadian women directors is virtually non-existent. This thesis will begin to address this imbalance. I am not, however, investigating the work of feminist Canadian women directors within the feminist theatre arena. My interest lies in productions of plays from the traditional Western theatrical canon that feminist Canadian women have directed. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the question, how do these directors engage with work that has been touted as the best “man” has to offer?

The word “canon” derives from the Greek \textit{kanôn} and is defined as “a straight rod or bar used by a weaver or carpenter, then a rule or model in law or in art” (Kennedy 106), “an authorized body of texts; also commonly used to mean a ‘traditional’ body of texts” (Worthen 1674) and “a basis for judgment; a standard or criterion” (“Canon” 281). These definitions emphasize the importance of inclusion within a canon. A work belonging to a canon is “authorized,” “traditional,” and used as a “standard” by which other works are judged. Canonical texts influence those texts that follow by setting the “bar” not only for the definition of excellence, but also for social and cultural acceptance.

George A. Kennedy states, “Canon formation is a natural human instinct” (105), which is one point of view in the current debate about the nature of canon creation and its influence. However, this perspective implies a benign inevitability without consideration of the social impact of the action. He also goes on to say that this innate impulse is intended “to preserve traditional knowledge and values…” (105), and does not acknowledge either how or by whom these values are developed. The term “traditional,” as used by Kennedy, appears to
be synonymous with “correct” or “worthy” and later I will relate this correlation to the traditional theatrical staging of canonical texts.

Other perspectives on canon formation focus on the social and cultural impact of an act that “is an inherently hegemonizing process or a blatantly imperialist endeavour” (Gorak xiii). Conservatives decry the dismantling of tradition by politically-driven forces that have no appreciation of art for art’s sake. However, others like William E. Cain counter that this “tradition” has not been without its own political agenda and that it “was unfaithful to the complexity of the past that it supposedly honoured” (3). Accusations of inequity within established canons based on race, gender, and class are becoming more and more frequent and are ultimately destabilizing what was once unquestioned authority.

Canon creation has always been a tool used by learned peoples to educate others and indeed, canons have become academic mainstays as they make up the reading core of many humanities and social science courses. Jessica Munns calls the creation of a set canon “in many ways a twentieth-century phenomenon related to the development of mass education, and to the link between educational curricular [sic] and publishing houses” (19). In fact, all the essays in the collection *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate* consider how educational systems have created standards out of necessity – limited class time and the convenience of anthologies – which have become equated with the world’s best, but are now seen as increasingly limited in their scope.

These ideas have extended into the discussion about a Canadian theatrical canon. Robert Lecker’s *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value* includes two essays that speak to this issue. Denis Salter gives an historical perspective on the attempts to create a national theatre and the way these attempts have “tended to suppress marginalized constituencies
whose artistic and political values transgressed the dominant paradigm” (90). Ric Knowles echoes Salter’s concerns and questions the perspective “that a stable, universalist dramatic canon and theatrical ‘mainstream’ can and should be established” (110). In his review of three Canadian play anthologies, Robert Wallace states that these anthologies illustrate “the subjective, if not arbitrary, nature by which the canon itself is created” (219). He goes on to say that “the notions of ‘quality,’ ‘merit’ and ‘excellence’ … that are valorized in these collections are not just socially produced variables: they are systemic strategies by which critics, editors and teachers confirm their power both to arbitrate and to inculcate cultural values” (222). Jerry Wasserman disputes Wallace’s contention, stating that he does not “accept that the contents of an anthology must be deemed sanctified simply by the fact of their inclusion, nor that choosing to republish certain plays and not others represents a kind of authoritarian cultural tyranny or conspiracy” (204). Wasserman believes that “the perception of canonical status [should not] be deemed to confer on a play or playwright anything more than a temporary turn in the spotlight” (201). This perspective, while laudable, does not address the reality of canonization.

The arbitration of cultural values is apparent in the traditional Western theatre canon. Anthologies of Western theatre from the 1900s to the present vary in content. A few women such as Susan Glaspell were included in some of the early twentieth-century collections; however, they soon all but disappeared until the 1980s when feminist revisionism caused work by women to re-enter the canon. Playwrights of colour do not begin to figure in anthologies until the 1990s. This does not mean that there were no anthologies of work solely by women or people of colour, but that their inclusion in the oft-used theatre collections of “masterpieces” or “great plays” has been and continues to be quite limited. For example, in
the second edition (1996) of *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama* edited by W.B. Worthen, 46 plays are presented with 6 (or 13%) by women writers. The third edition (2000) shows minimal improvement with 52 plays and still just 8 (or 15%) by women. Of the 32 plays in the Modern theatre sections, 7 (22%) are written by women. In the fourth edition (2004) of *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama* also edited by W.B. Worthen, of the 56 plays included 14 (or 25%) are written by women. In the sections that focus on contemporary work, the percentage of women playwrights increases only slightly to 29% (12 of the 41 plays). This is a mere 7% increase over the previous edition. This small boost is disheartening considering that there has been a large increase in the number of published women playwrights during the past 100 years as detailed in Susan Croft’s *She Also Wrote Plays: An International Guide to Women Playwrights from the 10th to the 21st Century*.

My argument here is not about what or who should or should not be included in a list of a culture’s great dramatic works. Instead, I want to emphasize the impact these choices have had on students over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first and subsequently on audience preferences. If people are taught that plays by certain playwrights are the best, it is understandable that they would want to see plays by these writers. If an audience demonstrates a preference for certain playwrights, it is understandable that a theatre company would include these playwrights in their seasons. For example, a look at ten seasons of productions at the Vancouver Playhouse, from 1989/90 to the 1998/99 season, shows 60 productions. Nine of the plays presented were written by the six playwrights consistently included in canonical anthologies: Shakespeare, Molière, Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Bertolt Brecht, and Tennessee Williams. There were also eleven other “classics” by G.B. Shaw, Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Oscar Wilde, and Noel Coward, comprising 20
productions or 33% in total. One third of all the plays produced at Vancouver’s major regional theatre over a ten-year period were written by a small group of men.

These numbers support E. Dean Kolbas’s assertion:

Socially sanctioned works of art become so deeply embedded within a collective cultural memory that they influence not only successive artists and authors (popular or otherwise) but also those who do not appear to participate directly within the field of production, such as amateur art enthusiasts, “casual” readers, or the public at large. (62-63)

This is how the Western theatrical canon of plays has functioned. Theatre enthusiasts and general audiences have been indoctrinated to accept unquestioningly the value of these texts and I contend that traditional productions of these canonical texts also become sanctioned in the same way. The valorized status of these texts masks a monumental gender bias that is continually reinforced and surreptitiously naturalized through their repetition.

As Marvin Carlson writes, “every one of the world’s great dramatic traditions has stressed from the outset the importance not of telling stories on stage but of *retelling* stories that are already known to their public” (18, emphasis added). It is impossible to know who told the original stories, but it is safe to say that men – sometimes solely and other times predominantly – have *retold* those stories on stage. Further, subsequent men took those retold stories and retold them again and again. What has resulted is a male construction of cultural memory that is presented on stage as “reality” without any acknowledgement that “the relationships between theatre and cultural memory are deep and complex” (Carlson 2). The productions of canonical texts by the women interviewed in this thesis explore this connection between theatre and cultural memory.
Judith Butler states that “signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules” (145). Teresa de Lauretis expresses a similar idea when viewing gender specifically: “The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation” (5, author’s emphasis). These women both articulate ideas which share an awareness of the concepts of repetition, representation, and presumed transparency. It is through repetition of a specific representation that gender, in this case, is constructed. And through this repeated representation the fact that gender itself is a construction is shrouded. Therefore, the women presented in canonical texts are male constructions of what a woman should be, cloaked in the guise of what a woman really is. This construct of woman is an area that several of the Canadian women directors in this thesis have explored in their individual productions, as I discuss later.

Carlson’s work on the repetition of theatrical narratives is based on the ideas of the pioneers of performance theory, particularly Richard Schechner. Carlson highlights Schechner’s oft-cited idea of twice-behaved or restored behaviour as a basis for the repetitions he finds in narratives and characters, among other theatrical elements. As Schechner states, “restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I were someone else,’ or ‘as I am told to do,’ or ‘as I have learned’” (28). With each repetition, cultural norms are reinforced and sanctioned through the prescribed behaviour. Certainly, no repetition can completely re-enact the original. There is always slippage which creates a threshold of possibilities. It is within this threshold – this liminal space – that many performance theorists feel that an effective change of learned cultural values is possible. Liminality has been theorized “as a mode of embodied activity that transgresses, resists, or challenges social structures”
(McKenzie 218). However, liminality as a tool for change is not a given; as Butler has argued, liminal space can be used to perform activities that normalize social structures as well. The five women interviewed for this thesis explore the transgressive possibilities of liminal space in various ways from the physical use of stage space in performance to the metaphysical understanding of the characters’ motivations by the actors.

To understand how intricately cultural/social construction and theatre are connected, we need to first be aware of a basis for their association. Theatre’s relationship to social drama offers one useful perspective. Anthropologist Victor Turner states, “Social life, then, even in its apparently quietest moments, is characteristically ‘pregnant’ with social dramas” (Ritual 11). For Turner, social dramas are the perpetual motion of culture: “a spontaneous unit of social process” (68). They occur continuously in every aspect of social interaction from “the local level to national revolutions” (10). Social dramas all follow the same basic structure: breach of a cultural norm, an ensuing crisis which reveals the model of current group struggle, redress which may range anywhere from personal advice to “the performance of public ritual,” and finally either reintegration into society or the recognition of an irreparable schism that may require ultimate separation (69-71).

Turner believes that theatre’s origins can be found in social drama: “The stage drama…is a metacommentary, explicit or implicit, witting or unwitting, on the major social dramas of its social context” (Universals 16). Specifically, theatre can be found in the third phase of social drama: redress. This phase “is essentially an attempt to ascribe meaning to ‘social dramatic’ events” (Ritual 12). It is during this stage that both formal and informal mechanisms are set in motion to contain the spread of the breach. Theatre, therefore, can be one of the devices used to limit the extent to which a breach of social norms reaches.
Limiting may be done through affirmative explorations that present the happy ending of social harmony due to compromise and crisis resolution as in *The Merchant of Venice*, or through negative cautionary accounts which end in the death or permanent separation of the breaching character as in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Either way, it is the act of repetition which embeds the presented perspective into the social consciousness. Turner maintains that “dramas induce and contain reflexive processes and generate cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place” (*Ritual* 92). His perspective is firmly rooted in the possibilities of the liminality of performance. However, reframing is only a possibility and not a given result. What emerges from the performance may be a reaffirmation of the original cultural dynamic. Turner states that the connection between theatre and social drama “is not in an endless, cyclical, repetitive pattern … [but] a spiralling one” (*Universals* 17) with the clear implication that the spiral is a positive movement. However, the spiral may be of such little deviation as to have a negligible effect and ultimately result in more of a reaffirmation than a challenge of the cosmos it produces.

Turner’s partner in what became the beginning of performance theory was Richard Schechner, whose work inspired Carlson’s ideas about ghosting and repetition. Schechner introduced the idea that *restored behaviour* is the basis of performance in daily life and within artistically structured frameworks (ritual, dance, theatre, etc.). It begins with a strip of behaviour which is an action without context, an act that is “independent of the causal systems.” Restored behaviour (the performance of everyday life) is a strip of behaviour with context. It “consists of recombinating bits of previously behaved behaviours.” *Restored restored behaviours* are performances which “are marked, framed, or heightened behaviour.

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1 Here, I use the term original to mean the dynamic at the beginning of the play and not to imply a single origin for all the dynamics of a specific culture.
separated out from just ‘living life’” (Schechner 28). They are strips of behaviour with context (restored behaviour) repeated site-specifically, to which the performance “is indissolubly tied” (Feral 173).

Therefore, the basis of theatrical performance is everyday performance in a chosen space and this holds true both for realism and work that clearly attempts to stand outside of conventional styles. All theatre is a remixing of restored behaviour. Experimental theatre is either an unusual combination of behaviours or the dislocation of a behaviour “from where it is acceptable or expected to a venue or occasion it is not” (Schechner 28). Daily performance, then, is clearly a source for theatre performance. There is also a reciprocal link between theatre and daily performance because audience members may restore a behaviour that they have seen on stage. For example, one may try to walk or talk like an actor on stage or imitate a gesture that they found particularly compelling. They may also avoid behaviours, consciously or unconsciously, that receive negative responses and censure while embracing those that receive acceptance. This brings us back to the possibly normative function of liminality and its ability to support cultural norms.

Finally, into this mix of social drama, restored restored behaviour, and liminality’s possibly normalizing function, I would like to introduce an essential question proposed by Herbert Blau: “What are we performing for?” Blau asserts that this question is intrinsic in any performance, whether it is clearly articulated or not (263). One reason for a performance may be to present a theatrical classic, and again the question is why. Why present this classic? What are we performing this classic for? While there are a myriad of answers to this question, it is important to recognize that they all fall into one of the two categories defined by Donkin and Clements: as an act of resistance or as an act of compliance.
A canonical text may be performed to expose embedded social structures within the play (exploring the possibility of change through the liminal space) or to comply with the traditional perspective of the play (reaffirming social structures through the liminal space). There is no neutral position for a director whether s/he is conscious of it or not. Blau’s assertion that the reason for performing is intrinsic to any performance underscores Donkin and Clement’s position that a director’s two possible motivations, “the one of compliance and the one of resistance, are highly politicized, although only the activity of resistance will get named as such” (2). An act of compliance continues unnoticed as the ‘authentic’ or ‘right’ way to interpret a text while the political, social, and cultural ramifications of this choice are shrouded under a veil of correctness, normalcy, and tradition. As Ric Knowles suggests in his book *Reading the Material Theatre*, “productions can easily become the unconscious conduits of ideology, and can function, in spite of themselves or the intentions of their directors, as … cultural production that silently reaffirms existing power relations in society” (27).

At the crux of this thesis is the notion of dialectical standpoints: repetition as a tool for social instruction or for social change. Through repeated traditional productions of canonical texts, theatre has been used to reinforce cultural expectations of gender by embodying prescribed twice-behaved behaviour while playing out social dramas that reward or punish socially-constructed behaviour. Traditional interpretations and staging present these gender constructs as a universal ‘real’ thus obscuring their fabrication and elevating them to the status of ‘natural.’ However, repetition of canonical texts can also be used to destabilize the myth of inherent gender characteristics by exposing the social and cultural
biases within the play. By offering an alternative view of the play’s ‘reality’, a director can use its repetition as an instrument of social change.

I explore how feminist Canadian women directors use the uniqueness of performance in different ways to challenge social structures within canonical texts which through their constant repetition have acted as tools to normalize those social structures. I have conducted personal interviews with five feminist Canadian women directors about their specific productions of canonical texts. After summarizing and analyzing the content of these interviews, I reflect on whether their strategies influenced the critical response to their work and if these approaches were “undercut or contained by the delivery system itself, which packages any content as a product for consumption” (26, Knowles’s emphasis).

By exploring how each director engages with a canonical text and brings her individual feminist perspectives to it, we can see concrete examples of how repetition may be used as an avenue for social change through the liminal space in performance. Through investigating the critical responses to the productions, we see how audiences and critics react to these disruptions of tradition and we may subsequently gain an understanding of how repetition has constructed social expectations.

One point of exploration is the directors’ individual perspectives on feminism. Jill Dolan argues that “Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from the male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse” (3). This is a straightforward definition, but it fails to capture the large or small differences between the many perspectives that fall under the feminist umbrella. It is now quite common to use the term feminism(s) instead of the singular feminism to refer to “both the differences in ideology and program among women who are feminists and also to the different kinds of scholarly activity engaged
in by performance scholars” (Reinelt 226). In fact, one of the cornerstones of my research is to begin to shed light on how Canadian theatre directors define themselves in both the personal and artistic arenas. Therefore, I asked each of the interviewed directors to define these terms for herself. By exploring how their collective responses are situated within existing feminist frameworks, we glean the beginnings of a Canadian feminist theatrical perspective that falls clearly under a moderate feminist banner.

The term “feminist” actually became an interesting point of discussion throughout the selection process which began with the following request that I sent out through the Candrama listserv (candrama@listserv.unb.ca):

I am a PhD student in Theatre at the University of British Columbia. I am starting my thesis research into Canadian Women directors and am looking for ones who define themselves as feminists and who have directed canonical texts (Ibsen, Williams, Shaw, Beckett, etc.). My intention is to interview these directors about their process in general and then as specifically explored within a production of a canonical text. The commitment of these volunteers would be their time for the interview and copies of any documentation of the specific production that they would feel comfortable sharing. If you know of anyone who may be interested in this project, could you please either pass along their contact information to me or conversely my email address to them?

The response was swift and supportive. I received almost two dozen responses that included the names of 35 women who might fit the category. Yet, there was an interesting undercurrent in the responses as well. Many names of women directors were offered with the proviso, “I don’t know if she identifies as feminist.” It was intriguing to see what I perceive
to be such a clear political and social perspective as *feminist* not readily identified when it came to theatre work. Those directors who are associated with Nightwood Theatre were considered by nominators as feminist without hesitation, but directors who did not have that clear affiliation with a feminist theatre remained uncertain in the minds of the respondents.

Valerie Senyk then posted the following to the listserv:

I think the reality is that the country is teeming with feminist directors, but some are working where they are likely to be recognized and acknowledged, i.e. Toronto or other large centres, and the rest are working in countless smaller centres throughout this land, all, in their own way, trying to make a difference. Obviously, one's research cannot include them all, but I think it's very important for those on this list to have an awareness of this.

To me, this seemed like a reasonable perspective and in fact I agreed that it was an important point to bring to the attention of those on the Candrama listserv. I was surprised, then, when this posting followed Senyk’s:

There are certainly many feminist directors, but the responses seem to have gotten out of hand. The question was about feminist directors working with canonical plays, as I recall. Lots of the names that folks have listed haven't done so as far as I know (though I may well be wrong!)

What was intriguing about this response was two-fold. First, it seemed extreme since there had been only the one email that was not “on topic” per se. Also, the tone was somewhat patronizing as if the email about the abundance of feminist directors in Canada was not important and/or had missed the point. Considering that this is an open listserv that appears to encourage discussion, I was puzzled by this response. Second, this email came
from Ric Knowles who had already kindly offered several names of women who had directed canonical texts. However, he could not identify many of his suggestions as feminist with any certainty. To him, the important criterion was the direction of canonical texts while the feminist criterion was secondary. To many others who responded, the important criterion was that the director be a feminist while the directing of canonical texts was secondary. The impact of the feminist label and the importance – or lack thereof – ascribed to it would resurface within the personal interviews I had with the directors and also within the critical reactions to the productions discussed.

Based on the initial response to my query, I contacted the women who were suggested to me and again had very positive replies. Some, like Denise Clarke of One Yellow Rabbit, encouraged the research but could not participate because they do not identify as feminist. Others again encouraged the research, but were not able to participate because they had not directed any canonical texts. Ultimately, five directors who have worked with canonical texts and define themselves as feminists agreed to be involved in the research. They are Katrina Dunn, Artistic Director of Touchstone Theatre in Vancouver; Kathleen Weiss, Assistant Professor of Drama at the University of Alberta and former Artistic Director of Vancouver’s Women In View Festival; Hope McIntyre, playwright and Artistic Director of Sarasvati Productions in Winnipeg; Michelene Chevrier, freelance director and former Artistic Director of the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa; and Jillian Keiley, Artistic Director of Artistic Fraud in St. John’s, Newfoundland. I extend my deep gratitude to these women who shared their experiences and responses openly and freely.

These women were chosen not only because they fit the two basic criteria: they identify as feminists and have directed canonical plays. An additional consideration was their
geographical and experiential diversity as directors. They are situated across the country, from British Columbia to Newfoundland, and work in a variety of settings from alternative theatre companies to university theatre programs to Canadian theatre’s A houses.\(^2\) This allows for a broad spectrum of perspectives within the field. Yet the majority of all their work takes place in Canada for Canadian audiences. So while their geographical settings and personal experiences are diverse, they all embody a Canadian point of view.

The fact that these women are all still active in the Canadian theatrical arena was another important consideration. Because we discuss past productions, the fact that they are currently engaged in theatre work creates a contemporary frame of reference for their observations. Their remembrances are not simply about an isolated event. The memories reflect each director’s perspective at the time of the production, but are also influenced by her intervening work and experiences in theatre. Therefore, the directors share thoughts about the productions in their original artistic, social, and political contexts, and also ideas about the productions from a current standpoint. They are remembering the past but they are also seeing that past through a present-day lens. Their experiences cannot be dismissed as something that only happened “back then” because these women continue to come into contact with many of the same challenges today.

My next major area of consideration was composing interview questions. While parts of the interviews are spontaneous responses to what is being said on both my part and that of the interviewee, it was also important to have each woman answer specific questions in order to more purposely compare and contrast their perspectives and experiences. I attacked this

\(^2\) The designation ‘A house’ is determined by the Canadian Theatre Agreement and is “arrived at by calculating the weekly box office potential” of a theatre. There are seven categories of theatres from A to G. An A house has the highest weekly box office potential (http://www.caea.com/EquityWeb/EquityLibrary/Agreements/Theatre/CTA/eSearch.html).
task from two sides. The first was an extensive reading of theatre books based around
interviews. This helped me understand the interview process and made me aware that the
way questions are phrased may influence the answers. The second was a process of creating
general questions (e.g., How does being a woman affect your career?) that I continually
revised to address more specific criteria (Does being a woman and a feminist affect your
work opportunities, the scripts offered to you, or the scripts you choose?). The full
questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

The interviews were structured in the following way. First, I began with general
questions about the director’s background. Second, I eased into more specific questions
around her thoughts and ideas about feminism and how she incorporates these ideas into her
work in general. Third, I focussed on the production of a specific canonical text that she had
directed, exploring everything from why she was offered the work to her rehearsal process.
Finally, I asked each director to reflect on her production both artistically and professionally.
The first three interview stages created a natural telescoping of questions that put the women
at ease and allowed them to share their social and political philosophies, their detailed artistic
visions, and their actual life experiences. The final reflection stage of the interview generated
a space for the women to contextualize their previous responses within their continuing
careers and at times highlight recurrent areas of friction or concern.

By far the most challenging aspect of this research has been the investigation into
critical response. For various reasons I had difficulty finding popular press reviews, personal
responses, attendance records, or critical articles on the directors or the productions
discussed. I explore possible reasons for this shortage of critical material in relation to the
detailed material I have been able to unearth in the second half of each director’s individual
chapter. I also consider the fact that when I was able to locate critical response, there was rarely an acknowledgement of the directors’ feminist interventions with the text. Many reviewers either did not see the feminist perspectives offered or did not deem them important enough to include in their articles or reviews.

Finally, I have chosen to structure this thesis in the following way. Chapters 1-5 are each dedicated to an individual director and her work on one specific canonical play. Each chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides an introduction to each director which includes biographical information such as geographical origins, education and training, experience, and influences. This is followed by an analysis of how each director articulates her own feminist perspective. The implication of each director’s definition of feminism is explored in relation to its impact on her work opportunities, its influence on why she accepts a job, how it is articulated during the casting and rehearsal processes, whether or not it has been an issue in any critical response to her work, and if she can specifically connect it to obstacles she has encountered.

The third section of each chapter explores the individual director’s production of a canonical text and contains the interviewee’s responses to the following areas:

- How opportunity for the work arose;
- How the time period and geographical place of both the play’s and production’s setting influenced initial production ideas;
- How the use of theatrical space influenced the production;
- How the director approached the text, including a detailed exploration of casting, rehearsal process, use of space, costumes, relation to ‘traditional’ production expectations;
• How she felt then and feels now about the production and the creative process she utilized.

The fourth section pulls together the critical response I found for each production, possibly including reviews, individual statements, attendance information, remounts, resulting work opportunities, and academic investigations. I have positioned the critical response directly after the interview so there is an opportunity to recognize possible correlations between the director’s intention and the public’s reception of her work.

Chapter 6 compares and contrasts each individual director’s interview responses with those of the others and attempts to situate them within the spheres of feminist theory and Canadian theatre. I conclude that their definitions of feminism generally position them as moderate within the larger feminist ideological spectrum. Their responses to the question of whether they consider themselves feminists or directors first are determined by the explicitness of the political intent of the play. It is interesting that a political determination is usually made by the producing company and/or the playwright and not independently by the director. As a consequence, I find that the elements that define a production as feminist in these directors’ minds are amorphous and may reflect their understanding that consistently directing overtly feminist work banishes them to the margins of Canadian theatre. Finally, work opportunities for these directors are dependent on how well they fit into the hierarchical structure of Canadian theatre production and often their casting and rehearsal processes put them at odds with that system.

The second part of the chapter explores how each director used the liminal space in performance to transgress or normalize the social structures within her play. Generally, the directors were most concerned with exposing gender as a construction and destabilizing
social expectations based on gender. They used a variety of techniques to accomplish this. One shifted the traditional position of women on stage from object to subject, another used cross-gender casting to expose the fallacy of gender essentialism, while a third employed Brechtian alienation techniques to undermine the ‘reality’ being played out on stage.

Chapter 7 shares some conclusions I have made as a result of this endeavour. All five women directors have experienced gender discrimination from Artistic Directors, academics, designers, technicians, critics, and/or actors. While this is not a surprise, it is disheartening. All five women directors have also had to make a choice regarding the extent to which they overtly express their feminist perspectives. If they are too obvious, they will be relegated to the margins of theatre production. If they want to garner recognition and its resulting economic benefits, they must be so subtle in their feminist explorations that critics do not even acknowledge them. For substantial positive change to occur, I agree with Knowles that it needs to begin at the educational level before new theatre artists are indoctrinated into the current theatre system. This means not only a change in how directors and actors are trained to fit into the current hierarchical mainstream theatre, but a change in the way women are marginalized in all aspects of theatre education from the question of who is included in traditional canons to the issue of feminist theatre analyses being limited to only feminist theatre courses. Unfortunately Lynn Fernie’s 1985 statement is still heartbreakingly true: “the substantial amount of theatre based on feminist analyses … has not been incorporated in any significant way into any level of the institution of Canadian theatre” (59).
CHAPTER ONE

Katrina Dunn and Portia’s Secret Life

“[T]his person ... was incredibly well read, extremely intelligent and ... hid that because it was not acceptable in her time.”\(^3\)

My exploration into the ways feminist Canadian women directors engage with canonical texts begins in Vancouver with Katrina Dunn. As co-founding an alternative theatre company in 1989 and now in her current position as Artistic Director of Touchstone Theatre, Dunn has explored issues of gender construction and sexual stereotyping in her work. After a discussion about her experiences and feminist perspectives, we focused on her direction of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* for Vancouver’s 2003 Bard on the Beach Shakespearean Festival. This play, with its strong anti-Semitic content, is a glaring example of the way social values are embedded within a text. However, it is also a positive example of how the liminal space of performance can be used to destabilize those deep-rooted structures. Without anyone’s changing a word, the portrayal of Shylock has evolved over the years from a money-grubbing scoundrel to a dignified member of a persecuted minority as a way both to encourage and respond to changing social mores.

In her production, Dunn uses liminal space as an instrument for social change: She exposes the woman-as-object construction inherent in the play. Portia is a prize to be won for her many suitors. As the focus of both physical and economic male desire, she embodies the object of the male gaze. However, Dunn creates a world on stage where we see beyond this objectifying construct and glimpse Portia as the subject in her own life. She has friends,

\(^3\) All quotations in this chapter are from a personal interview with Katrina Dunn in her Touchstone Theatre office on February 22, 2005 unless otherwise indicated.
independence, aspirations, and doubts about marriage. Unfortunately, this important feminist issue – woman as object of the male gaze – and Dunn’s engagement with it were ignored by much of the critical response to the production in favour of the racial controversy surrounding the play. She is untroubled by this outcome because she feels that the audience understood what she was trying to do. For Dunn, the important issue is that she was proactive and made an effort to initiate change, regardless of how critics responded to it.

Dunn’s background and training are typical of many Canadian theatre artists. She was born on a Canadian air force base in Germany, but has spent most of her life in Canada, particularly British Columbia where she still resides. Theatre has always been a part of her life, albeit “very casually” early on. She did not expect to study it at university; however, she ended up doing an undergraduate degree majoring in Dance and minoring in Theatre at Simon Fraser University (SFU). In her final year, she decided that she wanted to direct a show. “It was more about…trying to direct, you know, setting a directing challenge for myself.” The result was a production of Maria Irene Fornes’s Mud as a theatre installation at the University’s downtown Vancouver art gallery which she co-directed with Diane Brown. This show was not only her final project at SFU, but also the first for her newly founded theatre collective, Ruby Slippers. The mandate for the company is to illuminate “social hypocrisy and sexual stereotypes through humour and theatrical innovation” (http://www.rubyslippers.ca/about.htm). In November of 1989 she co-directed their second production, Blackout: Six Short Pieces by Samuel Beckett, with Diane Brown and Belinda Earle at the Firehall Arts Centre.

In 1990, Dunn was accepted into the Directing Program at the National Theatre School (NTS) in Montreal where she spent two years before embarking on her professional
She found this experience “difficult” because it was “traditional theatre training … [for a] very narrowly defined theatre.” This comment speaks directly to how conventional director training in Canada is focused on working within the hierarchical mainstream theatre system and does not encourage alternative methods. NTS appears to have recognized a need for its students to have a wider range of experiences and to that end has employed many unique and alternative theatre artists such as actor/playwright Daniel MacIvor and feminist director Sarah Stanley. However, the main purpose of its directing program is still to “develop future theatre leaders who will have a solid grasp of the director’s craft” (http://www.ent-nts.qc.ca/nts/directing.htm) and to ensure that NTS graduates successfully enter the established Canadian theatre system.

Dunn considers that SFU’s interdisciplinary approach to performance, which included working with musicians and visual artists along with dancers, actors, and designers is a stronger influence on her work. She speaks of her SFU directing teacher, Vinnie Murphy, as a particularly important influence: he “was the biggest influence on me. I found it very difficult to find good directing … in terms of a teacher.” Murphy’s background in conceptual directing taught Dunn about exploration, innovation, and inner space – “rethinking the relationship with the audience.” Also, Dunn’s dance sensibility added to a “choreographic imagination when it came to space.”

After her first year at the NTS, Dunn returned to Vancouver in the summer to direct Dominic Champagne’s *The Rehearsal* for the Vancouver Fringe Festival. She also came back to Vancouver after leaving NTS in 1992 to direct another Fringe production, Normand Chaurette’s *The Queens*. Both shows were chosen in their respective years for extended runs at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre (VECC) as Picks of the Fringe in September. Finally
after directing another production of *The Rehearsal* (retitled *Playing Bare*) for Montreal’s Street People Theatre in November 1992, Dunn returned permanently to Vancouver. For the next five years she worked as Artistic Director for Ruby Slippers and directed many of their productions including in 1996 Blake Brooker and Jim Millan’s *Serpent Kills* and in 1997 Karim Alrawi’s *Patagonia* for which she received a Jessie Richardson Award nomination for Outstanding Direction of a Play. She began her work with canonical texts by co-directing two Brecht in the Park events, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1994) and *The Threepenny Opera* (1995), which were large, vibrant shows presented free at selected Vancouver parks. Dunn also was involved in the company’s collective creation *Herotica* (1994), an evening of “theatrical erotica by and for women” (http://www.rubyslippers.ca/history.htm). The show was produced for the Women In View Festival and subsequently toured to Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille before returning for three sold-out weeks at Vancouver’s Station Street Arts Centre. In 1995, she was involved in the sequel *Herotica2* which was invited to take part in One Yellow Rabbit’s High Performance Rodeo in Calgary.

In 1997, Dunn left Ruby Slippers to accept the position as Artistic Director of Touchstone Theatre where she continues working today. Touchstone’s mandate is “to develop and present professional Canadian theatrical productions. It encourages explorations in content and form, and introduces new works to the public. Touchstone stimulates and develops public interest in an evolving Canadian cultural perspective” http://www.touchstone theatre.com/aboutus/ history.htm). Dunn also works as a freelance director and has done shows in Vancouver for the independent companies Felix Culpa, Vancouver Moving Theatre, and The Electric Company along with work for the Capilano College and Langara College Studio 58 theatre programs.
When asked to define feminism and feminist, Dunn responded:

How I define it? Well, you know, I was reading a thing in the newspaper ranting about how they go too far with this, you know, equity in sports for women and blah, blah, blah. And I just kind of think, feminism is just anything that is not about oppressing women. So you’re a feminist if you’re not for oppressing women, you know. She was talking about feminists as these other people and I kind of went, “Well, you know, feminists are the people that got you your job and made sure that you can vote – so you have some control over your reproductive system.” So if you’re not a feminist, then who are you, you know. So I just like to define it very broadly and I have a lot of distaste for people who despise the term…. Yeah, okay, it’s fallen out of fashion – it’s not as chic as it used to be…. So, yes, I just like to define it really broadly and I think men can be feminists as well and I think that we owe a huge debt to a whole lot of people. If you don’t acknowledge that you’re kind of stupid.

To Dunn, being a feminist director means the freedom to do whatever she wants. “To me feminism is about freedom – freedom to choose, freedom to work on any kind of material that speaks to me even if that’s written by a man and potentially about male experience.” She also does not believe that all her work is “what most people would call feminist,” but acknowledges that her feminist perspective does influence everything she does. This distinction between her feminist work and other directing projects is echoed by the other directors I interviewed. They appear to feel that their work needs this “feminist” or “other”
distinction in order to avoid being labelled, and thus marginalized, by established Canadian theatres.

When asked if being a feminist has negatively influenced work opportunities for her, she quickly replied that being a feminist has actually been a positive influence. “I think because of the way I see the world – I have a lot of confidence, I have a lot of drive. I’m not afraid to put myself forward.” She also considers theatre a “very female world.” She has met “a lot of women working in theatre,” and this has created a comfortable environment for her in which to work. Surprisingly, she is not often offered women-centered work to direct. Dunn finds that because Touchstone Theatre has a clear mandate to produce Canadian work, most scripts are presented to her with that national orientation rather than gender orientation in mind. She has noticed that she is approached by more men than women with potential scripts, but concedes that may be because “men tend to be more aggressive in promoting themselves.” In fact, Dunn works hard to provide a “good quota of work penned, or directed, or … performed by women. I definitely look for those opportunities.” She initiates most of the work she considers women-centered by working with women collaborators and by encouraging other women to pursue their projects.

When not collaborating, Dunn goes through the usual casting process. However, she tries very hard not to typecast and instead hires the person she feels is best for the role. This has created difficulties for her at times. She relates how one of the first shows she did for Touchstone was written by an Eastern Canadian playwright. When he came to see the show, he reacted negatively. The point of contention was that Dunn had cast a large woman in a lead role and “he just thought it was so wrong. He could not get past her body type even though she gave a fantastic performance and she was right for the role.” Many people may
believe we have moved past such casting boundaries, but Dunn laments, “It’s out there, you know. That attitude is definitely out there.” She believes that “we tend to think of women actors in very, very ridiculous terms” and that “there’s just so many generic young women out there.” However, while she endeavors to cast beyond type, Dunn does acknowledge that “sometimes you just need a specific hit.” It is not possible for anyone to completely escape cultural gender expectations.

I then asked Dunn if she agreed or disagreed with the statement that leadership “is the most often acknowledged quality of a good director” (Daniels 45). She agreed with the perspective, provided that leadership was defined as being “clear in your direction” and that “you actually tell people where you’re going.” She feels that the people involved in a production look to the director for assurance. “They want to know that you know what you’re doing.” Without clarity from the director, the cast and crew can become uneasy, and at times even “fear is generated.” It is interesting to note that although Dunn chafed against the traditional director training at NTS, she has come to embody its central principle: “directors … function within rehearsal processes as … creative geniuses whose vision shapes a theatrical production that actors … are trained to deliver” (Knowles, Reading 25). Further, she voices the possibility that “any director who fails or refuses to live up to those expectations is likely to be faced with a … defensive cast” (Knowles, Reading 28).

While Dunn feels secure in her abilities as a director, her direction has been challenged in the past on the basis of her gender. Actors have challenged her in an attempt to undermine her authority. Dunn feels that “if you’re weak, if you’re fragile … certain people will go in there and try to break you apart. And maybe that’s just more common with women than men … I certainly did experience that from some I worked with … it tends to be male
actors.” To head off any potential problem, she believes in the adage “hit early, hit hard.” She establishes the rules of her rehearsals right at the start so that actors can feel comfortable and safe within the process. “If somebody chooses to continue with a kind of inappropriate behaviour, they know something’s going to come at them.” This is an extension of the clarity referred to earlier. Not only is Dunn clear in what her direction is: she is also clear about how she and her cast will work to achieve that goal and what will and will not be tolerated.

Dunn was equally unambiguous about what she would not tolerate from a newspaper critic. Her response to the question, “Do you think defining yourself as a feminist has ever impacted critical response to your productions?” elicited the following story. At the time of the interview she had just finished directing a production of Carmen Aguirre’s The Trigger at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. The semi-autobiographical play involves the rape of a young girl and its aftermath. The response by the theatre critic for the Vancouver Sun newspaper “was brutal.” Dunn felt he basically “accused her [the author/performer] of exploiting her own rape and that this was a very selfish act and she should just shut up about her experience.” The review generated a heated response from the general public chastising the critic for “crossing the line.” While the harsh words in this critique were reserved for the playwright/performer and not Dunn personally, she believed that this intense response by the male reviewer to an almost exclusively female experience paralleled the often heated critical response to feminist work which male reviewers may not find relevant to their experience.

Dunn then reiterated the question of whether or not being a feminist influenced critical response. “So yeah, I would say sometimes it does. If you’re working on material that is volatile, then you know it happens.” Interestingly, Dunn has also experienced the opposite

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response from some women. When she has directed a play that is not specifically women-
centred, she has been chastised for not promoting women’s work and/or a feminist
perspective. This certainly can create a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ situation
and an ironic backlash for feminist directors who take on a variety of projects. This
condemnation completely contradicts Dunn’s definition of feminism: “feminism is about
freedom – freedom to choose, freedom to work on any kind of material that speaks to me.”
Dunn deals with the criticism in this way: “I ignore it.”

After Dunn’s well-received production of Cymbeline for Vancouver’s Bard on the
Beach Shakespearean Festival in 2002, Artistic Director Christopher Gaze approached her on
closing night and offered her the opportunity to direct The Merchant of Venice the following
season. She had thought that he might offer her work for the next year, but she certainly did
not expect an offer of this size, importance, and controversy. She accepted without hesitation
exemplifying her belief that being a feminist director allows her the freedom to choose any
type of work she wants. It was an exciting chance for her. Directing Merchant would move
Dunn into a higher echelon of freelance directors because the production was to be part of
Bard’s mainstage season whereas Cymbeline had been produced in its smaller venue. She
was about to make more money than she ever had as a freelance director while working on
only her second Shakespearean production. The career advancement and monetary
compensation made this an offer she felt she could not turn down.

While Dunn was familiar with the play’s “premise … and knew it was a volatile
play,” she had to research the work extensively before starting production. She was surprised
to find that, technically, the play is a comedy. She remembered it being played more as a
tragedy, and then this contradiction was compounded by themes of love and romance. “It
takes three separate genres and mixes them all up together.” Because of this, Dunn felt that many directors tended to streamline the play by taking out parts they did not like and then pushing the direction of the play toward a single perspective. She thought, “Let’s just do it. Let’s just do the play. Show the play in all its contradictions and play it full out.” Otherwise, if she had made cuts to suit herself, she would have felt “dishonest” about calling it a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. So she viewed her challenge as letting the play “go from comedy to romance to tragedy – back and forth all over the place – without kind of losing the audience.”

During her research on the play, several specific images and challenges emerged for Dunn. Initially, she was struck by the sense of carnival in the play. “There’s a lot of drunkenness, there’s partying, and a sense of out-of-control about this play.” She wanted to capture this wildness in her production; she wanted it to “feel like it was the Stanley Cup riots.” She also felt that Portia is basically “being auctioned off in the play” and that she is viewed as a lottery prize to be won. Dunn wanted to expose this narrow perspective by showing the many layers of Portia and the women around her. Dunn had to create a Portia that would be believable when she dressed as a man and overturned the court to save her husband’s life. This challenge was linked directly to the myopic vision of Portia as a prized object.

As Dunn has said, her feminist perspective influences all her work, and this perception of Portia as an object – of women as objects of the male gaze – is at the crux of much feminist exploration. This examination of objectification stems in part from the

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5 On June 19, 1994, tens of thousands of hockey fans rioted in downtown Vancouver when the Vancouver Canucks hockey team lost the seventh and final game of the Stanley Cup playoffs. More than 500 police officers armed with batons, shields, and tear gas battled looters and rioters for much of the night (http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-75-1299-7507/science_technology/police_cameras_privacy/clip9).
The writings of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan which are “the theoretical apparatus which underpins work on the construction of the feminine subject” (Aston 35). Lacan states that a child’s first step in acquiring an identity independent of the mother, the genesis of his self, and the process of social acculturation begin with the mirror-stage. Prior to this stage, a child does not have an understanding of himself as an autonomous being. There is no awareness of his body as something unto itself. He experiences life through independent physical sensations and does not connect these events to an entity separate from the mother. In the mirror-stage a child sees himself in a mirror and finally begins to perceive that he is a whole person and not an extension of the mother. It is at this point that the hope of self-reliance is born. It is also the point where the child’s earlier experience of undifferentiated self-satisfaction is traded for entrance into the “symbolic order of the culture” (Case, Feminism 119).

The importance of Lacan’s work to feminist theory is that it moves gender beyond Freud’s biological determinism into the realm of cultural construction. Lacan undermines Freud’s belief that autonomy “is produced in opposition to biological, organic, or instinctual process[es]” (Grosz 31) and posits that “the self is actually a cultural idea” (Case, Feminism 119). Therefore, the child sees in his reflection not an internal reality, but instead an external construct. The replacement of libidinal pleasure by this outer-organized sign system leaves the child with unfulfilled desires which may be sublimated through the creative act: “He has been denied any real satisfaction and establishes the stage as a site for his alienated, symbolic yearning for satisfaction” (Case, Feminism 120).

Therefore, according to Lacan and consequently much feminist theory, the self and by extension gender is a cultural construct. However, through this exploration of the mirror-
stage, gender also has become a differentiating point between subject and object. I purposely used only male pronouns in the previous paragraph because both Freud and Lacan explore the mirror-stage solely from the perspective of the male child. It either did not occur to them that the perspective of a female child might be different from that of a male child or they did not consider the possibility of difference important enough to explore separately. It is also possible that they just did not consider the female at all. For whatever reason, Freud and Lacan clearly connect the mirror-stage specifically to the male child and his desire.

In the act of looking, of gazing, power in the form of desire resides: desire for the image which offers an unattainable whole and also the desire for sexual satisfaction. Therefore, the gaze is equated with both power and desire. By positioning their analysis of this stage in development from a male child’s perspective, Freud and Lacan cement a relationship between the male, the gaze, power, and desire which excludes the female from the subject position. The male subject acts; therefore, by default, the female becomes the object which is acted upon. As Jill Dolan states, part of a feminist agenda should be “to denaturalize the psychological identification processes implicit in representation” (14). Feminists should destabilize the power of the male gaze and expose its gender implications. Through her reading of Portia as a prize to be won, Dunn directly engages with this subject/object dialectic and, as I will discuss, makes specific decisions to strike at the foundations of this seemingly ‘natural’ relationship.

Dunn’s decision about whether or not to present the play in a ‘traditional’ way was heavily influenced by the venue. Bard on the Beach is an annual Shakespearean festival held in Vanier Park each summer from June to September. The park is situated along the waters of False Creek in Vancouver’s Kitsilano neighbourhood next to the H.R. MacMillan Space
Centre. As there is not a permanent theatre, the plays are presented in large open-ended tents so that the backdrop of each play is a spectacular view of mountains, sea, and sky. While these tents create exciting possibilities, they do not support productions with extensive lighting or set designs. For this reason, all Bard productions are somewhat traditional in relation to the Elizabethan theatre practice of utilizing little or no set (Illustration 1).

Illustration 1. Act IV, scene i of Bard on the Beach’s 2003 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo: David Blue

But Dunn did not set the play in the Elizabethan or even the Jacobean period. Instead, she took elements within the play to “define the theatrical world – that is, not necessarily a historical period.” She and set designer Yvan Morissette created an “open window effect so you saw the [mountains] through that,” thus utilizing the natural backdrop to good effect,
while Mara Gottler’s costumes reflected the multicultural nature of a port city – both Venice and Vancouver – by using Indian and Moroccan influences (Illustration 2).

Illustration 2. Act III, scene ii of Bard on the Beach’s 2003 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo: David Blue.

The ‘open window’ design also framed Portia’s first entrance, creating a virtual picture of Portia on which the entire audience could gaze. This striking image was then quickly subverted by a number of strategies which are discussed below.

In terms of interpretation, Dunn portrayed Shylock as “a Jew that very much blended into the society,” which drew the ire of some Jewish patrons who felt “he wasn’t Jewish enough.” Dunn wanted to look at ‘financial racism’ – discrimination based on a perceived economic disproportion – which she believed was more prevalent in our contemporary
society, particularly in the multicultural Vancouver setting. She also wanted to emphasize how the Christian liturgy has oppressed people for millennia by enacting Shylock’s forced conversion to Christianity through a baptism at the end of the play. In the staging of this event, Shylock loses his male subject position. He becomes the object of Christian conversion and thus his mistreatment is paralleled to that of women.

When casting *Merchant*, Dunn did not look for people who would look good together, but instead she looked for actors who would give her “real people.” She would throw ideas at the person auditioning and see how s/he reacted. She believes that “if you have a big idea about a character or a direction you want to go, you better tell them in the audition because you might get somebody who’s not comfortable with that.” Shylock was pre-cast with Donald Adams in the role. Dunn had worked with him a number of times before and had no concerns about him in the part. Because Adams is not Jewish, he carefully researched “the history of the Jewish religion, especially the medieval period,” and his opinion that Shylock should “not be played as a villain or a buffoon” (Palmer, “Donald” 20) meshed perfectly with Dunn’s. She read a number of women for the role of Portia, but ultimately cast Moya O’Connell whom she had in mind throughout the entire audition process. O’Connell had played Imogen in Dunn’s production of *Cymbeline* and therefore Dunn knew her abilities and trusted her in the part.

At this point in the casting, Dunn clearly began to address the woman-as-object interpretation that had struck her so strongly in her initial readings. She created two women’s roles that were not in the original script, which she simply listed as “Maid, to Portia” in the program. *Merchant* is a male-dominated play (traditionally 16 male roles and 3 female) so by adding two more parts for women Dunn took a small step to addressing this imbalance. The
mere presence of more female bodies on stage changed the gender dynamics. Overall, they
did not appear quite so physically dominated by male authority, and during the scenes in
Belmont the women could actually physically dominate the visiting suitors. In the Belmont
scenes that involve prospective suitors (I.ii, II.i, II.vii, II.ix, and III.ii), Shakespeare clearly
writes from the perspective that women are a “medium of exchange” and that marriage is an
“institution of ownership” (Case, *Classic* 319). Dunn chose to remain faithful to the text and
therefore made no attempt to alter the patriarchal plot. However, she did subvert the
traditionally passive roles written for women. Rather than just appearing on stage “in order to
be looked upon,” the women were there “to do the looking” (Case, *Feminism* 120), thus
creating a subject rather than object position for Portia and her maids.

By adding the two roles, Dunn also created the impression of a “secret society”
among the women who were “schooling themselves and keeping that hidden from the people
who were … scared by it.” This supported the interpretation that Portia was someone “who
was incredibly well read, extremely intelligent, and who hid that because it was not
acceptable in her time.” Dunn believed this would make Portia’s educated and well-spoken
conduct in the courtroom scene more plausible while it would also complicate the perception
of Portia as a mere object. She no longer stood alone as a coveted prize, but instead was seen
as someone who had her own life. The sense of social and personal interactions embodied by
the four women did not only exclude men, it also made the need for male action – the male
subject – irrelevant. The dramatic action in the play was still determined by men’s desires:
Portia’s father’s decree, Antonio’s need for money, Bassanio’s loan from Shylock, and
Shylock’s demand for repayment. However, Dunn created a Portia who also had her own
desires and acted upon them even though this was not explicit in the text. She created a
woman with the power to act rather than fulfilling the traditional presentation of Portia as an object to be won.

The connections among these women were supported through Gottler’s costume design. The image of gold, silver, and lead that Dunn saw in the play was embodied by the group of women. “Portia’s dress was gold, silver, and lead all woven, doing different things. Her handmaiden was gold and then she had two other handmaidens that were silver and lead. We created their whole world around gold, silver, and lead” (Illustration 3). These costumes’ colours also underscore the authority of man and the restrictions on the women in the play. The chests that determine who will ‘win’ Portia are made of gold, silver, and lead. By reflecting the colours chosen by Portia’s father in the costumes, the women in the play are quite literally enveloped by male power.

For the part of Launcelot Gobbo, Dunn made a choice that caused some controversy. This character has some “very Jew-hating text” and she “chose to make things even more complicated by casting a black man in that role.” This was not a colour-blind casting choice. She also did not do this to highlight the Black-Jewish racial tension developing in the United States, but rather because the character is literally a slave. During the courtroom scene, Shylock challenges those who are asking him to let Antonio go free by comparing Antonio to their slaves. Since they do not let their slaves go free, why should he let Antonio go free? At this point, Dunn wanted a strong visual picture. The men asked Shylock to let the white man go free, but gave no thought to the presence of the black slave. While they condemned Shylock for being “A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch, Uncapable of pity, void and empty/From any dram of mercy” (IV.i.4-6), they could not see these same qualities within
themselves in relation to their treatment of their own slaves. This double standard “made
slavery real for people who say, ‘Oh, I’d never do that,’” and may have caused them to look
at how they truthfully engage with race. By highlighting the characters’ contradictions in the
play, Dunn exposes the cultural power structure inherent within it and women’s absence from
it both literally and figuratively.
Because Dunn was rehearsing a three-hour Shakespearean play in three weeks, she had to work fast. “Some people…think working in professional theatre is a great luxury; it’s not.” Because of the time constraint, she committed a great deal of time to preparation so that when she entered the rehearsal room she knew exactly what she wanted. Otherwise, she felt it would have been impossible to get the show up and running. “Basically, you get one or two hits a scene and that’s it.” Dunn laments the direction in which professional work is going. She conced is that you are judged on how well you can time-manage because the quicker you can work the more money you save the company. She believes that this is a strong consideration when companies decide to hire a director. “I’d love to say we did all these exploratory exercises and this and that, but we didn’t do any of that.” She relied heavily on the experience and professionalism of her cast to do their “homework.”

Dunn’s expectations for her cast were fairly simple: “I just expect actors to come at me with ideas, because I bring ideas so I expect them to come back.” She had a clear vision of what she wanted the play to say and that meant different interpretations of scenes than what some of the actors were used to. This departure from a more conventional understanding of the play caused “conflicts” with some of the actors who had worked extensively with Bard on the Beach. “Bard … has its own style and the actors play in that style.” Her response, “I know you’ve played the other shows like that, but that’s not what I’m looking for,” was not always well received. She “found it kind of tough” to break through the resistance and was not always successful in doing so.

Dunn does not attribute this difficulty to her gender, but Bard productions have been predominantly directed by men. Of the twenty-six shows produced on the Mainstage prior to 2003, only three were directed by women (11%). The proportion rises to 25% for Mainstage
shows from 2003-2006 where women directed two of the eight shows. And not only is there a preponderance of male directors, but often the same male directors are used repeatedly: Douglas Campbell (8), Miles Potter (3), and Artistic Director Christopher Gaze (4). This prevalence of male direction coupled with the fact that Shakespeare’s plays have a higher proportion of male roles must have made masculinity a factor in determining the Bard style. In other words, a dominant ideology can “speak through the exploratory process…. [and] shape the expectations that actors, designers, technicians and others bring to rehearsals” (Knowles, Reading 28). Dunn’s exclusion from this sexual determination may have contributed to her difficulties in getting the actors to work in a different way.

The characters’ genders were often points of discussion during rehearsals, especially for the women involved with the play. The dramatic action of the play is generally controlled by male characters with female characters reacting to the circumstances as they arise. Specifically, the father’s control of Portia from beyond the grave elicited some groans from the female cast members. He not only determines how her husband will be chosen through the chest selection, but then relegates Portia to the role of spectator in her own life. Patriarchy is played out on stage. However, there was also satisfaction that Portia ultimately subverts the all-male court through her disguise and thus exposes the arbitrary nature of patriarchal institutions.

Gender was also part of the debate over how overtly to play the homosexual love story between Antonio and Bassanio. “Sometimes it’s totally not played at all, sometimes it’s really overplayed.” Dunn decided to concentrate less on the sexual aspect of their relationship and more on the “real love story between these men…. they were each other’s life love.” This reading encouraged a discussion among the cast members about gender and
sexuality that carried over into the courtroom scene and Portia’s cross-dressing performance. O’Connell had no hesitation in throwing herself into a representation of male gender. “If anything I had to hold her back,” says Dunn. She even used make-up to create a beard effect for the first half of the play’s run. Dunn, however, asked O’Connell to stop creating this effect because Shakespeare did not call for a “burly” man but a “boyish young man.”

O’Connell’s enthusiastic cross-dressing highlights several areas that feminist theatre scholars are addressing. In her article “Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts,” Sue-Ellen Case explores the reasons for cross-dressing in classical theatre practice. Between the sixth and fifth centuries BC, there arose a “division between private and public life” (318) in response to the growing importance of citizenship in the changing social and economic structures of Athens. Citizenship privileged a person with economic and legal powers, but becoming a citizen was “dependent upon family lines” (319). A son could be granted citizenship only if both of his parents were citizens. Therefore as the legitimacy of heirs became paramount in acknowledging “political membership in the polis” (319), women’s sex lives were regulated in order to establish that legitimacy. Women were excluded from the public sphere and relegated to the private sphere of the household. This exclusion is clearly evident in Merchant as Portia is predominantly seen within the domestic sphere of Belmont. When she appears in public she must dress as a man to be taken seriously.

The segregation of “actual women in the classical world created the invention of a representation of the gender ‘Woman’ within the culture,” according to Case (318). Because only men wrote plays, they constructed a Woman on stage that served the needs and perspectives of the city-state. This creation was then brought to life by a man dressed as the constructed representation of Woman. As a result, “a subtextual message was delivered about
the nature of the female gender, its behavior, appearance, and formal distance from the representation of the male” (322). Case extends her argument through both Roman and Elizabethan times when theatre continued to exclude women from the stage and instead presented a representation of Woman. She asserts that each subsequent culture that reproduces texts from these periods without addressing their implications “actively participates in the same patriarchal subtext which created those female characters as ‘Women’” (322).

Michelene Wandor expands on Case’s argument, arguing that cross-dressing can be “an expression of rebellion; a form of witty subversion … [that] shows up some of the ridiculous constraints which define femininity and masculinity” (172). In the same way as Case, she firmly situates the practice in its historical context – Greek and Elizabethan theatre – and notes that cross-dressing “has flourished during historical periods when attitudes to sexuality and the position of women have been challenged” (172). She further comments on the English music hall practice of cross-dressing and highlights its subversive possibilities for destabilizing gender. For Wandor, the challenge of “sexuality and the position of women” can be a positive force, weakening rather than reinforcing the construction of Woman.

Therefore, cross-dressing highlights the material feminist contention that gender is a construction. Just as femininity is a learned behaviour, “‘masculinity’ can be learned … it is not some innate, inviolable quality assigned only to those humans who are biologically identified as male” (Ferris 168). Portia’s effectiveness in the traditionally male arena of law emphasizes both these positions. It subverts any contention that legal institutions are unfeminine male domains and at the same time, in Dunn’s production, it exposes the
arbitrary construction of the male gender itself through O’Connell’s unreserved cross-dressing.

Dunn’s reading of Portia as an intelligent and conflicted woman living within the constraints of a patriarchal society was played out in interesting ways. O’Connell is “incredibly beautiful…. a woman with movie star good looks.” Dunn felt that O’Connell’s looks immediately gave the impression of confidence and ease, and she “tried to create something that was very different…. [the idea that Portia] had all these dark streaks in her.” Dunn used the actor’s beauty as a tool to expose stereotypical perceptions of a beautiful woman. “It was very interesting to me to use her looks … [and] work against them in the way that we interpreted the character.”

From Portia’s first entrance, Dunn made her interpretation strikingly clear. Costume designer Gottler created a beautifully ornate dress to highlight Dunn’s view of Portia as a prize – something to be won. Portia entered up the back stairs of the stage so that she gradually came into view. She appeared as a gilt trophy standing upstage centre against the natural backdrop afforded by the open-ended tent (Illustration 4). Portia’s first action was to rip the dress open and take it off (Illustration 5). “That image was about telling the audience this is not going to be the Portia that you thought … you were going to see.” She will not be kept in the object position.

Another place where Dunn challenged expectations was in act three, scene two, when Portia gives her ring to Bassanio. The ring symbolizes all that Portia owns. “I was the lord/Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,/Queen o’er myself; and even now, but now,/This house, these servants, and this same myself/Are yours, my lord’s” (167-71). The exchange is usually played very romantically as if “there’s just nothing else that she would rather do than
Illustration 4. Portia’s entrance in Act I, scene ii of Bard on the Beach’s 2003 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo: David Blue

Illustration 5. Portia after removing the confining dress in Act I, scene ii of Bard on the Beach’s 2003 production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo: David Blue
give this man all her power and all her money and all her self-identity.” Instead, Dunn asked for a “moment of hesitation to give a sense of that impact hitting.” She wanted to emphasize that Portia is not being swept away by love, but has had “a little epiphany” about the enormity of what she was giving away. The hesitation communicated Portia’s realization and caused the audience to rethink their notion that giving everything to a man is a ‘normal’ thing for a woman to want to do.

One thing that Dunn asked O’Connell to do that took some convincing was to cut her hair. Dunn asked her to do this because of the impact she wanted to make at the end of the play. Throughout the production, Portia had beautiful long hair in keeping with the conventional image of the character. In the courtroom scene, Portia had short hair which was assumed by the audience to be a wig. At the end of the play when Portia reveals to Bassanio that she had dressed up as the Doctor of Law, O’Connell removed her long-haired wig to expose her cropped hair. “She’s actually cut off her beautiful long hair in order to exorcize this for him.” Not only did it show the sacrifice that Portia was willing to make for her husband, but it also exposed the assumption that Portia would naturally have long hair to fulfill gender expectations. It was another strong way to show that looks and their associated gender biases can be deceiving.

In response to the question, “Did you receive any specific feedback on the production that you could clearly connect to your gender or feminist perspectives?” Dunn answered “that people really felt that that interpretation of Portia and her world was something that couldn’t have been done with a male director.” She compares her perspective to that in Laurence Olivier’s film version of Merchant where he stars as Shylock and Joan Plowright is
Portia. Portia was “beyond feeling … literally on a pedestal” and Plowright played the role “like she was a robot; it was like the dead zone.” For Dunn, it was “such a male perspective. They can imagine a woman who’s perfect and above everything and who doesn’t respond to stimuli.” Portia to her was a “real person who obviously is very conflicted.”

Olivier’s Portia is a representation that can be traced back through history. The image of Woman as Madonna – pure and spiritual – stems from the Judeo-Christian ideal as represented by the Virgin Mary. She is the ideal woman who thinks only of others while her own feelings are irrelevant. It is almost as if this woman has no feelings at all and only exists to be a vessel for male conception both literal and figurative. Conversely, Woman as whore – sexual and evil – can be seen in both Judeo-Christian theology and even earlier in classical mythological. In the bible, Eve is the first woman on Earth. She tempts Adam with the forbidden fruit and thus causes them to be thrown out of paradise. In this story, the downfall of man rests squarely on a woman’s inability to resist temptation. That Adam also could not resist temptation appears to have little impact on where the blame should lie. In classical mythology, Pandora is the first woman on earth. She cannot control her curiosity so against all orders she opens the jar containing evil which is thus unleashed on the world. Again, a woman brings about the loss of everything good through her own weakness and man must suffer the consequences.

Dunn’s desire to show Portia as a “real person” confounds this Madonna-Whore dichotomy by revealing layers that are traditionally unacknowledged. She challenges patriarchal definitions by giving Portia conflicts that are not seen in these male-created icons. Should she give up her wealth to Bassanio? Can she manage the constant struggle not to
appear as educated and intelligent as she is? Should she have to? Through this reading of Portia, Dunn forces the audience to look beyond stereotypes to the reality of women’s lives.

While Dunn had no regrets about accepting the work and would happily direct the play again in the future, she concedes that it was a very difficult play to do. “People had very intense ideas about it…very attached to their ideas about how it should ever be done.” Also, the controversy around the anti-Semitic theme makes it a play some people do not believe should be done. “No matter the lens of interpretation you put on it, maybe you can’t get away from that.” She felt that the audience understood what she was trying to say about women and gender when she took part in the Talk-Back session. However, she was surprised that “the stuff that I did with the women was completely missed in the review.”

Dunn is referring to Peter Birnie’s review of Merchant in the Vancouver Sun, 2 July 2003. It is clear that Birnie believes that Merchant should not be produced at all: “Shakespeare’s schizophrenic mess simply isn’t worth the effort” (C6). While other reviewers acknowledged the controversy surrounding the play and its anti-Semitic content, no one else took the same stand as Birnie. They concentrated on the play’s interpretation and the theatrics of the production. However, Dunn “somewhat agree[s] with Peter Birnie that maybe this play shouldn’t be produced, you know, maybe it is a piece of hate literature.”

To address possible charges of insensitivity or racism, Bard’s publicity team worked hard to mitigate any uneasiness on the part of their potential audience. The 12 March 2003 news release entitled “Bard on the Beach Announces 2003 Season Playbill” sets the tone for how they would deal with the controversy of the play. It states, “Katrina Dunn will direct a balanced and dignified staging of this ever-provocative drama.” The clear implication is that the production will be sensitive to the anti-Semitic content and will neither pander to nor
ignore it. Also, the following paragraph announces “Mark Leiren-Young’s one-man ‘talkback’ play entitled *Shylock*, where an actor playing the famous moneylender examines the pros and cons of producing the politically volatile play *The Merchant of Venice.*” So not only will Dunn’s production be “balanced and dignified,” but the festival has created an opportunity for theatre-goers to explore whether or not the play should be produced. In this way, the festival stages *Merchant* while allaying possible repercussions from the audience by producing the play in a way that shows it understands their concerns. Also because *Shylock* is written by a Canadian, the festival addresses comments about whether or not we need another festival dedicated to a dead, white, British male playwright. The fact that *Shylock* is a one-man show and therefore very economical to produce, is just icing on the cake.

The 9 June 2003 news release dedicated solely to *Merchant* echoes the earlier one: “Katrina Dunn, Artistic Director for Touchstone Theatre, directs this great tale of love and revenge with balance and dignity.” While the emphasis has shifted from “this ever-provocative drama” to “this great tale of love and revenge,” it still reassures the media and the public that it will be done with “balance and dignity.” The release goes on to list the cast and what parts they will play. It is interesting to note that of all the characters mentioned, only one has a physically-descriptive adjective accompanying it: “Moya O’Connell is the beautiful heiress Portia [emphasis added].” In doing this, the promotional material perpetuates the traditional expectations for the character while emphasizing the importance of beauty in general. The male characters are defined as “friend,” “merchant,” or “servant” to establish either their relationship to others or their social position in the play. Similarly, the other female characters are referred to as “Portia’s maids” or her “waiting woman.” The
expectation of a beautiful Portia is given further importance by separating her from the other female characters in this way.

The 23 May 2003 news release reiterates the details of the season and provides the performance schedule for the entire festival including non-theatrical events such as wine tasting and fireworks. The description of Merchant has been truncated and refers to it only as a “classic drama.” There is no reference to possible controversy or how it may be dealt with. It is as if that issue has been addressed and there is no more need to do so. Shylock is only mentioned with regard to its dates of performance and not in any relation to Merchant. In none of the three releases was there any comment on Dunn’s feminist perspective on the play. It was as if one controversy was enough for the festival to handle without creating a possible new one by discussing the feminist perspective. This implies that a feminist reading of the play would create problems that could influence critical reception and audience attendance. The impact of describing a production as feminist is discussed in my last chapter.

In terms of attendance, Merchant was well received. While Bard could not provide attendance numbers for the individual plays, the attendance for the entire season increased slightly over the previous season – to 66,900 from 66,357 (http://www.bardonthebeach.org/history.html). Dunn thought “it was one of the best-selling shows that Bard’s ever done. The audience attendance was great.” While the critical response to the production was “all over the map,” there was still considerable coverage for the show.

Bard bought the covers of Playboard⁶ for June and July-August 2003 and there were promotional articles inside the June, July-August, and September 2003 editions. Previews were featured in The Western Jewish Bulletin (2 Aug 2003, 15) and The Province (26 June

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⁶ Playboard is a free publication that has become part of the theatre-going experience for Vancouverites with a mix of movie industry news, theatrical trivia and guides to current productions. It is available at theatres. (http://www.vancouverhistory.ca/chronology1966.htm).
There were interviews with Donald Adams (in *Arts Alive* July/August 2003, 20), Yvan Morissette (*Georgia Straight* 12-19 June 2003, 44), and the three directors for the season (*Vancouver Sun* 5 June 2003, C15, C18-19). Finally, six reviews appeared in various publications.

The news releases that Bard put out emphasized the “balance and dignity” of the play’s direction, but made no mention of Dunn’s directorial perspective in terms of the women in the play. Similarly, the interviews with Dunn focused on the challenge of presenting *Merchant* when many think the play should be banned for its anti-Semitism and did not reflect her feminist engagement with the text. She, in turn, acknowledged the controversy surrounding the play: “‘I know that there are people who believe that this play shouldn’t be produced anymore, and I think those people have a valid point’” (Ramsay 15). She then stressed the amount of research she did on past productions and interpretations of *Merchant* before beginning work: “‘My biggest fear was that people would think I approached it naively. It’s one of the most critically observed and discussed plays in the whole canon, and what we’ve tried to do is not back away from all the complexities’” (Birnie, “Three” C18-19). Finally, Dunn deflected anti-Semitic charges by highlighting the positive aspects of the play – “’He’s created these incredible characters and some of the scenes are just flawless’” (Ramsay 15) – and asserting that ultimately the play is “not about the Jews: it’s about money” (Harrison B6).

*Arts Alive* interviewed Donald Adams, the actor who played Shylock. After first providing a short list of Adams’s acting experience, the interviewer, Morgan Palmer, turned the questions back to the difficulties of producing *Merchant* for a contemporary audience presumably less racist than the original one. Adams followed Dunn’s example by relating
that “he felt it very important to spend time and care in researching the history of the Jewish religion.” The phrase “balanced and dignified” even crept into the conversation to describe the way Adams and Dunn felt the play needed to be approached (Palmer, “Donald” 20). Perhaps understandably, given that the article was an interview with the actor playing Shylock, there was no discussion about how the women characters were being interpreted in the play.

Interestingly, Moya O’Connell—who was consistently praised for her acting in the reviews and was eventually nominated for a Jessie Richardson Award⁷ for her portrayal of Portia—was never interviewed, and there were no quotes attributed to her in any of the preview articles or reviews. Although most of Birnie’s review speaks to the “play’s outrageous obstacles” such as its being “an inane tale … replete with racism,” he does make space to comment that “Moya O’Connell is handing us a deliciously rich performance as Portia” (“Merchant” C6). Colin Thomas echoes Birnie’s admiration of O’Connell: “Moya O’Connell’s Portia is elegant, intelligent, cruel, and—in one moment—guiltily troubled” (“Merchant” 44). Alan Charlton of The B.C. Catholic is even more effusive: “Particular mention must be made of Moya O’Connell’s Portia. In fact, of the dozen or so portrayals of the part which I have seen, I cannot remember one which has so successfully struck such a fine balance between lively comedy, passionate romance, and fine intelligence” (9).

The six reviewers are split evenly along gender lines – three women and three men. However, the only reviewers who speak to the addition of the two maids and their impact on the play are both women, Jane Penistan and Jo Ledingham. Penistan comments on the

⁷ The Awards are named in honour of actor, director, and costume designer Jessie Richardson for her contribution to and support of Vancouver theatre from the 1930’s through to the 1970’s. Awards are given annually to “celebrate and promote the outstanding achievements of the Vancouver Professional Theatre community” (http://www.jessies.ca/about.html).
“girlish excitement” created when “the elegantly gowned heiress and her ladies in waiting delightfully enjoy delicious pleasantries and comments on the strange suitors” (http://www.reviewvancouver.org/thmerchant03.htm). Ledingham remarks on the same scene: “By adding in the serving women as well as Portia and Nerissa, Dunn injects ‘pajama party’ frivolity … [as] the women roll about on pillows while mocking Portia’s would-be suitors.” These observations highlight the subject position of the women in this scene and Dunn’s effort to disrupt the woman-as-object perspective. However, the reviewers also inadvertently undermine the shifted perspective by using the phrases “girlish excitement” and “pajama party’ frivolity” to depict the scene. These descriptions imply that the women are simply playing at taking control and not actually wielding it, while they wait for the men to conclude their serious business. They may be subjects in their domestic sphere, but it does not extend beyond the chamber walls.

Ledingham is also the only reviewer to mention one of Dunn’s closing gestures which speaks directly to the traditional idea that women are happy to sacrifice everything for love. “Shylock’s daughter Jessica (Rebecca Auerbach) and Portia half raise themselves from their wedding beds and cast long, unsettled gazes out into the audience. Moya O’Connell (Portia) freights that look with such sorrow and bewilderment that her character seems to say, ‘What have I done?’” Ledingham ends her review with a notion that no other reviewer even alludes to: “Dunn’s direction throughout is thoughtful and clearly from a woman’s perspective [emphasis added] – an interesting, distinctive take on a trouble-some play” (“Troublesome” 27).

Throughout all the articles, Dunn never refers to O’Connell or to the feminist interpretation of Portia she envisioned. When I asked her why, she replied that neither the
Bard marketing department nor the press was “particularly interested in my feminist perspectives” (email). This lack of interest was evident in the news releases where Dunn’s feminist ideas about *Merchant* were never mentioned. She created a strong visual component in the production that addressed the construction of gender and character interpretations that questioned the ‘natural’ desire of women to marry. However, these were lost in the anti-Semitic controversy surrounding the play. Certainly, the portrayal of Shylock should be debated and a discussion of whether this play should even be staged is relevant. It is interesting to note, however, that there appears to be no controversy over a woman’s being forced to marry by her father and no discussion about whether a play that unquestioningly presents as natural a social order in which a woman’s life is completely controlled by men should be staged in this day and age.

In speaking with the other directors in this collection, I discovered that this lack of interest in the patriarchal social structures inherent in canonical texts is widespread. Not surprisingly then, Dunn’s efforts to use the liminal space of performance to challenge the power and ‘natural’ status of the male gaze was not remarked on by the male reviewers of the show. What is discouraging is that the female reviewers trivialized the effort through their use of language in describing it. I am not proposing that they did this intentionally. In fact, they seem to have felt they were describing very positive and enjoyable scenes. However, they inadvertently naturalized the gendered power imbalance by suggesting that the women were enjoying the process.

The lack of interest in Dunn’s feminist perspective on the play is evident in the lack of any reference to it in either Bard’s media statements or the interviews with Adams and Dunn. It is unclear whether or not Dunn tried to discuss the issue herself, but it seems
unlikely. The controversial anti-Semitic nature of the play overshadowed any other issues that could have been raised. Also, feminist directors often downplay, or at least do not promote, their perspectives in productions outside of feminist theatre companies in order to avoid being left on the periphery of the larger sphere of Canadian theatre production. This is understandable, but regrettable. Without confident feminist voices in mainstream Canadian theatre, feminist perspectives will remain in the margins and the social structures inherent in canonical texts will continue to remain unseen and unquestioned.
Chapter Two

Kathleen Weiss and One Woman’s Power in *Macbeth*

“I wanted [the interpretation] to be deeply about the way that men fear power and women.”

Kathleen Weiss has been a long-time proponent of equal opportunity for women in Canadian theatre while at the same time pushing for the representation of strong women characters and the presentation of women’s stories on stage. In the late 1980s, she was a co-founder of the Women In View Festival which strove to increase the profile of women in the profession. She was also the festival’s Artistic Director for seven years. Weiss developed the Women in Theatre and Film course at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and taught it for several terms. She has also directed texts from the traditional Western canon in a variety of settings including Tamahnous Theatre, UBC, and the University of Alberta (UofA).

Weiss’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is the specific subject of this exploration of how feminist women directors approach canonical texts. In this adaptation she challenges the intrinsic gender imbalance in the play by creating a two-person production in which a man plays Macbeth and a woman plays all the other characters. This structure not only visibly produces gender equality, but also creates a way for a woman to embody and wield power that is traditionally male. Weiss’s cross-gender casting exposes how society constructs gendered power relationships, and ultimately, gender itself.

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8 All quotations in this chapter are from a personal interview with Kathleen Weiss in a restaurant on December 18, 2004 unless otherwise indicated.
Weiss has experienced power inequity in various forms throughout her career. She was born and raised in New Mexico and did what she calls “a very traditional BFA” in acting at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. After graduation, she moved to San Francisco to continue her acting studies at the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT). The experience was not as positive as she had hoped as she “was asked to leave just a couple of months before [she] graduated.” Weiss believes this dismissal was typical of the program at ACT: “… every three months they’d throw people out and there were four people left at that point in my year and two of us left. There were only two people that graduated in that year.” Her dismissal did not deter Weiss however. She started working as an actor in the San Francisco area. Unfortunately, her acting experiences were “extremely frustrating.”

Because I was a certain kind of physical type – blonde and quite curvaceous – I was always cast as whores. I got so tired of playing whores. And dumb secretaries and there was a whole kind of role that I just played over and over and I kept thinking, “This is not what I think the theatre is about – what I went into the theatre for.”

Weiss was also disappointed that she never had the opportunity to work with a woman director.

At the urging of friends, she started to consider directing herself as a way of continuing to work in theatre without the frustrations of typecasting. They encouraged her to get some director training “somewhere” and then return to San Francisco to work. Weiss followed the first half of this advice; she decided to go back to graduate school. However, her choice of universities opened up completely new possibilities for her and she never returned to San Francisco to work. Weiss was accepted into the MFA Directing program at the
University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. She wanted a school “that had very strong classical components” and also provided opportunities to “do a lot of directing.” UBC fulfilled both these requirements and also offered her a fellowship: “… that’s how I ended up in Canada.” She never returned to live in the United States.

Weiss provides a wonderful analogy of the difference for her between acting and directing: “… that difference for me between acting and directing is like cold showers to fabulous bubble baths with bubbles and wonderful fragrances. It was just so completely right.” While acting, she struggled with “being able to follow my instincts and trust myself,” but when she started directing, those aspects “were completely available to me.” The last show she directed for her MFA degree was Paul Zindel’s *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*. “It is a quite wonderful play with three wonderful parts for actresses, which is one of the reasons I did that – well actually four wonderful parts for women.” After seeing the show Ray Michal, who was running City Stage in Vancouver at the time, offered Weiss an Associate Director position with the company. She accepted, thinking, “that could be fun.”

Ray Michal co-founded City Stage with George Plawski in 1972 on a Local Initiatives Program grant (LIP) and unlike many such companies in Vancouver was able to continue producing theatre long after the grant ran out. Initially, the company produced lunchtime shows in its first venue, a 70-80 seat donut shop. However, in 1976 they moved into a new 150-seat venue on Thurlow Street at Alberni which they shared with the burgeoning Vancouver Theatre Sports League (VTSL). Michal began having evening performances with this move and the company evolved from producing mostly mainstream shows to a “combination of light and more difficult works. Among them were Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy*, Joe Orton's *Good and Faithful Servant*, Harold Pinter's *The Lover*, [and]
David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*” (“Citistage” http://www.canadiantheatre.com). In April 1983, the remount of Michal’s original play *Piaf, Her Songs, Her Loves* launched the career of Canadian *chanteuse* Joëlle Rabu and had 400 performances before it closed on the first anniversary of its opening. The kind of work he produced at City Stage is suggested by the shows for which Michal received Jessie Richardson Award Best Director nominations: Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (1983), Mamet’s *American Buffalo* (1985), and Michael McKinlay’s *Walt and Roy* (1987). Michal won the award for Best Direction in 1986 for James Saunder’s *Next Time I’ll Sing to You* (*The Jessies Archives* http://www.jessies.ca/history.html). After the 1986-87 season, City Stage disbanded due to financial problems.

Michal’s idea of being an Associate Director meant that Weiss could “clean his office … but not actually direct. Everything but direct.” Weiss worked as an assistant director and stage manager. She also read every one of the “about 400 scripts in his office … did reports on all of them, [and] wrote letters back to all the playwrights.” While she admired Michal as “a wonderful person and a great theatre person” and felt that the work that she did was “incredible training in … the professional theatre,” the position did not offer her the opportunities for which she was looking. After about one year, Weiss moved on by accepting a position as Assistant to the Artistic Director of the New Play Centre (NPC), Pamela Hawthorn.

The New Play Centre was founded in 1970 and Hawthorn was hired in 1972 as its “first managing and Artistic Director.” Before her tenure, NPC had a mandate to “encourage and develop dramatic writing in British Columbia.” Hawthorn expanded that mission statement and NPC became a producing theatre company “dedicated to the production and presentation of new works” (http://www.playwrightstheatre.com/about.htm). Plays were
workshopped and given public readings and/or fully staged productions. In 1995, NPC merged with the Betty Lambert Society and became the Playwrights Theatre Centre.

Working with Hawthorn after working with Michal “was a completely different thing.” Weiss found herself in a “completely non-competitive” and very supportive creative environment. Every year NPC put on a festival of new plays which “was an amazing situation for a young director.” A variety of directors would come in to direct shows. Larry Lillo, Jane Heyman, and Kathryn Shaw among others joined Hawthorn for these festivals. The festival was structured in a very relaxed way. An audience would come and “watch a rehearsal and then just chat … about it.” Weiss was very comfortable with other directors giving her guidance and laments that “it’s not really much done in the professional theatre per se.” She was mentored by Hawthorn and Shaw, and felt it “was just the most amazing fantastic atmosphere to be a part of.” This relationship with other women directors was something that she had not experienced anywhere else.

Also at this time, Weiss was approached by the West Coast Actors Studio to teach some acting classes. She readily admitted that she had never taught before, but due to her work as a director and her nurturing personality they believed in her abilities. She “put a few classes together for West Coast which were kind of the first acting classes that had been offered in this city that people could come and take in the evening. There’s lots of them now, but at that point there was only [her].” When Weiss walked into the acting studio, she felt it was something that she had “a gift for,” and she has been teaching ever since.

Weiss also continued her own studies. She had previously done some work with American director Andre Gregory, who went on to work with Jerzy Grotowski in Poland. Tamahnous Theatre brought Gregory to Vancouver and Weiss, because of her previous
experience with him, was invited to attend the workshops. She then continued her study of
Grotowski’s techniques with master teacher Linda Putnam. From Putnam, she “learned this
whole other way of doing theatre … very physical, very non-linear.” While Weiss credits
Hawthorn as being a mentor “in a very traditional theatre sense,” she praises Putnam with

… a mentor for my life. I would not be who I am or the kind of theatre person
I am, were it not without Linda…. She has the most wisdom, the most
excellence of any theatre person I’ve ever met. She’s probably, practically, the
least successful in making money and being recognized and having renown
and being successful in the terms that success is often defined in the theatre,
but without question she is the paramount theatre person I’ve ever met.
So Weiss continued to work at NPC, teaching periodically at West Coast Actors, and
studying with Linda Putnam. She also started to work as a free-lance director.

In 1986, Weiss replaced Morris Panych as Artistic Director of Tamahnous Theatre.
Tamahnous was founded in 1971 by UBC graduates John MacLachlan Gray and Larry Lillo.
It involved a group of actors – Sue Driver, Jeremy Long, Stephen E. Miller, Eric Peterson,
Ken Ryan, Brenda Sherrin, and Nettie Wild – who wanted to operate collectively and explore
experimental theatre work. Initially working under the name The Theatre Workshop, and
later as The Vancouver Theatre Workshop (VTW), their first production was Dracula II, an
original script by the Stable Theatre Company of Manchester, England for Summer Festival
’71 (Miller 87). The show was a great success and the group went on to adapt Euripides’s
The Bacchae “with much writing, editing, and collating … including ‘samples’ from
speeches by then Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau … [and] whole sections [that] were
improvised within the structure” (Miller 88). The members of VTW were interested in breaking the “barrier of the audience as passive observers” (Miller 88). So *The Bacchae* was staged in an alley configuration and the “audience was invited to dance throughout the performing space” to music created live on “congas … guitar, flute, clarinet, and cello” (Miller 89).

The show’s success lead the group to do an original script, Jeremy Long’s *The Final Performance of Vaslav Nijinsky, St. Moritz-Dorf, 1919*. The show had a successful run at the Vancouver Art Gallery and then toured to the Open Space Theatre in Victoria. Their successes inspired the group to apply for LIP and Opportunities for Youth (OFY) grants. To be eligible, VTW needed to be a non-profit society and change its name. After “endless” discussion, they arrived at the name Tamahnous, which is Chilcotin for “magic.” The company continued to work on projects throughout the 70’s and early 80’s under their mandate:

- We are dedicated to developing new forms and plays, providing audiences with a wider choice of theatre, maintaining a high standard of production and making theatre an important element in the lives of a large number of people. (qtd. in Usmiani, *Second 68*)

In 1984 Morris Panych became the first Artistic Director of this company that had previously worked in a strictly collective format. When he took the position the company was “really floundering.” It had lost key members Larry Lillo, Stephen E. Miller, Eric Peterson, and John Gray and those that remained “might have been very talented, but there wasn’t a lot of leadership in the group.” Panych steered the company through this transition
from a collective to a more traditional hierarchical structure. “He was not happy doing it. It was not really a very happy marriage….”

Weiss, therefore, came into a difficult situation. When she was hired as Artistic Director, she brought with her a very strong mandate: “I wanted to do all original work, but I did want to be able to pull classics into the mix because I thought it would enrich the base of the company and also provide for the company.” She conceded that it was a “killer mandate for a small alternative theatre company with not much budget.” During her tenure, Weiss also tried to “do some healing” of the rift that was left when Tamahnous shifted its structure from collective to hierarchical. She brought back Panych and Ken MacDonald along with older company members in an effort to “really upgrade.”

During this period at Tamahnous Weiss did some work with canonical texts. Every year Tamahnous would present a “show that had its base in classical work but with some kind of contemporary point.” *Haunted House Hamlet*, written by her husband at the time, Peter Eliot Weiss, was a strong example of this mandate and Kathleen Weiss’s first production with the company in 1986. The adaptation “presents a young burglar breaking into a haunted house where he finds the corpses of Shakespeare's characters. These come to life and begin to act out Shakespeare's play while, simultaneously, the story of the young man unfolds as he interacts with the plot of *Hamlet*” (Gilbert 139). This structure immediately connects past and present and allows the audience to explore the Shakespearean classic from a contemporary perspective.

The cast is composed of four women and four men who each play a character from *Hamlet*: Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Horatio, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. The characters are often cast cross-gender and at times characters say lines that
are originally spoken by a different character in Shakespeare’s text. For example, “Ophelia has the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy” (Dykk, “Hamlet” B4). Interestingly, the production actually takes place inside a house and not a traditional theatre building. Also multiple scenes are played simultaneously and each audience member must choose which scenes to watch and in what order. S/he can follow a particular character throughout the house, stay in one room to see the story that takes place within it, or wander at will in and out of scenes that are underway: “You see the play you want to see. You're empowered to work Shakespeare out for yourself” (Dykk, “Hamlet” B4). This format makes the audience members active creators rather than passive observers of the story and embodies Jill Dolan’s feminist argument about spectatorship that encourages women to “deconstruct the privileged position of the ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male spectator” (180).

The production was extremely well-received. It was invited to the 1987 Theatre Festival of the Americas held in Montreal and has been restaged several times since its 1986 premiere. Weiss also directed the “artsy romp” Cocaine – The Board Game! (Dykk, “Play” D8), recalled the “simplicity of folk” music in the aptly titled Simple Folk (Dykk, “Recalling” B1), and staged the “feminist fantasy” Brides in Space (Dykk, “Feminist” C5) in 1987. She then took a chance with the provocative Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth (the production discussed in detail later in this chapter) along with a remount of Haunted House Hamlet in 1988. Finally, she helmed the “world’s first comedy about organ donors” called If I Should Die (Dykk, “Sick” B9) in 1989.

While Weiss found her time at Tamahnous “wonderful,” she also found it very difficult because “it was really hard to do alternative theatre in Vancouver.” For example, a production of Haunted House Hamlet could only accommodate about 60 audience members.
per show because of its experimental staging. Therefore, even with sold-out performances the show could never make a profit. Tamahnous had to constantly fight to keep afloat financially. Also, she added: “The shows that I did that were overtly feminist were such a hard sell here – a really hard sell.” This is supported by the fact that during her tenure at Tamahnous Vancouver’s major newspaper, the *Vancouver Sun*, published only one article on feminist theatre in the city. This article was a scathing review of Weiss’s production of *Brides in Space* which is discussed later in this chapter. She resigned from Tamahnous Theatre after the 1988-89 season to work as a free-lance director in Vancouver.

During this same period, 1986-1989, Weiss was one of seven founding members of View. This was “a group of professional women in the arts who … [wanted] to increase public awareness of women in the field” (Dykk, “Festival” B7). Initially, View’s work consisted of holding play readings and discussions. Then after two years of planning, View produced the first Women in View festival in 1989. This became an annual “performing-arts festival presenting the human experience from the perspective of the female artist” (“Female” F3). Initially, “it was run by three women kind of working together and then they thought that they wanted a stronger artistic sensibility…. they wanted some kind of an overall artistic aesthetic.” So Weiss acted as Artistic Director of the festival from 1992 until 1998. The 1999 festival was “cancelled due to funding and staffing problems” (Birnie, “Women” C5). Her “willingness to work long hours for little pay” finally took its toll and Weiss resigned (Birnie, “Women” C5).

It is interesting to note that there was considerable coverage of the Women In View festival, especially compared to the earlier lack of coverage for feminist theatre. This may be a reflection of the changing social attitudes toward work by women, but it is more likely that
it is due to the festival’s point of not referring to itself as a feminist project: “[T]he language used by the Women In View festival was built around women as opposed to feminists. Though there was very much a feminist aesthetic,” says Weiss. Removing the ideological designation feminist appears to have removed an impediment for the predominantly male theatre reviewers. Sadly, the feminist label continues to be an obstacle today. Winnipeg’s Sarasváti Productions’ annual FemFest, for example, is unable to garner production reviews due to its feminist perspective. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 3.

After spending most of her professional life in Vancouver, Weiss was hired as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 2003. She continues to teach and direct there, and is also Program Coordinator for the Master of Fine Arts Directing degree.

When asked to define feminism, Weiss responded:

To me, it’s about equal opportunity, but also equal representation. Because I think often when we talk about it, we talk about women having the same opportunities, the same salaries – and while I think all that is very important as a theatre person – where it’s very important to me is I want to see representation on the stage of women equal to men…. To me that means I want to see plays that involve women. And I want to see the kind of things that are important in my life on stage.

Weiss went on to say that she defines herself as “a director who is a feminist” and not a feminist director. She says that she does not have the kind of defined ideology that perhaps a materialist feminist would: “that’s a very clear ideology of what is represented in the work.” Instead, Weiss brings out her “own belief as a feminist” by “responding to a
particular tack and a particular project and the context of that project.” It is not doing feminist projects that make her a feminist. She brings her individual feminist perspective with her to each project she does and allows that view to come out in the piece instead of imposing a clearly defined feminist ideology on the production.

This distinction between directing from a defined feminist ideology and from her personal feminist perspective parallels the Women In View festival’s choice not to define itself as a feminist project. It is apparent that the designation has critical impact. However, creating this division exacerbates the problem of trying to bring feminist work into mainstream Canadian theatre. When openly feminist women distinguish between their work and their feminist work, they perpetuate its marginalization. They continue to make feminist viewpoints ‘Other’ and thus undermine their own legitimacy. Unfortunately, directors are often co-opted into this action because they do not want to be constrained by a feminist categorization that minimizes their employability.

While Weiss does not think of herself as a feminist director, she does believe that being a woman and a feminist has affected her work opportunities, the scripts offered to her, and the scripts she chooses. She quotes Pamela Hawthorn as saying, “women only move laterally … it’s really hard for women to move up the ladder in theatre.” Weiss, herself, has never been terribly interested in moving up. She has always worked from “the project in sight more than … how will [her] career go.” However, she believes that her experiences and opportunities are typical of many women in that she has “done a lot of new work…. done a lot of experimental theatre…. done a lot of projects with companies in the community.” By “companies in the community,” Weiss does not mean community theatre in the recreational sense. She is referring to “plays with creative fire about issues that affect that community that
they want to look at in the context of theatre.” She cites Joy Coghill’s Western Gold company in Vancouver which does “work with actors who are over 55 and look[s] at scripts that empower that age group” as an example.

Weiss acknowledges that it is very difficult “to know why you do or don’t get a job in … the theatre,” because no one comes out and says directly that a woman is not right for this job. “[N]o one ever says, ‘We don’t want a feminist director.’ But people do say things like … ‘You don’t fit into our aesthetic.’” Alternatively, one may find out the reason through unofficial channels. Weiss experienced “hallway talk” at an unnamed university where she “was basically told that [she] was not hired for a job because the male acting teacher wanted a male colleague and really felt they would be more comfortable with a male colleague.”

Weiss also thinks that people in general have the mistaken belief that the gender climate is different now, “that it doesn’t happen anymore, but it so, so, so does.” While asking to have the names held back, she related an incident when three women worked very hard to open a theatre. During the opening ceremonies, one woman spoke “very articulately and beautifully for all three.” Then a male board member took the stage and said, “Aren’t those three wonderful girls? Aren’t these great girls?” She believes that this “completely reductive” statement is indicative of on-going cultural sexism. Her conclusion is that, “if you want to do the hierarchy, if you want to rise, you sort of adopt the behaviour of the men because that’s how you get ahead.”

When asked how being a feminist affects her casting process, Weiss answered that what has been an important area of exploration in her work is the “actual physical image of women on stage.” This aspect of her directing clearly connects to her definition of feminism being about “equal representation.” To this end she does “a lot of cross-gender casting.”
Weiss detailed different ways in which she views this process. First, when she feels that gender is not fundamental to the characterization – for example, “a doctor in a play” – it is easy for her to cast gender-blind because both men and women “are certainly doctors.” In this instance, does it “really matter if this character is male or female?” Second, if gender is intrinsically tied to a play, “you can defy the system through gender” and “create a very different semiotic statement.” While Weiss feels that this challenge should be “apparent” in the work, she also supports the urge to just “see what happens when you actually do cast for that.”

That impulse to play drove her when she cast *Haunted House Hamlet* with four women and four men. She has done and continues to do work with all-female casts, but in this instance she wanted a balance. She liked “the energy that comes from having a mixed group.” Polonius was not only played by a woman but also “played as a woman character – as the mother.” In this production, Gertrude “engineered the murder” while “Claudius was a bit of a pawn.” This allowed an unpredictable relationship to develop between these two central characters. Also, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were a heterosexual couple “which was really beautiful, really fun.” This cross-gender casting was not an issue for the actors, the audiences, or the critics possibly because the alternative reputation of Tamahnous was already clearly established. People involved with these shows, whether as performers or spectators, knew beforehand not to expect traditional fare.

In another instance where Weiss cast within traditional gender guidelines but outside of traditional physical expectations, concerns arose. In the Fall 2000 production of Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* at the University of British Columbia, she cast the part of Irina with “a brilliant, brilliant actress, but quite a large young woman.” As a result, “the costume
people – who were women – complained bitterly and constantly, saying she didn’t look good in her costume because she was too fat.” It was difficult for them along with some audience members to get past the stereotype “that because she was the ingénue, she had to weigh 92 pounds to be acceptable.” However, critic Peter Birnie’s review in the *Vancouver Sun* made no mention of the actor’s physical appearance, and simply stated that the actor had “a lovely subtlety about her performance” (“Wonderfully” E7). Either Birnie was not part of the audience who wanted the stereotype fulfilled or he did not express this opinion in his review. The absence of a textual reaction to Weiss’s casting complicates assessing the validity of her perspective. She may have perceived a bias that did not exist; however, the fact that her experience echoes that of Dunn when she made a similar casting decision gives her opinion credence.

In terms of how being feminist influences her rehearsals, Weiss says that she works from a “female principle.” She feels that when she speaks “about the things that affect my process and affect the way I work … I say yes, this is all because I’m a woman, it’s actually about female principles.” She does not discount that male directors also work from the “same kind of feeling of principles,” but suspects that her feminist principles probably cause her to work more collaboratively in rehearsal “than maybe a male director might do.”

Weiss considers herself a “nurturer” in rehearsal and states, “there’s a level of compassion that I build into my work.” For example, during rehearsals for one show, actor Larry Lillo approached her. In order to find a certain quality for the character, Lillo asked Weiss, “Will you belittle me for the show?” She told him not to put her in that position; she “would not sacrifice his feelings for a show.” She does not, however, connect this sensibility with feminism. She connects it to “being female.”
Weiss believes that being female is also the reason she does not “think in very linear ways.” Her process is “very creative, but very chaotic.” Male actors often find this way of working uncomfortable because they are “looking for a really linear, heavily structured, really clearly hierarchical process.” Instead, Weiss does “lots of personal image work” because she believes this is how she personally interacts: “I receive information equally and probably more non-literally than I do literally.” She goes on to describe her three layers of perception using a conversation as an example. Layer one is the “literal information” that is said by the other person. Layer two is “everything that I perceive that is going on in that conversation with that person that is not literal – that is not being said – but that I completely know and understand.” Finally, layer three is the “instinctive layer.” Here she unconsciously receives information from the other person, information that she “might be aware of, but would never be able to verify.” Weiss thinks that theatre also works in these three layers: “I’m interested in theatre that can do what’s literal, but then do the second layer and even the third layer. That’s what I want in theatre.” She sees male actors having difficulty with this perspective because “it’s not a very objective way of looking at the world through a lens that is extremely disciplined.”

In her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous advocates this concept of working non-linearly as a way to evade “the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system” (253). Cixous believes that when a child acquires language s/he becomes part of what Lacan calls the symbolic order of written language. This is entry into the linear world of male discourse which “objectifies women and cannot convey their perspectives or experiences” (de Gay and Goodman 5). Therefore, Cixous, along with other influential French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, advocates creating an
écriture féminine, “a ‘feminine writing’ which would deconstruct the assumptions of symbolic language” (de Gay and Goodman 5). This concept is widely debated among feminist theorists, however, and charges of essentialism have been made against écriture féminine because it implies “a causal relationship between biological make-up and language-use” (de Gay and Goodman 5).

Weiss’s belief that women’s thought and working processes are less linear than men’s is anecdotally supported but by no means definitively proven. Indeed, in an interview with the BBC, director Robert Lepage talked about his work process and stated that “the only real invention comes out of chaos and, and so it's better not to know … where you are when you start off if you want to accomplish something good.” By making such a sweeping statement, Weiss highlights the profound impact cultural constructs have on gender preconceptions. She is working towards gender equality by exposing gender bias. However, she herself is not immune to the power of social gender prescripts, such as the idea that men are objective while women are emotional. Of course, one way these precepts are reinforced is through the repetition of traditional productions of canonical texts so it is essential that their intrinsic gender rules be challenged.

As a young director, Weiss’s working style was challenged by male actors who told her “You don’t really know what you’re doing.” Weiss’s experience parallels Dunn’s in this area and also exemplifies Knowles’ view that a director who does not work in the established theatre training style will be labelled as someone who “doesn’t understand ‘the process’” (Knowles, Reading 28). This attitude towards Weiss has changed somewhat because now she has an established reputation and therefore gets “a lot of the benefit of the doubt.” Also, nowadays she consciously establishes her leadership in the rehearsal process unlike earlier in
her career: “I used to not do that because I didn’t think that I had to do that, but now I always
do that. And I not only do that at the beginning of rehearsal, but once a week.” Weiss takes
the time every week to allay any fears or insecurities her process may create in the actors.
She does this by saying: “[T]his is where we’re at now. I know it feels really weird, but that’s
the way I work. We’re looking at patterns and I want to work with patterns before I make any
set decisions.” Again like Dunn, Weiss has been forced to adopt at least part of the expected
hierarchical theatre system in order to keep the rehearsal process running.

Weiss likens her process to that of successful English director Deborah Warner. After
hearing Warner and actor Fiona Shaw speak, Weiss paraphrased how Shaw related that
during a nine-week rehearsal period for *Hedda Gabler*, four to five weeks were used to
“explore and no decision is ever made.” Shaw continued that “sometimes the men just go
crazy because they think that if no one ever makes any decisions, then we’ll never know
what we’re doing.” However, in the sixth week Warner begins to “nail things down and
when she nails them down, she really nails them down.” Weiss deeply relates to this “very
amorphous, very creative, very seminal” way of working followed by the final decisive
process. While she revels in the exploration, she eventually reaches a point in the rehearsal
where she makes clear and firm decisions. The interpretation of the play is controlled by
these final decisions. Weiss says that if “you don’t do that nailing down … you can lose the
interpretation and it’s very important to me as a director that I hold the interpretation.”

When asked whether defining herself as a feminist has ever influenced critical
response to her productions, Weiss responded as she did to the question of whether being a
feminist affected her work opportunities: “It’s not an overt thing.” She went on to give the
example of how in 1999, she acted in a production of Meah Martin’s *Over the Moon* at UBC
directed by Jan Selman. Weiss explained that it was a very non-linear play about a “not terribly likeable” middle-aged woman’s relationship with her mother. The play received “terrible reviews from Colin Thomas,” the theatre critic for The Georgia Straight. She then related what Thomas said to a friend in the theatre lobby during the show: He disliked “plays about middle-aged women. They’re not interesting enough.” Weiss said that naturally this was not said in the actual review, but is an example of the concealed bias of many reviewers.

Whether or not this third-hand hearsay report is accurate, Thomas’s review of Over the Moon is scathing. His opening line, “New dimensions in boredom,” sets the tone for his critique in which he systematically discusses the play’s weaknesses, its over-direction, and its need for less indulgent dramaturgy. He also comments on Weiss’s lack of acting skill, “Thank God she’s a better director than performer, because she’s awful here.” One of Thomas’s major criticisms is that UBC did playwright Martin “a huge disservice” by even mounting the play: “How many professional houses do you know of that will pay the salaries of 32 performers in order to celebrate tedious domestic minutiae?” In this sentence, it is clear that he found no value in the play’s subject matter. However, Thomas couches his opinion in the criticism that UBC is “out of touch with professional theatrical practice” and, thus, deflects any sexist implications about this perspective (“Two” 67).

Critic Jo Ledingham’s review in the Vancouver Courier echoed many of Thomas’s sentiments. She agreed that the play was so long she became bored: “Over the Moon went on for another interminable hour after the break … but by then I’d stopped caring.” She also reiterated Thomas’s belief that the script needed “serious dramaturgy.” The similarities between these two reviews seem to discount Weiss’s assertion that Thomas’s dislike of the play was based solely on anti-female bias and not on an objective opinion of the play.
However, Ledingham had a very clear difference of opinion when commenting on the play’s worth. She wrote, “At the heart of the play are interesting ideas … [such as] How do you put an ‘unloved’ mother away in a care facility? … [and] Why are some mothers so mean?” (27). Ledingham’s final comment that Martin’s script “has merit” is certainly at odds with Thomas’s perspective that it was simply “tedious domestic minutiae” (“Two” 67). This difference may be indicative of the historical bias that the private sphere to which women have been relegated is considered of little importance to men.

Another example Weiss offered was the critical response to her production of Peggy Thompson’s *Brides in Space* for Tamahnous Theatre in 1987 which was an “extremely feminist” piece. The play is about four women who initially decide to be mail-order brides on another planet, but who ultimately discover that “they didn’t want to be brides at all.” While Weiss concedes that “there were other problems with it as well,” she basically feels that “it was just … a statement people didn’t want to hear.” Weiss’s perceptions are supported by the play’s review in the *Vancouver Sun*. Theatre critic Lloyd Dykk certainly belittled the entire production by mocking: “The only certainty is, dat ol’ debbil, man, comes in for it again.” He trivialized the lesbian love story: “Under the guise of bravery, of course lesbianism between two of the space cadets … had to be explored as a viable lifestyle.” Finally, he marginalized both the production and the feminist perspective of its writing: “it still comes down to theatre for the long-converted who'll just react to the right gesture” (“Feminist” C5).

Weiss’s final example of the bias against feminists and/or women by reviewers involved Touchstone Theatre’s production of Peter Eliot Weiss’s *The Invisible Detective* that she directed. The playwright was Weiss’s husband at the time. One review referred to her as “the playwright’s wife.” In her recollection, Weiss was never referred to by her actual name.
She was shocked that this could happen and underscored the gender bias by stating: “The reviewer would not have said … written by the director’s husband.” The review to which Weiss refers was written by Colin Thomas of *The Georgia Straight*. Weiss’s recollection that her name was not mentioned was incorrect. However, the way Thomas refers to her, his opinion of how her direction contributed to the overall production, and his placement of this comment at the end of the review may be just as telling. Thomas wrote, “The playwright’s wife, Kate Weiss, directed this show, and I’m sure her eagerness to experiment with form contributed greatly to the evening” (“Invisible” 31). Weiss was correct that she was referred to as “the playwright’s wife” and this reference comes before her name was mentioned. This grammatical structure gives emphasis to her relationship to the playwright over her as an individual. Also, he referred to her by the diminutive ‘Kate’ while Weiss always uses Kathleen for her professional credits. Thomas’s comment, “I’m sure her eagerness to experiment with form contributed greatly to the evening,” marginalized and undermined Weiss’s direction of the play by implying that any production of the play would be entertaining regardless of who directed it. Finally, this was Thomas’s only mention of the director and her contribution, and this one sentence appeared in the very last paragraph of the eight-paragraph review. So while Weiss was incorrect about not being mentioned, her belief in the gender-bias of the review is well supported.

An interesting parallel to the way Weiss was treated in Thomas’s review is found in a Reid Gilbert article in *Theatre Research in Canada* (Fall 1990). The article “explores the work of Morris Panych and Ken MacDonald, suggesting that their various collaborations exemplify post-modern metadrama” (134). *Haunted House Hamlet* is one of the productions briefly discussed as an example. The article states that the play was written by Peter Eliot
Weiss during Panych’s tenure as Artistic Director of Tamahnoun and that Panych played the title role of Hamlet. It goes on to say that this production was “the one which travelled to Montreal's Festival of the Americas in 1987” (139). These facts are all true. However, Gilbert’s earlier statement in the article, that “[b]y blurring the traditional distinctions between writer, designer, director and actor, by employing complex intertexts, and by forcing an active participation by the audience, Panych and MacDonald move beyond narrative” (134), creates the impression that this is what occurred during the production of Haunted House Hamlet. I am in not in any way trying to diminish the contributions of Panych and MacDonald to the success of the show, but Gilbert implies that they alone were responsible. Weiss’s direction of the show was not even mentioned. Beyond being marginalized as in Thomas’s review, Weiss’s contribution is never even acknowledged. Therefore, Gilbert inadvertently asserts that the show’s academic interest remains squarely in the hands of Panych, MacDonald, and the director’s husband, Peter Eliot Weiss. It is worth noting that Thomas and Gilbert are gay men discussing the work of other gay men: Panych, MacDonald, and even playwright Weiss. Therefore, their dismissal of director Weiss’s contribution to the show and its success may have more to do with sexual orientation bias than with gender bias.

Interestingly, it was a relationship between husband and wife that spurred Weiss’s decision to explore Shakespeare’s Macbeth from her feminist perspective. Every year of Weiss’s tenure at Tamahnoun, she would present a “show that had its base in classical work but with some kind of contemporary point.” So she decided to do a production of Macbeth for their 1987-88 season after the success of Haunted House Hamlet. Weiss was “very interested in the relationship between the two of them [Lady Macbeth and Macbeth] and what had happened.” It was the push and pull of “male energy/female energy” she found
fascinating, but one of the things that Weiss felt was difficult about the play is that Lady
Macbeth “just disappears.” Therefore, she decided to stage a two-person Macbeth with a man
“playing Macbeth … [a woman] would play all of the other parts.” In order to set up this
two-person exploration, Weiss wrote “an introductory scene putting them in the
contemporary context of this very ambitious couple. He falls asleep and then he dreams the
play of Macbeth, and his wife is very dominant and appears in the dream as all the other
characters.” It was titled Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth.

Shakespeare’s work has become the site of a number of cross-gendered productions.
The reasons for these productions are as varied as definitions of feminism, but many connect
to Weiss’s desire to explore gendered power dynamics. The New York premiere of Mabou
Mines’s long-awaited Lear in 1990 cast Ruth Maleczech in the title role. Maleczech was
seduced by Lear’s language and wanted “to own the language … and then to give it to the
audience from a woman’s consciousness” (qtd. in Wetzsteon 40). However, as Susan Bennett
comments, “it is not only the beauty of the language, but the power that adheres to it. That a
woman might express such power in what is recognized as a poetic frame creates no small
shift in the paradigms for ‘doing’ Shakespearean tragedy” (Performing 76).

The site-specific nature of the production of Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth made the dream
reality of the concept work. The play was staged in Graceland nightclub, a back-alley club
that catered to the more alternative scene. It was housed in a warehouse in downtown
Vancouver “with catwalks up around the ceiling and this huge concrete atmosphere,” and
was only accessible from a door off the loading platform in the alley. It was a very open
space with a soaring ceiling supported by massive concrete walls. The scope of the space was
reminiscent of European cathedrals, but the mood was cold and ultramodern. Therefore, the
club supported the contemporary context of the introductory scene as well as the magnitude of the original *Macbeth*.

The production also was affected by the fact that it took place in Vancouver. “[I]n those days we would be the only experimental theatre so everything I did was a comment and a reaction to the other theatres in town whether I intended it to be or not.” Had Weiss been in London or New York “where there was a lot of experimental theatre, there would have been a very different way in.” Ultimately, Weiss did not want to stage her production the way that “it would be done at the Playhouse,” so the use of Graceland nightclub was a way of juxtaposing the show with the production styles of Vancouver’s conventional theatres.

Weiss believes an audience should be challenged and not pandered to. “I like intelligent theatre and I like opposite theatre.” However she also feels that the director has a responsibility to make the show accessible to the audience. She often finds that “experimental theatre – and … feminist theatre as well – … becomes too esoteric.” A production will have its own unique semiotics, but that sign system needs to be put into a context that the audience can comprehend.

… [O]ften when people work with images, they just go, “Well it means this to me, so why don’t you get it?” So I think you have a responsibility to open up those images so that people can be let into the understanding of what you really mean. Does the meaning have to be perfect or obvious? No, but yeah they have to be figure-out-able. … I’ve seen an awful lot of terrible, terrible, terrible theatre where you go, “What the heck is it?” … and then somebody will say that the goose and honey meant sexuality. Well fine … you thought that – you knew that, but how am I supposed to know that.
Fortunately, Weiss had the opportunity to work with set designer Ken Macdonald on this project. They had worked together previously on *Haunted House Hamlet* and they also approached work in a very similar imagistic way: “he’ll start from the biggest image in the play … so that’s a very big draw for someone like me. That works really well.” For *Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth* the main image was a bed, a “huge bed with this kind of ironwork framework.” In fact, the bed was the only set piece in the production due to a combination of Weiss’s and Macdonald’s vision and the very limited budget for the show.

The production budget was approximately $600 so they used fabric and rolls of paper in addition to the lone bed to create a “very, very imagistic – very non-naturalistic” show. Red was the predominant colour for the show symbolizing blood, danger, and death. In the introductory scene Macbeth “falls down and gets a premonitory stain of blood on his designer jeans.” At another point in the play they unrolled white paper “through the entire expanse of the nightclub.” They then painted the bottom of Lady Macbeth’s feet red and had her walk across the paper so she left blood red footprints against the stark white paper. “It was very imagistic – it was a beautiful show” (Illustration 6). Also, “blood-red banners dropped from the rafters” several times during the show (Dykk, “Macbeth” D7).

The costumes for this production were very simple due not only to the limited budget but also to the need for the woman to be able to transform from one character to another in seconds. This was accomplished by her putting on something simple such as a robe or crown to denote a new character. Therefore, the costumes evolved in response to the movement of the actors as it developed in rehearsal. Ultimately, the “visual impact of what the costume does to the actor was far less important than the actor’s ability to transform that costume.”
Sound was also utilized in the production to create mood and heighten tension. First, composer and musician Reid Campbell created an original score to accompany much of the action. Secondly, the design of the nightclub allowed the actors to create sound during specific scenes to heighten tension. A strong example of this happened during the scene where the armies arrive. The catwalk was metal and the female actor ran along it while wearing shoes with some type of metal sole. The sound bounced off the towering concrete walls: “It was incredibly noisy and you just heard words through this incredible noise.” The sense of being overwhelmed by the clanging sound was in stark contrast to the relief experienced when the jarring noise stopped.

Naturally, set, costume and sound design impacted the production in innumerable ways; however, Weiss knew that the casting would make or break this two-hander: “I
couldn’t have done it with just anybody.” Fortunately, Weiss had a young female actor in the company who was “this brilliant actress,” so she cast Patti Allan to play Lady Macbeth, Banquo, the three witches, the porter, Hecate, and Macduff. She then hired as Macbeth Stephen Aberle, a “very, very good actor” who trained at Vancouver’s Studio 58 acting program and with whom she had worked before. Allan had the versatility and courage to tackle the multiple roles. Aberle had the acting chops and also embodied the physical image Weiss had of Mr. Macbeth: “I wanted somebody who was a little bit soft … because he was a business man. But he was quite tall and in shape and good looking – certainly male. But he wasn’t like a big-screen warrior like Mel Gibson.”

For this project Weiss structured the rehearsals as a combination of her usual “personal image work” and “traditional work on the text.” While she calls traditional text work her “demon,” she understands that “[a]ny time you do a Shakespeare play you hope that you’re going to illuminate the text. So even if you’re reinterpreting the text, you sort of carry in the back of your mind, ‘Okay, are we just laying something over or are we actually making a statement?’” They did considerable work to get past the “trappings” of scenes to the “invisible underneath.” Weiss gives as an example the porter scene in which s/he is peeing on the wall. She felt that on the surface it was a person peeing, but underneath she found a “comedy routine” with a very macabre sensibility. To capture that, she ultimately staged this scene as a vaudeville routine between Allan and a skeleton which she felt captured Shakespeare’s dark humour and starkly foreshadowed the many deaths that follow (Illustration 7).

As with any rehearsal, Weiss expected the actors to be open to her ideas and direction. Unfortunately, this was one area that caused friction in rehearsal, and in her opinion,
imbalance in the performance. Weiss wanted to explore the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. She wanted this production “to be deeply about the way that men fear power and women.” The reason for staging the play as a nightmare was to expose the inner, possibly unconscious, fear of a man terrified by a powerful woman. This was an issue with which Weiss was struggling in her personal life and she felt that this play was fertile ground for exploration. Aberle, however, was unable to support this perspective: “he just really didn’t get it.” He became very “resistant” and when Weiss would push him “he would really duck.”
Weiss commented that if you are doing “work that empowers women and you want to work with male actors,” resistance, fear, and a lack of understanding of the interpretation can be a problem. She went on to recount an experience with the Nelson, B.C.-based theatre company Theatre Energy. The company had hired Weiss to direct a new play about witches. The powerful women in the play were being accused of witchcraft in an attempt to discredit them and then make it possible to take over their land. There were two male characters in the play: one “was a strict believer … who was totally against witches, and the other man … was just a little guy who had fallen in love with this woman and he wanted to marry her, but he also wanted her land.” Weiss received a phone call from the company’s members saying, “There’s no man in Nelson who will be in this play. They’re all terrified of it. They don’t want to be identified by the community.” She finally had to hire two actors from Vancouver to perform in the show.

Resistance, fear, and the inability to understand became the major obstacles for Weiss’s production of *Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth*. She had worked with Aberle before this production and considered him “a very, very good actor.” However, when it came to grasping the push and pull of male and female energy that she wanted, he was unable to fully commit to this relationship: “[H]e was really so intimidated with the script and really, really uncomfortable because I think there was just this incredible energy and novelty and power and he was really, really having a hard time struggling with the concept.”

Aberle even tried to deflect the challenge that he had difficulty with female power by saying that Lady Macbeth is not really a woman anyway. Aberle explained that with Lady Macbeth’s line, “unsex me here” (1.5.44), she “gives up her feminine stuff to be strong enough.” Weiss had heard this interpretation before and thought that it might make the
struggle she wanted easier for Aberle to enact if he felt Allan was more male than female. Weiss also thought that having Allan “fight for the glory in a male way … could be really interesting to do.” Regrettably, Aberle “was just not a match for her [Allen].”

Weiss referred to the show as “brilliant, but flawed” and laid a large part of the responsibility for this at Aberle’s feet: “the whole production tumbled a bit because he was just not there in the way he needed to be there to make that … the statement.” He could not match Allen’s drive and courage and “ultimately in the show, she just wiped him off the stage.”

Weiss’s recollection of the critical response to the production is hazy. While she had every review for Haunted House Hamlet, she could not find one for Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth. She laughed that this was because “they must have been bad,” but she could not honestly remember. (I discuss Vancouver Sun theatre critic Lloyd Dykk’s review later.) She did, however, clearly remember that there was “a general sense from … theatre people that it was this fabulous, wonderful, undertaking even if it didn’t quite work.” She particularly remembers having “a lot of discussion about this particular show” with colleagues and audience members. At the time, Weiss was attempting “to create experiences that [she] thought were very different from what it would be like to go to the Arts Club.” Performing the play in a nightclub with dancing afterwards produced a buzz in the space: “the audience was quite alive and very excited by the show.” The houses were not huge, but that was not unusual for Tamahnous Theatre’s shows. The company had a “small, but loyal following … a little kind of pocket of interest in that kind of experimental theatre.”

Weiss also did not remember receiving any feedback that was connected to her gender or feminist perspectives other than “this was a pretty daring thing to do.” She gave two
possible explanations for this. First, because it was so obvious that it was a feminist exploration, people may not have felt the need to comment overtly on this aspect. Second, because of Allen’s performance, Weiss felt that the audience “totally bought it.” Initially, there was a confused response to Allen’s playing the male characters, but eventually it became a non-issue because Allan was so “courageous” and “so believable.” Audiences simply experienced the play instead of thinking of it as a feminist statement.

What was “heartbreaking” for Weiss was that she did not feel that the issues she wanted to address in this production were understood. “Nobody got” the theme of men being afraid of strong women. She conceded that this may have been her fault because she “didn’t drill that into the show.” Weiss sharply remembered this disappointment since she had made a point of asking people about this aspect of the show. She was curious about their opinions and felt let down when they had none to share. However, she feels that the lack of understanding could also be attributed in part to the work of Aberle. Because “he would not actively engage on that level,” Weiss “really did not get to develop that idea nearly the way [she] would’ve liked.”

With this disappointment in mind, Weiss stated that she would have done some things differently. First, she would have “done a much better job in creating a kind of context.” At the time of this production, there was no framework “for work like this at all in Vancouver.” In contrast to her work with the Women in View festival where the female perspective was expected by audience and reviewers alike, *Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth* was performed in a vacuum without a reference point. She would still shy away from using director’s notes because she “hate[s] going and reading these program notes that tell you the director’s
concept.” However, she “would set some kind of dialogue” with the audience that would help situate the production within a larger experimental and feminist framework.

Second, Weiss would have recast the part of Mr. Macbeth when she was faced with such resistance from her actor. She attributes her inaction in this regard to being a relatively young director at the time. “[I]t took [her] a while to figure out what was going on” because of her lack of experience and this was coupled with her belief that they could work together to overcome the block. Now, she “would have understood clearly what was happening” and she “would have been much less accommodating.”

When asked if directing the play had had personal and/or professional impact, Weiss hesitated. Eventually, she responded that the situation with Aberle “affected [her] profoundly.” For her, seeing an actor “terrified of other people” was unsettling. While she could understand the situation intellectually, she did not know how to handle it. “I think I really pulled back for a while … because I just thought, ‘wow.’ And what happens to ensemble here … the whole idea of being a creative non-threatening ensemble and suddenly there’s this incredibly threatened ensemble and it just confused me and really scared me for a while.” Purposely, Weiss’s next few projects were quite different in tone with a remount of the successful *Haunted House Hamlet* followed by the comedy *If I Should Die*. She took a while before she approached “another show like that.”

However, this experience would not stop Weiss from doing the show again. She would be excited to explore the question, “Which way would I go with this?” now that she is a “much more mature director.” Whether because of being lucky or being selective, Weiss feels that almost everything she has worked on in her career “really mattered to [her]”; therefore, she would be happy to return to previous shows and attack them again. However,
some of this work “would not be feminist.” Feminism has enabled her to decide for herself what is important to her as a woman, but she will not allow herself to be dictated to or restricted by the ideology: “I don’t really want it to be any more prescribed by another woman than I want it to be prescribed by a man.” This is the perspective she tries to share with her female students: “… that’s what I would want for them. It’s not about, ‘Here’s these six rules that you have to do to be a feminist.’ It’s like, no … let’s look for what is authentic for you, not just what they told you to feel. What is the result of you taking the wheel?”

The critical response to the production of Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth was short and scathing. The only review I found was in the Vancouver Sun by the same critic who belittled Weiss’s production of Brides in Space. Lloyd Dykk wrote a cursory 432 words in his review titled “Macbeth gets down but it’s all just a bad dream.” The tone of the review was condescending and contemptuous. He scoffed at Mr. Macbeth’s ability to recall Macbeth in his sleep: “Could it be a fixation on that long-past English 253 class?” He challenged whether or not Mr. Macbeth is even worthy of the effort: “all this sturm und drang seems a bit excessive for a man who appears no more exceptional than the usual corporate schnook.” Dykk suggested that perhaps Mr. Macbeth should have been “dreaming Death of a Salesman” (“Macbeth” D7).

Weiss’s lament that the issues she tried to address in the production were not understood is certainly borne out in this review. Most of Dykk’s comments – as exemplified by the quotes above – came from the perspective that the male was the most important character in the play. Although the title of the play included both the male and female Macbeth, his only reference to Mrs. Macbeth was “Mrs. M. wonders if they can’t break out of the rat-race and get away somewhere.” This sentence was followed by a portrait of her as a
stereotypical whiney wife: “They never have any fun any more” (“Macbeth” D7). That was the sum total of Dykk’s comments on the character of Lady Macbeth.

The most telling statement Dykk made was this: “What this adaptation does not examine is the perhaps more interesting question of the psychic life of a man who could see his wife as Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Macduff, Hecate and the three witches rolled into one.” He appears to have felt that the play would have been better served as an exploration of why a man imagines his wife in these guises, rather than as an exploration of gender dynamics and gender construction because the woman actually embodies all these characters. He firmly places man back in the centre of any interpretation and, as with the coverage of Dunn’s production of Merchant, misses a feminist perspective that is trying to destabilize the social structures embedded in the play.

The canonical status of Macbeth has made it a recurring target for experiments with liminal space. Productions directed by women in the UK have considered the power dynamics from a different perspective than Weiss and addressed how “Lady Macbeth is often blamed for egging Macbeth on to kill King Duncan.” Joan Littlewood, Jules Wright, and Helena Kaut-Howson all believed that “the character of Macbeth needed to be seen as fully accountable for his actions” (Schafer 149) and not as a victim of a manipulative woman. In this way they challenged the Christian parallel of Eve tempting Adam with the forbidden fruit. Instead of Eve/Lady Macbeth being solely responsible for bringing sin into the world, Adam/Macbeth must accept equal responsibility.

Weiss’s cross-gender approach to Macbeth emphasized the fact that “non-verbal elements [such as gender] do not convey stable truths but contain within themselves the possibility for rewriting and remaking meanings” (de Gay 55). She disrupted the expected
repetition of cultural gender norms in the play and thus challenged the audience to rethink its gender preconceptions. Weiss’s use of the liminal space of performance was certainly more overt than that of Dunn and so garnered a more explicit – and decidedly more negative – response. This may be one reason that Weiss and other female directors distinguish between their feminist work and their ‘usual’ work. Employment opportunities often hinge on positive reviews, and explicitly feminist productions of canonical texts are often, as in Weiss’s case, either ignored or denounced.
Chapter Three

Hope McIntyre and the Social Construction and Destruction of Blanche

“Blanche ... [was] forced into this role of womanhood which did not match with reality ... [or allow her] to survive as an independent woman.”

While more widely known as a playwright, Winnipeg’s Hope McIntyre has an MFA in Directing and is also Artistic Director of her own theatre company, Sarasváti Productions. Her company has a mandate to promote social change which is most often articulated from a female perspective. It also produces three events annually that encourage the work of female theatre artists while raising money for local women’s groups. In our interview, however, we move beyond her company’s work and discuss her direction of Tennessee Williams’s canonical text *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which was produced by an independent theatre group in Toronto.

Often called “one of the most influential plays of the twentieth century” (Kolin xv), *Streetcar* is frequently analyzed as an embodiment of the shifting social structures of the post-WWII American South. In contrast, however, Anca Vlasopolos proposes that the play “has less to do with the history of the South ... than with gender-determined exclusion from the larger historical discourse” (152). McIntyre explores this ironic omission of women from the social discourse that eventually fragments them in order to reflect a myriad of gender expectations. In the play, Blanche’s reflection begins to crack as she is unable to continue to fulfill the social demands of ‘woman’. Finally Blanche shatters when she cannot survive the

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9 All quotations in this chapter are from a phone interview with Hope McIntyre on February 18, 2005 unless otherwise indicated.
horrific cultural propaganda that women actually want to be sexually dominated by men. Because Blanche no longer reflects what society demands, she is lost in a society that has no place for her.

Long before McIntyre discovered *Streetcar*, she had been interested in theatre and from an early age she was doing the “typical … shows in your basement kind of thing.” She became very involved with theatre in high school, performing in shows, directing, and beginning to write for the stage. Upon graduation, she attended the University of Saskatchewan and obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts with a focus on performance. During her undergraduate years, she continued to direct student shows and hone her playwriting skills. She also took part in the local Fringe Festival. After finishing her undergraduate degree in 1995, she went straight to work on a Master of Fine Arts degree in directing at the University of Victoria. At that time, the university was experimenting with the degree structure and the regular two-year academic curriculum was condensed into a full-time one-year program of study with the thesis project occurring as part of summer repertory. Driven to learn more after graduation in 1996, McIntyre moved to England to attend John Sichel’s multimedia training facility, ARRTS International, where she completed a multimedia apprenticeship and acting diploma in 1997.

In Victoria McIntyre had been directing Fringe productions and independent work “on the side” along with her academic pursuits. These productions show her strong commitment to socially- and politically-motivated work. She directed *This Is For You, Anna* for Phoenix Theatre and a collective creation entitled *The Prostituted Muse* with the University of Victoria Student Alternative Theatre Company. When she returned to Canada from England, she settled in Toronto to pursue her professional career full-time. She
accepted a position as Company/Production Manager with the commercial theatre producer Rare Gems Productions and learned about the “business and producing side of theatre.”

At the same time, she kept directing with alternative and independent theatre groups until she “established [her] own company with some others there”—Sarasvâtî Productions. McIntyre directed and wrote for the company. Eventually, she moved to Winnipeg where she currently resides. The board of directors for Sarasvâtî Productions agreed that the company should move with her so that she could fulfill her vision for it.

Sarasvâtî is the “Indic goddess of inspiration and great change” and the company’s vision is to “inspire artists and audiences through the use of theatre.” Their mandate includes “promoting social change and human understanding … supporting and educating emerging artists … [and] experimenting with new forms of theatrical presentation.” Their political activism is apparent in the shows they have produced. McIntyre’s *Hunger* is based on the true story of a woman’s hunger strike on the steps of the Guatemalan Capitol Building. Also based on a true story is Victoria Loe Hicks and Nancy Kruh’s *Jill’s War* about a children’s rights worker killed in Iraq. The company has also shown a very strong commitment to supporting the efforts of women playwrights. Each year Sarasvâtî produces FemFest: Winnipeg’s Annual Theatre Festival of Plays by Women for Everyone to “showcase women theatre artists and provide them with the opportunity to develop their work”; International Women’s Week Cabaret of Monologues, which is “an annual event that raises funds for women’s groups” and creates an occasion to “represent the diverse voices of women”; and One Night Stand, which is a reading series that offers the chance for “playwrights [women and men] to test new material before an audience” (http://www.sarasvati.ca).
While Sarasvâti keeps her extremely busy, McIntyre continues to work beyond the boundaries of her company. From 2001-2003 she was the first Crake Fellow in Drama at Mount Allison University where she directed Cixous’s *Portrait of Dora*, James Reaney’s *The Canadian Brothers*, George F. Walker’s *Escape from Happiness*, and Harold Pinter’s *One for the Road*. She was the Women’s Caucus Chair for the Playwrights Guild of Canada from 2001-06 and is currently President of the Guild. She was also the co-Chair of Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women’s Initiative which produced the recently released study *Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre*.

When asked what drew her to directing, McIntyre responded, “Well, it’s interesting.” Her initial love was performance, which is why she did a BFA acting degree. However, “there are not a lot of roles for women. And so I was … I would say guided towards directing by some of my professors during my undergrad.” As she was not given many roles during her BFA training, directing became “a way of doing theatre and having a bit more control of the type of theatre I was doing.” Henry Woolf was one of those professors who guided her.

Woolf has an international reputation which began in England when he directed and starred in the first production of his school friend Harold Pinter’s *The Room* in 1957. He and Pinter have been life-long collaborators and Woolf has become a "living icon of the theatrical avant-garde" (Eyre and Wright 229). In 1960, he was cast with Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright in Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*, directed by Orson Welles. He played a Transylvanian in the 1975 cult classic movie *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and went on to act with Eric Idle on Rutland Weekend Television and in the subsequent 1978 movie *The Rutles: All You Need is Cash*. He joined the Drama Department of the University of Saskatchewan in
1983, became the Department head in 1995, and retired as a Professor Emeritus in 1997. He was also Artistic Director of the Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan Festival from 1991-2001.

In the Drama Department Woolf taught the undergraduate directing course and encouraged McIntyre to think about directing as her focus. She was excited by his passion for theatre, awed by the breadth of his experience, and grateful for his belief in her ability. She was also inspired by another professor, Pamela Haig Bartley, who taught her acting and directed some of the productions with which she was involved. McIntyre loved Haig Bartley’s style: “very collaborative by nature, very open, working with the actors which I really enjoyed.” These are qualities that she continues to emulate.

As our conversation moved from her directing to her ideology, McIntyre responded in the following way when asked to define feminism: “I think I’m of the more recent school of thought that there’s actually feminisms so I can’t give a single definition because I think there’s so many branches and schools of thought now around it.” In spite of the wide spectrum of feminist perspectives, McIntyre believes that the “goal of them all is … [to strive] for equality for women” and that the differences are just in “the way you go about it.” She describes herself as “a liberal feminist” who is “working for equality across the board.” McIntyre is the only one of the five directors interviewed who actually categorizes her feminism. This self-definition undoubtedly places her alongside Dunn and Weiss under a moderate feminist banner.

This principle of equality became even more important to McIntyre as she began teaching in a post-secondary environment, first at Brandon University and currently at the University of Winnipeg. Because of the multiple sections of Introduction to Performance at Winnipeg, all instructors are required to use “the same anthology and teach certain plays.”
While she acknowledges that “the anthology has gotten better” in comparison to early versions and that “there’s a lot more women in it now, which is great,” she laments the fact that there are still not as many women as men represented. She also highlights the fact that in the current syllabus only one play by a woman is included: Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*. She is concerned that among her students “very few actually know what feminism or being a feminist means.” Luckily, there is also flexibility within the course syllabus and McIntyre tries to address this gender imbalance and lack of awareness by introducing feminist theatre to her classes.

This systemic bias is not uncommon for general Introduction to Theatre or Drama courses. As McIntyre points out, typically an anthology of plays is an assigned text for these courses and, as I have discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, these anthologies heavily favour male playwrights and their canonical works. These courses are usually mandatory for drama majors while also being open electives for other faculties. Therefore, students from all disciplines are quickly indoctrinated into a world of drama that privileges men and their accomplishments. Knowles states that “among the material conditions of production that shape meaning in the theatre, training and tradition function as perhaps the determinants least immediately apparent” (*Reading* 24). This training and tradition continue to marginalize and devalue women and their contributions to theatre under the veil of a dispassionate historical practice.

The question—Do you think of yourself as a feminist director or a director who is a feminist?—was “a hard one” for McIntyre to answer. “I guess I don’t feel like I can separate who I am from what I do. So, I’m a feminist and so ultimately I guess I would be a feminist director.” She tries to make a distinction between who she is and her “style of directing.”
When she works on a play she calls “inherently feminist,” she clearly directs it from a feminist point of view. However, when she works on a piece which she feels does not fit into that category she becomes more a director who is a feminist. “I tend to approach it with a different sensibility, but not necessarily imposing the principles of feminist theatre on it.” McIntyre mirrors Dunn and Weiss in this separation between feminist and ‘other’ work. What constitutes feminist work for McIntyre remains vague, but again its separation from ‘regular’ work exacerbates the lack of incorporation of feminist ideology into mainstream Canadian theatre.

McIntyre feels that being a feminist has “definitely” influenced the type of productions she does. There are plays that she “would not direct.” She has chosen to create and collaborate with a “small independent company because I have the freedom of doing the type of work I feel should be done and the type of work that isn’t being done on the main stages right now.” Unfortunately, not directing for Canada’s main stages also means she is not “getting the pay scale of an Equity director who’s working in the mainstream…. there is a bit of elitism.” As well, McIntyre is the Chair of the Woman’s Caucus of the Playwrights Guild of Canada and co-chair of the recently released study Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre. These activities coupled with the fact that Sarasvâti Productions produces the annual FemFest and International Women’s Week Cabaret have put her mistakenly, she says, in the category of “someone who works with women’s work and nothing else.” This is the risk that all feminist directors run: open and extended involvement with “women’s issues” pigeonholes them in the eyes of Canadian mainstream theatre practitioners. Therefore, their opportunities and any corresponding economic benefits
are seriously curtailed. In McIntyre’s case even making a personal distinction between feminist and other shows cannot protect her and her work from being marginalized.

When casting a play, McIntyre feels that her “process is a lot more open.” She generally does not look for “specific types or looks,” though unsurprisingly that depends somewhat on the play being done. Unfortunately, no one can completely escape our social conditioning or training biases. However, she casts with a “much more open field aesthetically” in terms of actor appearance. She is willing to choose actors who do not fulfill the traditional physical expectations of a part. She is also willing to cast actors with little professional experience. She enjoys collaborating with “emerging artists” and providing an opportunity for actors’ development.

Working in the capacity of both an actor and a playwright, McIntyre feels she has seen “all the various styles of directing” from “God directors – who essentially just tell the actors exactly where to stand” to others “who give very little guidance.” Within this spectrum she sees herself as someone who has a “much more collaborative process.” While she comes “in with a concept and a blocking plan, it’s flexible.” She encourages a great deal of exploration in the rehearsal room, using improvisation and character exercises along with examinations of the play’s themes. She “really ask[s] for the actors’ input.” “I often find that the actors’ intuition … changes what I do in the overall final product.”

McIntyre agrees that the characteristic of leadership is “the most often acknowledged quality of a good director” (Daniels 45), but only if she defines leadership in her own terms. “I think a leader takes what’s being given by the team as a whole and earns their respect and is able to kind of guide them through the process so that the final product has some cohesion.” She has no respect for an “autocratic leader” who makes all the decisions alone.
This somewhat untraditional perspective of the director’s role places her outside of the hierarchical structure of mainstream theatre production which in turn contributes to her existence on the edges of mainstream Canadian theatre.

With respect to how her authority is received, McIntyre believes she has experienced discrimination on the basis of her gender. As far back as her training, she encountered those who questioned her choices, including the proposal for her initial MFA thesis production. The committee told her that the piece was dated, but McIntyre felt that their skepticism was because “it was a feminist piece and because they didn’t have enough respect for me to allow me to do it.” She has also felt challenged by designers and production people who assume that because she is a woman, she does not “understand construction or principles of design … [I]t’s been heavier on that side of things.”

However, she has rarely felt that an actor was unable to take direction from her because she is a woman. She qualifies this with the fact that she has chosen to work predominantly with alternative theatre companies where people “are more open … and there’s less of the traditional kind of set-up in place.” This comment illustrates the inherent tendency in mainstream theatre to work in a habitually hierarchical way. However to establish her authority, McIntyre just does her job as best she can. “I trust that I know what I’m doing and ultimately as soon as people see that then usually there’s no question of the authority.” Even so, she has worked with people who “question the direction they’re being given … there’s nothing really you can do about that, unfortunately. You just know never to work with them again.”

The critical response—or more to the point, the lack of critical response—to McIntyre’s productions has definitely been influenced by her feminist stance. Her
productions are categorized as “women’s work” and as such do not receive serious critical attention. She specifically cites Sarasvàti Productions’ FemFest as a challenge. “All the publicity on it always focuses around the fact that it’s for women and not around the quality of the shows.” The Winnipeg Free Press will not even review a FemFest production “because the editor says there’s no market for it.” The paper will preview the festival, but again the focus of the preview is always “on the fact that the Artistic Director says that women playwrights are still disadvantaged in Canada and not around the pieces themselves and the high quality of writing from women.”

McIntyre’s perspective is well-supported by an examination of the articles. After searching the archives of the Winnipeg Free Press, I found over fifty references to FemFest but almost all (48) were only one or two lines long, giving dates and show times. There was no review of any FemFest show in the remaining articles: the items were previews of FemFest. The previews showed real support for the festival and the difficulties of being a woman playwright in Canada. However, with titles like “Women’s Work: FemFest Gives Voice to Female Playwrights Toiling in Theatre’s ‘Male Bastion’” (Prokosh, “Women’s” D1) and “Fest Gives Female Playwrights a Break” (Prokosh, “Fest” D4), the emphasis is clearly on what can be termed “women’s issues.” I could also find no reviews of the Cabaret of Monologues or Sarasvàti Productions’ other shows.

McIntyre wants to raise awareness about women writers, but this parochial coverage by the press ultimately limits the exposure they receive. The Winnipeg Sun mentions FemFest only four times. They are short items on the festival’s dates and a list of the plays presented. Similarly, the Manitoban only mentions schedule details. Swerve has had an interview with a playwright at FemFest whose show would be of interest to their gay,
lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual audience. None of these publications reviews the productions. The comment, “You don't have to be female to appreciate the womanly charms of FemFest but when it comes to identifying with relationship and gender issues, it might help,” in the Sun’s article “FemFest 2005: Women’s Work Done Onstage” does little to refute McIntyre’s claim that the focus of the articles simply creates the impression that only women would be interested in attending. McIntyre has actually had men come to the festival and ask if there are any other men inside the theatre before they go in. She has also had women comment, “my husband didn’t want to come because it was for women, but I think he would’ve liked it.” In this way, these Winnipeg newspapers contribute to the mistaken belief that women’s plays are for women only while men’s plays are for everyone.

McIntyre makes an observation about a season a few years ago at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto when all the plays were written by men. The Artistic Director of the feminist company Nightwood Theatre, Kelly Thornton, asked Passe Muraille’s Artistic Director Layne Coleman how and why this happened. His response was that he had not even thought about it. He did not purposely set out to exclude women, but he made no effort to ensure that he had included them. Predictably, there was no mention of this gender inequity in any of the Toronto papers. Coleman certainly did not set out to stage a ‘ManFest’ and the plays were not marketed in that way at all, but a parallel can be drawn. All of Theatre Passe Muraille’s productions received serious reviews with comments about content and style without any specific mention of the fact that they were written solely by men. However Sarasvàti’s productions receive no reviews that “talk about the artistic quality of the work … it becomes about it being women’s work or feminist work and not about it being good art….

What do you do about that?” Another example of how all-women seasons are spotlighted
while all-men seasons are not can be found in my interview with Micheline Chevrier in
Chapter 4.

In 1999 while McIntyre was employed at Rare Gem Productions in Toronto, she was
offered the opportunity to direct Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The
chance came through a colleague, Chris Tolley, who was running Expect Theatre out of the
same office as Rare Gem. Tolley was first approached by Rubber Gun Productions to direct
*Streetcar*, but previous commitments precluded his taking the job. He then suggested that
McIntyre would be a good second choice. McIntyre met with the Rubber Gun producers.
They “talked about the production, what they wanted to do and ultimately [I] decided to take
it on.” There were two reasons she gave for accepting the job. *Streetcar* presented an
“interesting challenge” because of its status as “one of those canonical pieces that everyone
reads.” She wanted to see what she “could do with the piece.” Also, after a year and a half in
Toronto, McIntyre saw it as an opportunity to establish her reputation there and “a chance to
work with other artists in Toronto.”

McIntyre was quite familiar with *Streetcar*, having studied it both as dramatic
literature and an example of the Method acting style during her university training. However,
she always starts “with a lot of research” because she thinks “it’s important to understand …
where the play comes from.” This entailed reading Tennessee Williams’s biography, “several
theory-oriented books on the play,” and some of its sources. In particular, she researched
Williams’s *Portrait of the Madonna*, which was “an earlier version of the play.” All this
exploration helped McIntyre develop her concept. “I think my interest really became centred
on the character of Blanche and ultimately how, as a woman, she ended up in the situation
that she does. Because, for me, the play is really her story of decay.” The themes of love and
loss and the “idea of women who are in some way lost in society” became major explorations for her in this production.

McIntyre set the play in its traditional 1940s time period. Her production was the last play staged in the Annex Theatre in Toronto, which had a thrust stage rather than the more common proscenium configuration. It also had “a walk-around balcony around the entire space and then these staircases that essentially [led] down to the stage, these huge staircases.” This influenced the “fourth wall illusionism kind of traditional” staging normally associated with the play, but supported a “fragmented naturalism” that she felt worked well for her interpretation of the play and the space. “We had the framing of walls and then we used scrim and newspaper to create the walls themselves so that they were transparent at times.” This transparency underscored the question of what is reality and what is a constructed illusion. One of the theatre’s staircases became “the staircase up to the second floor apartment” in the play. McIntyre felt that Toronto has “a huge alternative theatre scene so there’s freedom obviously to play around and you’re not going to encounter the same kind of conservative audience base that you would in some of the smaller cities or on the regional stage.”

McIntyre began collaborating with the design team which included many recent graduates from various university and college theatre programs. She enjoyed the newness of the group because “they were all very eager” to apply their education in a non-academic situation. She discussed with the set designer, Brandy Glovka, how to reflect the themes of “loss and fragmentation” in the design, how ‘real’ she wanted to set to look, and “very specifically which elements needed to be period.” The costume designer, Tamara McKinley, naturally wanted “the costumes to really communicate” the characters’ personalities and
positions. Blanche’s initial costume conveyed not only her refined upper-class qualities, but also her performance of the Southern Belle. As the play progressed, her look became less precise and controlled to reveal her inability to continue to mirror social expectations. There was also a clear contrast between the costumes for Blanche and for Stella. Stella’s showed how she had “changed and given up that [upper-class Southern] history,” and reflected her new social position.

The process of casting Streetcar took a standard route. Open auditions were held in which McIntyre saw “quite a wide range of actors.” Her experience has been that “there’s lots of hungry actors in Toronto” so there was a strong pool of actors from which to draw. While she was “obviously [looking for] the best actor for each role,” she also wanted to put together “the best ensemble.”

When I audition, I also try and look for actors who I feel would be able to work well with each other, with a team collaboratively, because the way I work is a little more collaborative. You have to make sure you have personalities who are going to bring stuff in, who are going to be interested in being involved creatively in the concept and the creation of their characters and then, of course, who are going to be reliable.

McIntyre also looked for actors who would be open to her reading of the play. In her interpretation she wanted to explore a “sympathetic perspective towards the women in the play,” and she did not want to cast actors who could not support that analysis.

The part of Stanley had been pre-cast with Thom Sears, a founding member of Rubber Gun Productions – something McIntyre knew before accepting the job. Sears “wasn’t extremely tall” so McIntyre looked for a Stella who was not only a strong actor but
also would balance Stanley physically. She found these qualities in Natalie Robitaille. This concern for physical harmonizing illustrates the impact of traditional expectations on the casting process. Even a politically aware feminist such as McIntyre is unable completely to escape this social inculcation. However, in casting Blanche she was not overly concerned with finding someone who had the “look of Blanche per se.” Instead, her major focus was casting someone “who could play all the layers to the character.” For Blanche, she wanted someone “who could play the other side to womanhood” while at the same time creating a believable sisterly relationship. McIntyre felt that Kathryn Morgan was a good choice (Illustration 8).


McIntyre always starts her rehearsals sitting at the table. “It’s important to me to do enough text work so that the actors are on board on the same page with myself and with one
another” and also to “give them a sense of ownership of that process.” The Streetcar cast focused on the text and moved through the play unit by unit so that everyone involved was familiar with what was happening at all points throughout the play. From this early understanding, McIntyre moved on to do some “exploration work.” That exploration varied in form depending on the needs of the individual actors. They did “some character background work … [and] some improvisation and some work around theme.”

Unfortunately, the time that elapsed between these rehearsals and our interview made it impossible for McIntyre to be more specific about what form these investigations took. She is clear, however, that the purpose of this work was again to help each person understand “the concept we’re working within” and also to help “clarify their character [and] how the character fits in to the overall piece.”

From there, McIntyre went back to moving through the play unit by unit, but this time with the actors on their feet so that they could experiment with the blocking. She always comes in with prepared blocking for any project which again illustrates the influence of traditional director training. However, instead of simply telling the actors where to move, she let them “feel it out for themselves.” She told them to “[m]ove where you like, see how it feels” and then compared their blocking with what she had already prepared to “find what work[ed] best.” This process allowed McIntyre to discover blocking that felt comfortable for the actors and also created “the picture and the relationship clearly.” She believed this was the best way for her to find “the staging that [spoke] to the concept.”

Throughout rehearsals, McIntyre’s expectations for the cast were quite straightforward. She “wanted them to focus on their characters” and to ensure “that the characters [were] well developed.” For her, the plot of the play was “essentially … the
journey of the character of Blanche and the relationships in the play”; she wanted “that to be the primary focus for the actors.” Her direction for them was to “make their world for Stella and Stanley and then make it a very foreign world for Blanche,” who cannot adapt to reflect a new ‘reality.’

Focusing on the characters sparked considerable discussion during rehearsals about the characters’ gender roles. McIntyre enthusiastically debated these elements with the actors. While they usually arrived at a consensus regarding character choices, she retained the power to make the final decision if needed. From the beginning McIntyre wanted to explore the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley that she felt was ultimately driven by how each character perceived their gender role within their larger societies. For Blanche, being an upper-class woman from the Southern United States demanded genteel behaviour. A Southern Belle never confronted or contradicted a man directly, but instead used her status and sexuality to influence and manipulate him: “I think it’s wonderfully fitting that Belle Reve should finally be this bunch of old paper in your big, capable hands!” (sc. 2). McIntyre felt that Blanche was “forced into this role of womanhood” that society created. For Stanley, being a man in the ‘new’ South meant you asserted your authority: “I’ve been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy’s eyes!” (sc. 2). In his battle with Blanche, McIntyre believed Stanley wanted “to remain a man” and in his mind “that man exert[ed] power.”

Stanley’s assertion of power had not only verbal but also physical outlets. His attack on Stella in scene 3 was one such act. McIntyre “felt that ultimately it was very much an example of the characteristic abusive partner that lashes out and then the apologies come afterwards.” Whether or not this assault is visible to the audience would naturally differ from
production to production. The 2002 production directed by John Cooper at UBC’s Frederic Wood Theatre kept the audience shielded from all violence between Stanley and Stella by conveniently staging the moments behind a wall or door. Because of the thrust configuration of her stage and the transparency of the set, McIntyre did not have the “liberty” to screen Stanley’s abuse of Stella. “[E]verything was wide open…. So that happens right there.” She and the cast discussed at length whether this was Stanley’s first abusive act and “whether it was Blanche questioning his authority that kind of drove him to start reacting this way.” While the question was never fully resolved for the entire cast, there was consensus that Stanley’s extreme need to “play the male” unleashed “violent tendencies for him” that were “established right from the top.”

Naturally, the part of the play that set off the most debate among the cast was what McIntyre calls “the rape scene.” “[W]e discussed that scene a great deal and how we wanted that to play out and what we wanted to make clear to the audience.” McIntyre had seen productions which projected the sense that Blanche somehow wanted intercourse to happen, and she discussed this perspective at length with her cast. However, for McIntyre, Blanche’s desire to have sex with Stanley was “completely wrong in terms of the concept we were working with.” Instead, it became the point where Blanche completely shatters because she is unable to mirror the desire that society has constructed for her. She does not want to be raped. Because the scene fades to black quite quickly after Stanley’s immortal line, “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning” (sc. 10), McIntyre wanted to ensure that the audience saw a rape and not a seduction before the blackout.

McIntyre achieved this by clearly establishing the power relationship between Stanley and Blanche from their first meeting so that the audience would see that the rape “was really
Stanley asserting himself as a man” and not a result of mutual desire. “[H]e essentially had her pinned down on the bed before we went to blackout,” which established it as an act of violence. Then in the following scenes, she showed in stark detail the effect the rape had on Blanche: “It was ultimately the thing that led to her final decay, her final kind of decision to float completely into the fantasy world. She couldn’t deal with the real world anymore.” She could not reflect the constructed ‘real’ of that world any longer.

The rape scene has always been a point of debate for directors, performers, critics, and audiences. In the original Broadway production, director Elia Kazan was very clear that the rape was something that Blanche wanted: “So she at once wants him to rape her and knows he will kill her” (qtd in Ciment 71). The fact that he still refers to the act as a rape is problematic. Rape, by definition, implies that one of the people involved does not want to have sexual relations. His usage may be a function of his time and place; obviously the meaning has undergone changes since the 1940s. However, it may also be a result of Freud’s influence on the perception of women’s sexuality at the time. Freud's contention that women unconsciously wanted to have sex with their fathers and that hysteria was a result of sublimating that desire may have been at the forefront of Kazan’s mind as he read Blanche’s hysterical behaviour just prior to the rape. For Kazan, Blanche’s hysterics may just have been a sublimation of her sexual desire.

When Kazan made the movie of the play in 1951, the rape scene was a problem because the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code was still being enforced and one of its rules was that rape would never be shown on film (Tischler 51). Early rewrites of the scene by Lillian Hellman had the rape as a delusion of Blanche’s disintegrating mind; however, Williams and Kazan fought to keep the scene as they felt it was essential to the story. “There
must be a rape. The play demands it” (Tischler 60). Ultimately, Williams wrote the screenplay, preserving the rape scene, and Kazan used what Tischler coyly refers to as “interesting filmic strategies” to keep the scene within the Production Code guidelines while remaining true to his interpretation that Blanche wants Stanley to rape her (65).

Subsequent revivals of Streetcar on the English-language stage have approached the rape scene from a similar perspective. While the interpretations of Blanche and Stanley have undergone an evolution as has the meaning of the play for each director, the rape scene has usually remained relatively consistent with the implication being that consciously or unconsciously, Blanche wants it to happen. The tenacity of this particular cultural construct is unnerving. Revivals such as director Herbert Machiz’s in New York (1956), James Bridge’s in Los Angeles (1973), Ellis Rabb’s 25th anniversary production at Lincoln Center (1973), Edwin Sherin’s production in London (1974), Brian Brook’s in Johannesburg (1975), Jack Gelber’s in Lake Forest, Illinois (1976), Nikos Psacharopoulos’s at New York’s Circle in the Square (1988), Gregory Mosher’s 45th anniversary production in New York (1992), and Robin Lefevre’s in Dublin (1998) all “for the most part, accepted the traditional ideologies … upon which the Broadway premiere was based” (Kolin 120).

The academic interpretations of the rape scene, if anything, seem to diminish Stanley’s responsibility and underscore Blanche’s desire and/or need for it. Bert Cardullo states: “The inevitability of her doom, however, springs not from the character of this conflict [between Blanche and Stanley] but from her rejection of Allan Grey…. Stanley’s rape of Blanche thus comes to appear the ironic physical incarnation of a defeat whose seeds she herself inadvertently cultivated.” He goes on to create reasons for Stanley’s behaviour such as his “uncontrollable drunken lust” and the fact that “he has probably not been
sexually gratified for some time due to his wife’s growing pregnancy.” He excuses Stanley because “Stanley has no reason to believe his act will have any negative consequences” (80), and says of Blanche’s reaction, “Her role as the passive victim of an act of incidental, inadvertent cruelty, of sudden lust and immediate ‘fun’ and ‘diversion,’ is thus emphasized” (81).

In the introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1971), editor Jordan Y. Miller maintains that Stanley “is not naturally a rapist” (13) and thus again implies it was some provocation by Blanche that caused the rape. In the same compendium, Philip Weissmann contends that the rape is the culmination of Blanche’s oedipal desires, which are also seen earlier in her marriage to Allan Grey, and her subsequent promiscuity. While Foster Hirsh sees Stanley as a liberating prince who causes Blanche’s collapse and thus frees her from having to lead a double-life (24), Arthur Ganz sees him as “the avenger of her homosexual husband” (80). Finally, Senata Karolina Bauer-Briski tries to expunge the act of rape entirely by calling it a misunderstanding: “For him it is not even rape. He thinks that both of them are having fun, because he takes Blanche’s fear as a game and simply misunderstands her” (104). She ends with the thought: “This act, however, is not sadistic … but a natural male retaliation” (105). Bauer-Briski’s use of the phrase ‘natural male retaliation’ illustrates the depths to which sexual violence has been ingrained as a normal male characteristic and not seen as the construction of a patriarchal society.

Thus, McIntyre’s interpretation of the rape as a true act of violence perpetrated on an unwilling Blanche was a break from the sanctioned perspective and underscored the gendered power struggle McIntyre had established. Stanley’s need to be a man and *his*
understanding of what being a man is has led him down a violent sexual path. It was appropriate for McIntyre’s production that the climax of the play occurred with a visible act of male violence by Stanley to completely destroy his adversary.

In the final scene, the nurse and the doctor were portrayed “sympathetically … they were there to help her.” This was in contrast to some productions where the nurse literally wrestles Blanche to the ground in a shocking display of woman-on-woman violence. For McIntyre, “by that point in the play … Blanche had kind of resigned herself to the fantasy world. That’s her only way of survival.” Blanche’s last walk through the apartment stood in relief against a backdrop of individual reactions by Mitch and the all-male poker players. Stella was “devastated emotionally” at the end of the play and Stanley stood soothing her. Yet, in McIntyre’s interpretation there was also “a victory for him [Stanley]. He exerted his role in the household.” He had won the battle. Unfortunately, Stella’s disbelief of Blanche’s rape accusations and her decision to stay with Stanley imply that his triumph is the proper social order.

Through the rehearsals, McIntyre observed an interesting change in the actor playing Stanley. The pre-cast Thom Sears “wasn’t the traditional-looking Stanley at all.” He was short and without the physically powerful physique that Marlon Brando brought to the role. While Brando’s image for the role is often emulated, McIntyre was not worried about her lead not fulfilling it. “[H]e actually brought some different things to the role as a result. You got a bit more of the faded Stanley who used to be, you know, the soldier and the great man, but was starting a little bit to see that fade as well which was interesting.” However, the actor playing Stanley felt a need to continue the traditional representation and as a result he began exercising and “trying to build up that look for himself” from the very beginning of
rehearsals. “[N]ot because I asked him to, but I think he felt that he needed to bring that out. I think he watched the movie version with Marlon Brando a few too many times.”

As well as building himself up physically, the actor also worked “in a very Method style.” McIntyre believes that this combination of gaining strength and mass, and the in-depth and personally demanding style of the Method created a response in the actor that became a problem in rehearsals. The actor started to lose himself in the character and as such “had problems really turning off the violence and the passion.” A couple of times during rehearsals the actor got too carried away by the intensity of his feelings which translated into uncontrolled acts of violence. McIntyre believes, “You always have to be in control when you do stage combat or when you enact violence on stage.” Therefore, she spoke directly to the actor about the need “to pull back,” about “always being 10% present as an actor in control” and not being completely consumed by the character. McIntyre states: [I]t’s interesting that it was with the male actor that it happened and I don’t know if that says something about that individual or the character of Stanley. I think it would be harder for a woman to lose herself to violence like that.” Here McIntyre echoes the culturally prescribed bias that women are inherently less prone to violence than men, which again illustrates the depth of social gender stereotyping even within feminist ideologies.

Overall, McIntyre was fairly satisfied with the results of the show. While she did not remember any direct critical or personal comments that the interpretation was feminist or that the play was obviously directed by a woman, she did feel that the issues she wanted to address in the production were understood “to a certain extent.” Her main worry in taking on the play was that “Streetcar totally has that potential to paint women as victims of various types and idealize them.” However, she felt that her perspective on “society’s construction
of the masculine and the feminine” was very clear in the show. What remained unclear was whether people were “necessarily … conscious of it per se.”

McIntyre would accept the challenge to direct the play again, but she “would do certain things differently.” At the time of this production, she was not “heavily conscious of semiotics” when she directed, but a production’s semiotics has become something she now takes care to consider. “[T]here would be different choices I would make … that would help make sure that the issues I was addressing were even more consciously clear to an audience.” Basically, Streetcar has become “such an important piece, especially in American theatre,” that it is important “for us as feminists to … deconstruct it and subvert it.” Even The Simpsons television show has done a version of Streetcar with the character Ned Flanders playing Stanley, “shirt off and rippling with muscles.” McIntyre states, “you know that it’s an important cultural piece when The Simpsons parody it.”

Scholar Barbara M. Harris agrees with McIntyre’s assessment of the impact of Williams on popular culture in her essay “It’s Another Elvis Sighting, and … My God … He’s with Tennessee Williams!” Harris states that “television measures the pervasiveness of an icon as no other medium can” and she goes on to provide examples of Williams’s influence (183). Allusions to Williams and his characters “embellish television scripts” for such shows as Northern Exposure; Frasier; Magnum, P.I.; Beverly Hills 90210; Wings; Will and Grace; The Golden Girls; and Murder, She Wrote (187-88). In this case, the repetition of canonical texts to create meaning has even moved beyond the walls of the theatre and into the homes of the public. Stanley has become the epitome of what it means to be a man: physically powerful and sexually aggressive.
When it comes to the texts of the traditional Western theatrical canon, “we need to be able to approach them and attack them.” However, if McIntyre were given a choice to direct either a canonical text or a non-canonical text written by a woman, she would choose the latter. “I think that at this time in our society the priority is allowing work by women to get done so that we can also subvert the canon as a whole by selecting a whole new set of pieces.” While this production did not launch her “career or anything like that,” it did help clarify for McIntyre what type of theatre she wanted to do. The producers allowed her to do what she wanted with Streetcar and the actors worked well collaboratively. The relative freedom to create in a mutually respectful environment solidified where “[she] wanted to place [her]self in theatre in Canada.” Subsequently, most of McIntyre’s current productions have taken place within her own theatre company, Sarasváti Productions, or at Mount Allison University.

The audience response to McIntyre’s Streetcar “was very positive.” The critical response, however, was nonexistent. “We got previews and some publicity, but I couldn’t find any record of any reviews.” It is not possible to attribute this lack of coverage entirely to McIntyre’s feminist perspective. That the production was a small, alternative one may have contributed to the lack of attention from reviewers, “and also being [in] Toronto there are hundreds of productions every night so it’s always a huge competition to get” media recognition. McIntyre was not involved in the promotion of the play and so was unsure how much and what kind of effort was put into garnering coverage. However, she remembers, “We had good audiences for the whole run.”

The popularity of A Streetcar Named Desire cannot be denied. A segment entitled “Fifty Years of ‘Desire’” aired on 11 November 1997 on the PBS show NewsHour with Jim
Lehrer, opened with the statement that “the play has been produced more than twenty thousand times since it opened on Broadway in 1947” (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec97/streetcar_11-11.html). The repetition of this canonical text has been used to create meaning under the guise of sharing universal truths. In *Streetcar* one of these ‘truths’ is that deep-down all women want to be dominated by men – specifically, women actually want to be forced into having sex even when they protest. Traditional productions of the play have reinforced this perspective by staging romanticized rape scenes which imply Blanche’s desire for sexual domination. McIntyre’s decision to show the rape for what it is – an unwanted physical violation – is an attempt to unmask the cultural construction of men and women’s desire.

The fact that Williams and his characters have achieved iconic status in American popular culture only emphasizes the impact that repetition has on social awareness. It may also explain why the majority of academic analyses of the play support the traditional interpretation of Stanley’s rape of Blanche. People are reluctant to deconstruct the myth of an idol. Therefore, they release Stanley from any responsibility in the act by saying that he was drunk or that he misunderstood Blanche’s protests, or that Blanche wanted it to happen. In this way, the culturally-constructed epitome of a sexual male can continue to fuel the fantasy.
Chapter Four

Micheline Chevrier and Chekhov’s Tension between Men and Women

“It was about the tension between men and women and that particular dynamic in a love context … it’s a very complex thing and kind of impossible really.”

Micheline Chevrier brings a decidedly different resume with her to this study of feminist Canadian women directors. Unlike the previous interviewees, she has successfully broken into the upper echelon of mainstream Canadian theatre. She has directed at A houses across the country including regional theatres, the Shaw Festival, and the National Arts Centre. She was Artistic Director of the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa, an Associate Artistic Director for Theatre New Brunswick, and an Associate Artist at Toronto’s CanStage. Like the other directors, Chevrier has worked extensively on new plays, but she has also tackled a number of Canadian classics along with some of Western theatre’s canonical texts.

For this thesis, Chevrier and I discussed the evening of Chekhov’s one-act plays that she directed at the National Arts Centre. Morwyn Brebner and Andrew Moodie wrote new adaptations of Chekhov’s “The Bear,” “Swan Song,” “The Proposal,” and “The Evils of Tobacco” which she presented together under the title The “Vaudevilles” of Chekhov. Chevrier feels that these plays are about the “tension between men and women.” However this tension is not some biological imperative but a relationship structured by society’s imposed gender expectations. She highlights this theme of socially-constructed gender

10 All quotations in this chapter are from a phone interview with Micheline Chevrier on February 22, 2005 unless otherwise indicated.
relations by exposing the constructed nature of theatre itself. Chevrier uses various Brechtian alienation techniques to ensure that the audience understands that it is a play they are watching and not some view of reality.

Chevrier’s journey to A-house director began in Val d’Or, Quebec where she was born to French-Canadian parents. At the age of 4½, she moved with her family to Montreal and spent the rest of her growing years there. Upon completion of the two-year program at Collège d’Enseignement Général et Professionnel, she decided to attend McGill University. While she wanted to go into theatre, her parents were against the idea. However, Chevrier was also interested in math; so to please her parents she enrolled in the Economics program at McGill. She had chosen McGill because she thought, “I better perfect my English if I’m going into the world of business.”

She lasted two weeks in economics. She transferred out and “by fluke” ended up in the English Department. “I got to study Shakespeare and Jacobean drama and read all kinds of Canadian lit that I had not encountered up until now because I had had a mostly French education.” She had read Molière, Racine, and Corneille but had not encountered Shakespeare in her French schooling. She was excited to engage with new playwrights and different writing styles, but it left Chevrier in a difficult position upon graduation. She found it very tricky to make any headway in Montreal’s Québécois theatre community because she “had this weird degree at McGill,” a Bachelor of Arts in English with an option in Theatre.

In the late 1970s, Québécois theatre was consumed with “agitation surrounding the séparatisme question” while Chevrier was busy pursuing an English degree that did not fit into the dominant socio-political view. Then, in 1980, the referendum on Quebec autonomy was defeated and a somewhat disillusioned French-language theatre moved “away from the
nationalist and socio-political themes” onto themes of “individual and personal problems” (David 449). However, upon graduation Chevrier was still estranged from the French theatre community because of her background in a very academic study of English canonical plays, while the experimentation of the 1970s continued to be embraced and explored through new francophone works as well as international successes.

Even as Chevrier worked for a year in Montreal after receiving her degree, she realized that she did not want to be an actor. She also did not want to go to the French-language division of the National Theatre School. Because she “didn’t come from an Arts family,” the whole process of what to do next “was all very foreign.” After that year, she moved to Toronto to do a Master of Arts degree in Dramatic Literature at the University of Toronto. The program was one year, but she “finished it in a year and a half because of the papers.” She admits that her “education was purely academic”; however, during both her degrees she was “doing a lot of practical stuff on [her] own and in student theatres.” By the time she completed her Master’s degree, she was already working at Théâtre du P’tit Bonheur (TPB).

TPB was established in 1967 with the mandate “to provide quality theatre for francophones living in Toronto” (http://www.theatrefrancais.com/years_of_theatre.php) and was named after its first production: Le P’tit Bonheur by Félix Leclerc. When Chevrier joined them in the early 1980s, the company had moved from its converted 65-seat performing space on the third floor of an office building to Adelaide Court, “where it shared two theatres (seating 200 and 100) with Open Circle Theatre and New Theatre,” both English-language companies. TPB staged many plays by Michel Tremblay, but it was most successful with classics by Molière, Carlo Goldoni, and Georges Feydeau. TPB went on to
change its name in 1987 to Théâtre Français de Toronto and has become “the largest
Canadian French-language theatre outside Quebec” (Rae 539).

In response to the question, “How did you get started directing?” Chevrier openly
declared, “I have a very bossy nature and ultimately I also had a very curious nature.” She
had initially “loved acting.” But when a friend at McGill asked Chevrier to direct her new
play, she “then discovered that [she] really liked that work better…. Yes, much, much
better.” She feels that directing “fits [her] personality” because she gets “to look at all
aspects.” While at school she “directed a lot” and once she had graduated, she “did a lot of
stuff for Fringe and started my own company.” Chevrier also learned quite a bit about
directing by working as a stage manager with companies as varied as Toronto’s Necessary
Angel Theatre, the Stratford Festival, and Theatre New Brunswick (TNB).

She became an Associate Artistic Director at TNB in 1991 and directed Dracula for
their 1991-92 season. She went on to direct David French’s Salt Water Moon at Regina’s
Globe Theatre (1993) and worked as Associate Dramaturg for Playwrights’ Workshop in
Montreal. She was the Artistic Director for the Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC)
from 1995 to 1999. During her tenure there, she also took time to direct Joanna McClelland
Glass’s If We Are Women for Centaur Theatre’s 1995-96 season and Janet Munsil’s
Emphysema (A Love Story) at Alberta Theatre Projects’s (ATP) PanCanadian PlayRites/97
festival. Since leaving GCTC, Chevrier has worked at many of the top regional theatres in
Canada. She directed Wendy Lill’s The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum for the Globe and ATP
(1999/2000), Wendy Wasserstein’s The Sisters Rosensweig for Theatre Calgary (2001),
David Auburn’s Proof for Manitoba Theatre Centre (2001/02), and Stephen Massicotte’s
Mary’s Wedding for Prairie Theatre Exchange (2002/03), to name a few. She has directed

Chevrier laughed when I asked her who or what has been a major influence on her directing. “The major influences are the plays … and the fact that I seem to have this irresistible urge to want to tell them on stage.” She loves reading about other directors and certainly enjoys seeing their work, but what influences her most are the texts. Her first impulse to want to direct came while reading Ionesco. She remembers thinking, “Oh my God, I want to do this.” She wanted to tell “this kind of kooky story” in the style of German Expressionism. She also recalls that while working as a stage manager with director Richard Rose on *Coming Through Slaughter* by Michael Ondaatje, Rose, and dramaturg D.D. Kugler helped her “think about how to prepare as a director.” This was an “environmental play” staged at the Silver Dollar Bar in Toronto as part of Necessary Angel’s 1989 season (http://www.necessaryangel.com). “[Rose] was somebody who actually loved to chat about the act of directing” and Chevrier took the ideas he shared and made them her own. At the moment, however, Quentin Tarantino is the director she admires most. She wants “to do that shit on stage…. [It’s] so Greek…. I think he’s the coolest.”

It is interesting to note that all the directors, playwrights, and dramaturgs that Chevrier has mentioned are male. To this point all of the directors interviewed have been
predominantly trained and mentored by men with the exception of Weiss who had an opportunity to work extensively with other women directors at Vancouver’s New Play Centre. Knowles asserts that traditional (read male) theatre training dominates Canadian theatre and that an ability to work in this “naturalized dominant ideology” is a requisite for a successful career (Reading 28). Chevrier’s work as a stage manager for predominantly – if not exclusively – male directors must have indoctrinated her solidly into this process and may be a contributing factor to her success in mainstream theatre.

When defining feminism and feminist, Chevrier laughs again “in the right way…. I wanted to look it up, see, and now I can’t wow you with my dictionary definition.” When I assured her that I wanted her definition and not the definition, she responded:

I’ve always defined it [as] having the focus on women – not to the exclusion of men – but certainly taking that point of view…. I like the point of view. I think that’s what I would consider a feminist production is having a woman’s point of view. It’s not female chauvinism. It’s just having that flavour and I certainly feel it in the stories that I tell or in ways one chooses to work.

There’s definitely a difference in the way we tell stories. I feel it.

Deciding if she is a director who is a feminist or a feminist director took some thought. Chevrier related a story that ultimately brought her to the belief that she is a feminist director. It began with a conversation she had with Sarah Stanley11 who had recently bought a place in Montreal. Chevrier had also moved back to Montreal and Stanley “asked me if we [wanted] to start a theatre company and … [suggested] we [might] find that we want[ed] to

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11 Sarah Stanley is the former Artistic Director of Buddies In Bad Times Theatre, as well as a former Artistic Associate for the Magnetic North Theatre Festival, a former Associate Director for Factory Theatre in Toronto and a former Dramaturg-In- Residence at Playwright's Workshop Montreal (Stanley).
give it a feminist bent.” At first Chevrier thought, “I don’t really know what that means.” Then she realized, “But I kind of do.”

The fact that Chevrier defines herself as a feminist director is in some ways surprising. In contrast to the earlier responses to this question, Chevrier is the only one who chose this designation for herself without any qualifications about the type or intent of the work. She is also the only interviewee who consistently works within the hierarchical theatre system that appears to discriminate against theatre artists who self-define as feminist. The reason for this discrepancy may be two-fold. First, her proven ability to work within the traditional system may deflect backlash against her feminism. Second as she relates later in the interview, she is actually unsure whether she has ever publicly stated that she is a feminist. Regardless, Chevrier’s ‘quiet’ feminism was highlighted during her time as Artistic Director at Ottawa’s Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC).

GCTC was founded in 1975 by a group of five professors and students at Carleton University. The company was initially run by volunteers and performances were held at various Ottawa venues. In 1982, GCTC opened its own permanent 230-seat theatre space and became a professional company. Its mandate to produce Canadian work expanded to “foster, produce and promote excellent theatre that provokes examination of Canadian life and our place in the world.” The company has produced over sixty world premieres of plays and the majority of its productions are still plays written by Canadians. GCTC has a play development program that each year “commission[s] emerging and established playwrights and workshop[s] new plays.” It also established and manages The Playwrights’ Unit which provides “playwrights the opportunity to work with a dramaturg during the development process of their piece” (http://www.gctc.ca/about/).
Each season under Chevrier’s tenure at GCTC was thematically based: first Ontario artists, second portraits of women, third portraits of men, and fourth portraits of family. These themes came up quite naturally for Chevrier. When she took over at GCTC, she returned to Ontario from Montreal where she had been an Associate Dramaturg for Playwrights’ Workshop. She felt that featuring Ontario artists would be a wonderful way to “celebrate” that return. The second season, she kept “coming across all these plays that were written about, for, [and] by women.” It seemed fitting to highlight these discoveries. The season that focused on portraits of men was a logical extension of the second season as was the fourth season’s portraits of family. She was “interested in different angles of how we tell stories on the stage and what seems to fascinate us.”

The portraits of women season caused quite a stir. While for Chevrier it was something that occurred logically due to the plays she was reading at the time, others interpreted it as a political statement. Women did not exclusively write the plays and there were certainly men in the casts. However, The Globe and Mail newspaper “seized upon it” and sent a writer to Ottawa from Toronto to interview her “about this incredible thing I was doing.” The season consisted of Michel Tremblay’s Les Belles Soeurs, Sharon Pollock’s Doc, Wendy Lill’s The Glace Bay Miners’ Museum, and Jan Derbyshire’s one-woman show, The Opposite of Everything is True. This was hardly a program that could be termed radically feminist. In fact it could just as easily have been marketed as a Canadian season.

However, Toronto reporter Sharon Rupp arrived to interview Chevrier about her season’s emphasis on women. Her article was titled, “A Season of Not-So-Feminist Theatre” with the subtitle “Micheline Chevrier, artistic director of Ottawa’s Great Canadian Theatre Company, has programmed a daring line-up of plays about women. But she trusts their wide
appeal will keep her theatre full.” These titles seemed to underscore the cross-gender interest of the plays and downplay any overtly political perspective the season may have had. However, the headlines were in direct contrast to Rupp’s opening paragraph which described the “aggressive graphics” of the season’s brochure: “an illustration of a young woman who looks like Anne of Green Gables gone mad. Her red pigtails stand out at right angles, her mouth forms a scream, her fists are clenched. Another image shows a woman in martial-arts garb kicking an invisible assailant” (C12). The oscillating of perspective from inclusive to combative continued throughout the article. Rupp quoted Chevrier first saying, “‘I am not … an ardent feminist,’” then following it with “‘I am a feminist in the true sense of the word.’” It was as if Rupp could not decide which perspective to explore. It may also have been Rupp’s desire not to negatively impact the company’s season, which was the concern of freelance Ottawa theatre reviewer Iris Winston who was quoted in the article: “I thought people would react negatively to it…. Winston’s concerns are well founded when we consider the treatment of FemFest by Winnipeg’s press and public.

Chevrier had never thought of her portraits-of-women season “as a feminist act” and was amazed at the response. The interest of the press did, however, cause her to think about what feminist meant. She realized that she was a feminist because she put herself “in the centre of the work.” By that she means that if you are going to “interpret something,” it implies that you will “be a filter.” And if you are a filter, “you have to put yourself in the work and give your point of view.” She criticizes shows in which she cannot see a point of view:
You go to a Shakespeare show and you think, “Wow, the Shakespeare was really clear. Who gives a shit?” But why did you want to tell this story? What was it about this story … that you felt you needed to tell us? And how would you like to do that?

Chevrier is female and “can’t help but be that.” Therefore, since she is “the conduit” between text and performance, she “will be directing feminist if [she’s] honest about it.”

Chevrier’s confession highlights a core issue being discussed by women today. She implies a direct correlation between female and feminist in her statement. Females who do not define themselves as feminists would take issue with this implication by categorizing female as a biological determination and feminist as a socio-political one. Also, some feminists would challenge Chevrier’s conflation of female and woman because they perceive female as a biological category and woman as a cultural construct. At the crux of the statement is the implication that there is a universal female and/or feminist perspective. This belief has created a rift in the feminist movement because it denies or trivializes differences that exist because of class, race, and sexual orientation. Therefore, the term feminism(s) is now often used instead to make the point that feminism is not a single meta-narrative, but embraces a myriad of perspectives. Certainly, the five women directors presented here embody a range of viewpoints covered by the feminist designation. What this may mean to our understanding of Canadian feminism and to the way issues are addressed by Canadian feminist directors is explored in detail in the concluding chapter.

Chevrier’s gender not only influences her work but has also influenced her work opportunities. She stated: “For the longest time I used to joke that I was getting all the girl plays and potentially the French Canadian translation plays.” In some ways this trend made sense; because she is a woman and French Canadian, she has a lot to bring to those types of
scripts. However, she began to get “a little concerned that was all [she] was ever going to get.” Her worry about doing only ‘girl’ plays is well supported considering her early resume which includes a large proportion of plays by or about women. However, there is little evidence of a preponderance of French-Canadian translations in her theatrical resume outside of her work with TPB.

Chevrier believes that people in theatre “want to label you.” Being able to say, “‘Oh, this is what this director does’ or ‘this is what this director’s like’” makes the process of choosing a director easier, and having a distinct style or body of work is something for which directors certainly may strive. There is the belief that “if you can direct just anything, maybe you’re just a jack-of-all-trades and you’re not that interesting.” The dilemma as Chevrier sees it is this: “do I specialize and therefore do I get this reputation – or am I somebody who responds to different stories with related themes?”

This issue is hardly unique to Chevrier. Rina Fratacelli’s decisive 1982 report *The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre* illustrated the difficulties women had in securing employment in the theatre field through the 1970s. Commissioned by Status of Women Canada “in anticipation of the Applebaum-Hébert cultural policy review” (Lushington 15), it revealed that women in Canada comprised only 13% of directors, 11% of Artistic Directors, and 10% of produced playwrights (Fratacelli, *Invisibility* 114). In October 2006 a new report written by Rebecca Burton was published that researched the same issues. *Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre* was a joint project undertaken by Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women’s Initiative, Nightwood Theatre, Playwrights Guild of Canada and its Women’s Caucus, and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts. Women in Canada now comprise 34% of
directors, up 21%; 33% of Artistic Directors, up 22%; and 28% of produced playwrights, up 18% (Burton 22). Though the numbers have improved, they are still far from suggesting gender equality and stand in stark relief against the fact that women make up the majority of theatre audiences (Burton 72). I further break down these numbers in Chapter 6 to expose significant factors that disadvantage women economically.

Chevrier feels that what helped her push through these initial restrictions was her age. At the time of the interview she was 46, and while she still considers herself “very young,” others do not. She feels she has “crossed into this weird thing where [she] stopped being a woman really – like [she was] kind of this asexual thing.” She believes that at some point, “women lose their sexuality” and enter this “weird zone.” Gina Ogden supported this view in her presentation at the annual conference of The Gerontological Society of America in 2000. She stated that “[m]edia stereotypes of late life depict …. women beyond reproductive age as asexual…” (http://www.ejhs.org/volume4/Ogden.htm). At some point Chevrier had entered into this zone and was no longer really looked at as a woman, but rather an asexual human. Consequently, she feels she was offered shows to direct that she would not “have been offered before.” In recent years, Chevrier has been given the opportunity to direct “an amazing array of things actually,” and believes that she has been “really lucky” in this respect.

Conversely, “being a woman or a feminist does partially affect” the work that Chevrier will accept, but she “wouldn’t say completely, yet.” Again, her decision whether or not to accept work comes back to whether she feels she needs to tell the story. Her gender certainly influences that need, but so too does what may be happening in her life at a given time. “If you are honest with yourself, you are moved by different stories at different times
for different reasons.” For example, she “would never have picked Albee” for herself.

Although she thinks *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is “an amazing piece of theatre,” she had never been “drawn to direct” it. She had the same perspective on *Zoo Story*. However, in 2004 she attended a production of Albee’s *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* and “went gaga over the script.” She read it several times and each time was even more enchanted with it. “It had such profound resonance” for her because her personal life “had taken a turn … that had completely surprised [her] and had turned everything upside down in the best way.”

Fortuitously, she was offered an opportunity to direct it for CanStage’s 2005-06 season and she eagerly accepted. Chevrier has responded to scripts because she was “a recovering Catholic,” had “been single for a long, long time and childless,” and was “unbelievably obsessed with justice and fairness.” Ultimately, she believes that “as an artist, what you choose is influenced by long-term basic character things and then stuff that’s happening in your life at that time.”

This response to the text is also what inspires Chevrier’s casting process. While she acknowledges that being a woman and a feminist probably influences how she casts in some way, her obsession “with telling the story well” is primarily what drives her when casting a play. She believes that she is influenced by the age, body weight, or attractiveness of an actor only in as much as it relates to the play. Casting based on a person’s attractiveness or not casting that person as a statement against society’s fascination with beauty is just being a “bad director.” This comment may highlight another reason why Chevrier has had success in mainstream theatre: she fulfills traditional casting assumptions and sees no need to bring political ideology into the process.
When it comes to rehearsals, Chevrier is unsure whether being a feminist influences her process. She does, however, think that the “rehearsal process is probably different because I am a woman.” Women “share their own bod[ies]” with a baby for nine months and then “that body continues to be used and abused, as it were, … depending on the day.” She believes that because of this experience, women are “predisposed to [see] the bigger picture.” They are “less possessive.” During Chevrier’s time as a stage manager, she found that male directors “are more concerned with failing” and that this “does colour the rehearsal hall.” She feels awful that “society makes them feel that way” but goes on to say, “when you’re a woman, it’s almost expected that you fail.” Because of this difference in expectations, “the rehearsal hall has a different tenor” depending on the gender of the director. This perception creates a catch-22 in the careers of many women directors. If you are expected to fail, A houses will not take the risk and hire you. Consequently, if you have not proved you can succeed, A houses will not take the risk and hire you. Therefore, women face a double hurdle when they attempt to compete for mainstream work.

Chevrier’s comments on her rehearsal process echo those shared in Rebecca Daniels’s *Women Stage Directors Speak*. Daniels interviewed thirty-five American women directors about the impact of gender on their creative process. When discussing collaboration in rehearsals, she writes, “emotion, trust, nurture, and intuition – are agreed on with varying degrees of emphasis by all the directors as characteristics of a good collaborative environment.” While there was general agreement that there needed to be a “balance between … collaboration … [and] the artistic vision,” Daniels finds, in sum, “that these women seem to have an easier time submitting themselves to the collaborative portion of the process” than
The responses of the Canadian women directors interviewed in this thesis show a perspective on gender differences in rehearsal similar to their American counterparts.

Regardless of whether the director is a woman or a man, Chevrier agrees that the characteristic of leadership is essential for the position. “People need to know somebody’s looking out for them.” Her experience as Artistic Director at GCTC drove home this point.

I realized how much I had to facilitate, celebrate, understand, learn, acknowledge the staff all the time so they could do their jobs well and therefore, make the whole thing happen which was my job. I learned how little power I had and how much I needed to blend as opposed to stand out. I needed to be clear about what I needed, but at the same time I needed to understand what they did. It was such an apprenticeship.

Chevrier brought everything she learned from that residency back into her work as a director. Her definition of leadership is allowing “everybody [to do] their job…. if you direct an actor to death then the actor never has the opportunity to know who they are and therefore to do their work.”

Chevrier did not always work this way, especially at the beginning of her career. This was because as a woman her authority was challenged. She always wanted to be “5’11” and come into a room and have a big baritone voice,” but she is actually “5’5”, average height, average weight.” Being “pretty basic” made establishing her position “problematic.” She particularly noticed this early in her work as both a stage manager and director at Theatre New Brunswick in the early 1990’s and eventually came to believe that it was more because of her lack of confidence than anything else. “You just think you don’t have the right” to be there. This feeling of not belonging is an on-going issue for women theatre artists. It begins
within training facilities where “the relative lack of female professors reinforces the socialized sense of inferiority that women often experience, which can easily translate into lower confidence levels” (Burton 104). This deficiency of positive role models in the training arena is then compounded by the fact that there are more men than women working in the theatre field, as the earlier statistics indicate. Women are conditioned to feel like outsiders.

Along with gaining more confidence, Chevrier actively addressed challenges to her authority in three ways. First, she not only learned English but “tried to speak English better than the English.” This established her educational pedigree. Second, though embarrassed to admit it, she started wearing heels. “I started to make myself taller so I would feel tall. And I never sat down…. I was very present and very animated.” Third, she realized something when talking to British-born director David William at a Stratford workshop. As they were chatting, Chevrier thought, “Wow, he sounds really smart.” She did not say that he was really smart, but that he sounded smart. She realized that William “spoke in complete sentences and … took his time to get to the end.” Sometimes he would even “stop in the middle of the sentence in order to find the right word to end the sentence.” Chevrier was amazed. She decided if she spoke in the same way, she would also sound smart. “And you know, it’s true!” she declares. So these three tactics helped her overcome early authority issues to the point where now “a lot of people have told me that I’m formidable.”

When asked if defining herself as a feminist has had an impact on the critical response to her work, Chevrier was startled: “I don’t know [if] I’ve ever defined myself publicly.” She then went on to expand that statement by saying, “but being a woman – it’s kind of implied.” She concedes that it depended quite a bit on whether or not the work was women-centred. However, Chevrier did notice that, at least in Toronto, a show directed by a
woman did not receive “the same splash…. I think that as a woman it’s just not the same. You don’t get the same thing that a Richard Rose or a Daniel Brooks would get” in terms of print coverage. She believes that as a theatre community – artists and critics alike – we are “still much more attracted to the bad boys.” They do not know quite what to do with “the bad girls of theatre,” a term that she uses jokingly.

The opportunity to direct four of Chekhov’s one-act plays at the National Arts Centre (NAC) in May of 2003 arose from Chevrier’s relationship with Marti Maraden, who was Artistic Director of the NAC’s English theatre program at the time. Chevrier had left GCTC but was still living in Ottawa. Maraden was in the middle of directing Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* while juggling Artistic Director duties such as selecting the next year’s season, so she hired Chevrier to “sit in her chair and give her a hand…. I just fielded a lot of stuff through the day that, because I’ve been an Artistic Director, I could just keep off her plate while she was in rehearsal.”

During this arrangement, Chevrier and Maraden talked about the upcoming season and Maraden expressed her desire to have Chevrier direct for the NAC. Then “[Maraden] actually came to the theatre one day and she said, ‘Look what I’ve pulled off the shelf.’ And they were the one-act plays of Chekhov.” Maraden asked Chevrier if she would be interested in directing some of the plays and Chevrier thought, “Oh my God, that would be incredible. To do Chekhov, but not do *Uncle Vanya* or *Cherry Orchard* first or any of that stuff.” She was worried about doing one of those daunting plays as her first Chekhov project and felt the one-acts offered a different avenue into his work. The one stipulation that Chevrier had was that there be new adaptations of the plays by Canadian playwrights. Michael Frayn had translated the texts that Maraden had brought. However, Chevrier felt that for the NAC
audience to understand the humour, they needed “the language to the ear … [to] have a
Canadian and modern immediacy, otherwise it won’t be funny.” Maraden quickly agreed to
this arrangement so Chevrier accepted the job.

Chevrier’s desire for new Canadian adaptations of the plays brings to light a theme in
her career: her commitment to Canadian work. It is easy to see by briefly scanning her
resume that at least half of her directing projects have involved new or established plays by
Canadian playwrights. The reason for this is unclear. Chevrier never mentioned a strong
interest in Canadian work during our interview. Also, the Canadian directing projects she has
undertaken have been for the most part plays chosen by the producing theatre and not
decisions she has initiated. Perhaps the reason is that after successfully directing one or two
Canadian works, she has been categorized as someone who works well with Canadian plays.
The labelling creates a self-fulfilling cycle: she directs Canadian plays because she is offered
Canadian plays because she directs Canadian plays.

Chevrier selected four one-act plays to create the program: “Swan Song,” “The
Proposal,” “The Evils of Tobacco” and “The Bear.” She wanted to “create an evening of
Chekhov” and not just do four one-act plays. She wanted to “actually create a world about
these four plays” so that they were all “somehow linked.” To achieve this, Chevrier used the
concept that the cast “was a group of actors who arrive in town and set up shop.” She knew
that the idea was “not terribly new, but it worked terribly well.” She also used intermezzi –
“something that is non-verbal, music-based” – to craft the world in which the four plays
could live. This was a usual way for her to work: “I love doing things between acts – I’m a
big intermezzo kind of girl.” Ultimately, Morwyn Brebner translated “Swan Song” and “The
Bear,” while Andrew Moodie translated “The Proposal” and “The Evils of Tobacco.” As
both translators were playwrights originally from Ottawa, the language of their translations was “reflective of the region.” “[H]ad I been in Regina, I would’ve found a prairie writer.”

Chevrier was familiar with the texts from her university studies, but she tried not to remember “the bad student productions” and instead “actually looked at the script.” What emerged from her going back to the text was the theme of love: “the tension between men and women and that particular dynamic in a love context.” Also, the image of the moon became important after a friend quoted Chekhov, which Chevrier paraphrased, laughing: “your wife should be like the moon, she shouldn’t be in your sky every night.” She had always found Chekhov to be “melancholic” and the image of the moon fit perfectly with that impression as it was “austere and yet soft.” Finally, she “wanted to celebrate Chekhov as the man … as the theatre person … somebody who loved actors.”

Chevrier also wanted to stage the plays in the tradition of the period in which they were written. Hence, the title for the evening’s works was The “Vaudevilles” of Chekhov. She was not thinking, however, of “vaudevilles in the American sense of the term, but in the Russian sense of the term.” Russian vaudevilles were highly influenced by the popularity of the 19th century French farce, particularly la comédie de boudoir. “[I]t had a real flavour of that … through the situation and yet à la Russian really.”

Chevrier felt that the plays would have made no sense if staged outside of their historical context. Therefore, she presented them traditionally. Costume designer Judith Bowden – someone whom Chevrier had “worked with on quite a few productions” – kept within the late 19th century period for costuming but used “farcical twists” to reflect the characters’ different foibles. For example, Natalya Stepanovna in “The Proposal” was “a country bumpkin type girl” and her costume was “kind of poofy” so that she looked “a little
bit like a cabbage” to emphasize her rural roots (Illustration 9). In “The Bear” because the widow Elena Ivanovna Popova is “so attached to being a widow,” her costume had “a long, long black train that was like her grief” (Illustration 10).
The set was also designed by Bowden in the same period vein as the costumes. Initially, the play was to be staged in the NAC’s Studio Hall with a capacity of 250-300 people depending on the seating arrangement. However, the site was changed to the Theatre that has a seating capacity of approximately 800 people in the thrust configuration which
Chevrier and Bowden decided to use. Because the Theatre is “quite deep,” Bowden “created a whole world of forest back there.” She placed trees “from mid-stage to the back of the stage” which were not realistic in style. The trees could be flown in and out and had beautiful textures, “yet everything was quite, quite of that period.” This forest created a very effective opening for the evening because “Swan Song” took “place on an empty stage.” Therefore, the first actor’s entrance “came way, way, way from the back” through the trees. The rest of the set pieces sustained the same period style because Bowden started with “the old style of the old houses and then add[ed] on to that.” The larger set pieces such as doorways and picture frames were flown in while the actors themselves changed the smaller set pieces during the intermezzi.

Chevrier brought in Marc Desormeaux to create original music for the set changes along with the overall sound design. He “created a strange nouveau folk-Russian…very playful, very weird, but very weirdly traditional.” It gave Chevrier “stuff to play with.” Also, Chekhov masks were created: “almost a photocopy of a drawing – a photograph of Chekhov’s face that they slapped on.” All the actors wore the masks at different times during the intermezzi: “They were all Chekhov watching the stage.” This is how Chevrier celebrated “Chekhov the man.” These between-play musical set changes *cum* short love plays were created out of a combination “of play [improvisation between the actors] and his [Chekhov’s] love of theatre.”

Casting the *Vaudevilles* was very easy for Chevrier. “Swan Song” required an actor in his 70s or 80s. Chevrier went immediately to Douglas Campbell and “just offered him the part.” He was someone whom she knew and with whom she had worked before. Plus, “there aren’t that many 80-something” professional actors in Canada. She auditioned in Toronto for
the female parts, one in “The Bear” and one in “The Proposal.” She cast one actor she had
“worked with before and was dying to work with again,” while the other she “had never
worked with.” Christine Brubaker (“The Proposal”) and Yanna McIntosh (“The Bear”) were
both women with whom she “personally really wanted to work” and who “were very well
suited” for the parts. However, Chevrier did have them read before casting them: “They read
and it was confirmed for me.” Finally, because she likes to use “some members of the
community” in which she is working, the other three men who were cast were “Ottawa-based
actors”: Paul Rainville, Peter Froehlich, and Patrick McManus.

The rehearsal schedule was “very traditional in terms of English-Canadian” theatre.
They rehearsed six days a week from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm. The main difference was that
they had four weeks of rehearsals rather than the usual three because “of the newness of the
scripts … because they were new adaptations and also because of the size … four plays to
juggle.” Chevrier’s challenge was to ensure that “actors were not left alone for too long” as
she worked on the different playlets. For the first week, she “never left one of the plays alone
for more than a day.” She would spend the morning on one short play and then the afternoon
on another and repeat this the next day for the two others. During the second week she would
“spend a whole day on a play and then touch two the next day.”

Chevrier had high expectations for the actors. Initially, she laughed about this, saying
that she expected them to “be good! To make me look good!” On the serious side, she knew
it was important for them to “track their own stuff” because they were not just leaving a
scene. Due to the rehearsal schedule, at the end of the day they would leave the “whole
world” of a play and not return to it for several days while they rehearsed a completely
different one. This was particularly true for the three Ottawa-based actors as they each
performed in two of the Chekhov playlets that made up the evening. She not only expected the actors to come to the next rehearsal with all the previous work “under their belt,” but she wanted them to come “with new ideas or suggestions.” To her delight, “everybody did that.” She praised them, saying, “They were amazing. Everybody was thinking all the time. And they were extremely responsive….”

Also due to the farcical style with which she was working, “physicality became quite essential.” Jo Leslie was hired as a full-time Movement Director and also “functioned as a type of assistant director.” During the rehearsals, they did warm-ups and worked with movement and character exercises that were “instrumental in developing a certain vocabulary for each character.” “Because you can’t do this kind of work if you’re on book,” Chevrier insisted that the actors “learn their scripts very quickly.” Again, she was gratified that the actors were able to rapidly get off book and that they were also “extremely responsive … to the physical work.”

Because Chevrier viewed these plays as being “about the love between men and women and how impossible it is,” the characters’ genders were often points of discussion. She and her actors talked constantly about the characters’ actions and motivations in terms of sexual characteristics: “that’s such a boy thing to do. That’s such a girl thing to do. Oh he’s such a father in this moment and you’re such a woman.” These discussions brought them to “the crux of the behaviour – human behaviour – and how it is viewed by society.” In “The Proposal,” the father is basically saying, “please marry my daughter, please someone, please anybody.” Chevrier saw this as a socially determined perspective, which is also influenced by “social class and status.” These talks were never critical of the actors. They became about “sharing stories from life that … [brought] some light onto the situation.”
Chevrier’s view that human behaviour is shaped by the society in which it happens reiterates the perspectives of theorist Sue-Ellen Case discussed in Chapter 1. The desire to fit into a group is an instinctual human survival mechanism. Fulfilling social expectations is what allows a person to remain within a group. The discussions that Chevrier had with her cast highlight the point that although the human impulse is to stay together, there is nothing innate about the way in which a community chooses to operate. Case’s exposure of the constructed nature of societies aligns those constructions with a patriarchal agenda that silences women’s wants and desires. Case goes on to implicate theatre directly in the creation of a “‘Woman’ [who] appeared on the stage … representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender of ‘Woman’ while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings, and fantasies of actual women” (Classic 318). Chevrier’s discussions with her cast are one way of exposing the social constructions within the plays.

Audience response to the Vaudevilles was very positive. “The audiences just loved it. I mean, just loved it.” Chevrier remembers the show being very well attended. The NAC does not release attendance records so the accuracy of her statement could not be verified. However, the production won the Capital Critics Circle’s Best English Theatre Production award for Ottawa’s 2002-03 season, which indicates a level of high achievement that might very well have been reflected in audience attendance. Chevrier was thrilled that the production won the award. She agrees that the entire production was solid: “It was good because of everything, everything… mostly because of Chekhov and then after that, all of us. The brilliance of it, the love of it, the playfulness of it, the skill of it.”

Chevrier did not receive any specific feedback from her production of The “Vaudevilles” of Chekhov that she could connect to her gender or feminist perspective.
However, she felt that “people responded to the availability or vulnerability” of the show. While she is unsure if the openness in the production was due to her gender, she says that her desire “to have a chat with the audience” is something for which she is always striving. “There was an invitation in it” and this time “they chatted back through their reactions and their feedback.” She “really felt that,” but again asserts that she was unaware of any comments that could be directly connected to her being a woman.

Chevrier’s one regret about the entire experience is that she did not start working with the Canadian playwrights/translators earlier in the process: “We started late working with the playwrights and that was a bit of a mistake.” She believes that the experience would have been more “gratifying” for all had she done “a workshop earlier with the cast and the design team …and have the playwrights more part of the idea for the production.” Other than this, Chevrier feels that the issues she wanted to raise in this production regarding male/female relationships and how they are viewed by society were clearly understood.

The Chekhov production had a huge impact on Chevrier personally and the impact could be directly linked to one comment from an audience member that initially surprised her: “That’s the most French thing I’ve seen on the English theatre stage in my life.” However, she realized that this was a response to the French tradition of farce in the plays. Chekhov “called his short plays vaudevilles” because he clearly saw them as part of that very popular nineteenth century theatre form (McNabb 16). Chevrier started thinking about the productions that she “felt were most representative of [her] … what [she was] passionate about” and she was surprised to find that they all fell into “the world of farce.” Therefore, the show “had a great impact” on what she calls her “joy factor.” She believes that this factor is “stuff that keeps you confident and going even though it’s really, really hard. Really hard, but
joyful.” So while Chevrier did not think this production impacted her professionally, she did feel that it helped to clarify for her what type of plays she liked to do.

Yet, I would take issue with Chevrier’s belief that the *Vaudevilles* had no professional impact for her. A critical and popular success at one of the nation’s most prestigious theatre venues could not help but raise both her profile and her desirability. Perhaps she had this perspective because she already had an incredible variety of A-house work scheduled for the future. She would spend September 2003 directing Noel Coward’s *Hay Fever* for Theatre Calgary and direct Michel Marc Bouchard’s *Written on Water* for a January 2004 opening at CanStage in Toronto. From there she went on to direct Paula Wing’s *Number One and Jamie* at the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People in Toronto in April 2004 and J.M. Synge’s *The Tinker’s Wedding* at the Shaw Festival in July 2004. Chevrier certainly earned her description by Richard Ouzounian in *The Toronto Star* as “one of Canada’s most constantly employed freelance directors” (D3). Therefore, she may not have perceived any immediate effect from this work, but such an accomplishment must have helped solidify her reputation as an A-house director.

Despite the positive experience of directing *Vaudevilles* and the accolades the production received, Chevrier says she would not direct this show again because “there’s no reason … to go back.” She has directed certain plays twice: Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Molière’s *School for Wives*, and an adaptation by Patrick Garland of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. She says she would even like to go back to Fo’s *Accidental Death* a third time. However, when Martin Bragg, Artistic Producer of CanStage, asked if she might like to bring *Vaudevilles* to Toronto, she declined. She did not think “the response
would be the same” and she did not want to “tarnish the experience.” She ended by saying, “I
don’t know what I would learn from that, frankly.”

Due to the stature of the NAC, *Vaudevilles* received strong media attention. *The Ottawa Citizen* first mentioned the play in a preview on the Saturday (17 May 2003) before it opened on the following Thursday. Under the title “Two for the Theatre Buffs,” the article
described the adaptation’s writers, play titles, director, cast, and the details of the run. The
other pick was GCTC’s production of Jason Sherman’s *It’s All True*. Next, the *Citizen’s*
reporter Catherine Lawson did an extensive interview with Douglas Campbell about his
participation in the first play of the evening, “Swan Song” (F1+). The interview was
published on the day of the opening, 22 May. Playing on Campbell’s international reputation,
Lawson imbued the *Vaudevilles* with a level of quality and expectation even before the plays
had opened, while in fact saying very little about the plays themselves and nothing about
Campbell’s experience working with Chevrier.

Catherine Lawson also wrote the review for *The Ottawa Citizen* in her same
lightweight style. The review was very positive: “Director Chevrier has given us a highly
polished evening of theatrical delights.” However, she offered little actually critique of the
work. Instead, Lawson described the plays’ basic plots, but not their overall themes of love,
relationships, and society’s view of them. She commented on how the plays were new
Canadian adaptations and that “one of the many pleasures of the *Vaudevilles* is the unstuffy
language spoken.” She seemed to imply that by making the language more accessible, the
adaptations had improved Chekhov’s plays, but she did not explore how “Russians who
speak plain, Canadian English” might have affected the flavour of the plays. Finally, Lawson
dismissed the Chekhov masks that Chevrier used to celebrate “Chekhov the man,” with the
observation: “It appears to be their way of saying, ‘We know this is silly, but it is Chekhov.’”

Denis Armstrong of *The Ottawa Sun* also wrote a preview article on Douglas
Campbell, although it was somewhat shorter than the one in the *Citizen*. It was printed on
Thursday, 15 May, a week before the opening of the plays. Like Lawson, Armstrong
concentrated on Campbell’s impressive resume and his charming personality. However, he
was able to slip in pertinent information such as how all four plays are about “the hilariously
revealing foibles of love” (“Theatre” 37). Armstrong was somewhat less charmed in his
review for the *Sun*. He rated it ½ out of 5 and called it “Russian torture” (“Nothing” 30).
After a review of basic plot lines, Armstrong focussed on the new translations by Brebner
and Moodie: “Both … writers seem to think they have a lot more to say here than they
actually do. But they don’t” (“Nothing” 30). After calling the adaptations both “hollow” and
“shallow,” he lamented, “It’s like watching a car crash.” He was able to find only one thing
in the production worth praising: “There’s a real insight into the foibles of humanity in these
four one-act plays that manage to survive even this new translation” (“Nothing” 30).

Two radio programs also reviewed the *Vaudevilles*. On the 9 June *Ottawa Morning*
show of CBC Radio, Alvina Ruprecht reported that even though the run of the show had
ended, she felt she owed it to the artists involved to express “how thrilled I was to see this
contemporary adaptation of four Chekhovian comedies directed brilliantly by Micheline
Chevrier.” She went on to support Chevrier’s belief that the audiences enjoyed the
production by adding: “I have never seen the audience carry on in such gales of laughter.”
Connie Meng’s review of *Vaudevilles* for North Country Public Radio was equally effusive:
“Director Chevrier … has done a masterful job of staging the pieces. The pre-show and
transitions are wonderful…. I particularly liked … the combination of Chekhov masks and Groucho Marx cigars.” Unlike Armstrong’s ½ out of 5 rating, Meng gave the show “five Royal Canadian Mounted Police” on a scale of one to five.

There was no reference in any of the reviews to the gender expectations associated with the plays’ social strictures such as the idea that ‘normal’ women desperately want to be married. This lack of comment raises questions about Chevrier’s contention that these issues were clearly understood by the audience. Her use of Brechtian alienation techniques to expose the theatrical construction of the evening as well as the social construction of the plays does not seem to have had the desired effect. In fact, the intermezzi seem to have added to the feeling of frivolity rather than being understood as a feminist comment about the plays’ content.

The omission of any reference to gender issues may simply indicate the reviewers’ reluctance to introduce weightier perspectives into the review of a comedy. However it is more likely that, just as with Dunn’s production of Merchant, there is a general lack of interest or concern by reviewers about the patriarchal social structures inherent in canonical texts. Their very status dismisses any thought about their implications. Ultimately, the critical response to Vaudevilles, though positive for the most part, did not engage in deeper explorations of the gender politics presented on stage.
Chapter Five

Jillian Keiley and the Music of Chekhov

“The point was to listen to Chekhov’s language, the most naturalistic language in the world. Even if it is from a canonical text, it’s still alive and vibrant and natural.”  

The east coast of Canada is represented in this thesis by Newfoundland director Jillian Keiley. Keiley has made an impact on Canadian theatre by creating a unique style of directing which she calls Kaleidography. This style entails mathematical precision in both the actors’ movement and voices to create a symphonic experience. Her work, involving her distinctive directing approach as well as more traditional methods, has earned her a variety of prizes such as CBC’s Emerging Artist of the Year in 1997 and the Elinore and Lou Siminovitch Prize in Theatre in 2004.

In our interview, we discussed Keiley’s production of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* which was staged at the 2002 Sound Symposium held in St. John’s. In her production, Keiley reduces the fourteen-character cast down to the four main protagonists – Trigorin, Irena, Nina, and Treplev – who are each represented by both an actor and a specific musical instrument. She focuses the play on the love relationships among these four characters as expressed through the music of Chekhov’s language. Keiley refers to herself as “a regular feminist,” but her unusual directing style appears to remove any feminist ideology from her

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12 All quotations in this chapter are from a phone interview with Jillian Keiley on March 12, 2005 unless otherwise indicated.
work. However a closer exploration of this work reveals a feminist slant of which even Keiley was unconscious.

Keiley grew up in a farming community called The Goulds, about forty minutes outside of St. John’s, Newfoundland. Her interest in theatre began in her childhood. Her mother was a nursing instructor and every year she would take Keiley “out to the theatre to see her nurses graduate.” Keiley was fascinated. “Can you imagine … 50 women in white dresses with red roses, in rows…. I thought it was so beautiful, this two hour procession of nobody I knew, kneeling down and getting their white outfit on.” She “loved the pageantry of it” which she jokingly attributes to being a “good Catholic.” So as a child, she decided she wanted to create her own pageantry “without having to become Pope or anything.”

After graduating from high school, Keiley spent the 1989-90 academic year at Memorial University doing a general studies program to earn the equivalent of Ontario’s required Grade 13. Upon completion of the year, she moved to Toronto where she was “part of the very, very short-lived directing program they had for undergraduates” at York University. She liked the program so much that in the past few years she has spoken to the Head of the department and the Dean of Fine Arts to urge them to reinstate it. They have not responded positively. Keiley laughs, “They’re afraid they’re unleashing too many unqualified directors out there.”

The summer before Keiley left for Toronto, Professor Gordon Jones cast her as Helena in Memorial University’s Summer Shakespeare production of _A Midsummer Night’s Dream_. Like many directors before her, Keiley started out as an actor and she readily admits that she “must have been a nightmare to deal with.” She “knew nothing more than that when I was being spoken to as an actor – I didn’t want that.” Keiley “was never looking at it from
the inside.” Instead, she “was always looking at it from the outside and very keen on how we were delivering things to affect the audience.” As a result, she knew very early on that her true passion in theatre lay in directing, not acting.

So in 1991 when Keiley had returned to Newfoundland for the summer, she approached Jones saying, “I don’t want to be an actor. I really want to be a director.” To her surprise he responded, “Okay, well you can be my assistant director.” Thus, while working on her degree, Keiley spent her summers in Newfoundland as Jones’s assistant director on *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1991), *Romeo and Juliet* (1992), *As You Like It* (1993), and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1994) (Jones, Hirsh 30). She has worked as an assistant director “many, many times and often your job as assistant director is to sit.” This was not the case when working with Jones: “He actually said, ‘Okay take this actor downstairs and go through the text with them.’” Keiley was thrilled. She had an opportunity to learn “all these Shakespeares intricately because I wasn’t worried about the blocking…. It was … really such a privilege to do that.”

Upon completion of her Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1994, Keiley returned to St. John’s permanently. She lobbied Lois Brown, who was Artistic Animateur of the Resource Centre for the Arts (RCA) Theatre Company at the time, to “produce this big, giant cabaret.” Keiley wanted to include “all members of the St. John’s arts community, senior artists and emerging artists on the same bill and every night would be a theme night” (Keiley par. 5). Her persistence paid off as Brown relented and hired her to create this show. Now Keiley’s company, Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, continues this tradition each year: “It’s sharpened our diplomacy skills, improved our production efficiency, made us friends in all kinds of strange places, and it’s also a decent fundraiser” (http://www.artisticfraud.com/other.html).
The first eight 24-hour productions by Artistic Fraud were done in the 400-seat Reid Theatre on the campus of Memorial University; however, due to the show’s growing popularity it was moved to the 1000-seat main theatre at the St. John’s Arts and Culture Centre.

Keiley has never looked back. After the cabaret, Brown encouraged her to continue working with the RCA theatre company, so Keiley remounted a piece that she had co-written with Chris Tolley during their years at York University. Entitled *In Your Dreams, Freud*, this “unwieldy musical,” with a cast and crew of 45, had a successful run in St. John’s and in 1995 toured to Halifax (http://www.artisticfraud.com/archives.html). This effort spawned the new theatre company, Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, of which Keiley is still Artistic Director. This production was also the start of Keiley’s six-year relationship with RCA where she was an Assistant Animateur and an Artistic Associate.

For Artistic Fraud, Keiley has directed Ron James’s *Up and Down in Shakey Town* (1995); Robert Chafe’s *Lemons* (1996); Keiley and Dave Sommer’s *The Cheat* (1996); Chafe, Petrina Bromley, and Keiley’s *Under Wraps: A Spoke Opera by* (1997); *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1998); *Signals* (2000); *Icycle* (2002); *Burial Practices of the Early European Settlers through to Today* (2003); and *BellyUp* (2003). She has directed several shows for Theatre Newfoundland Labrador (TNL) including Torquil Colbo’s *Beyond Zebra*, John Mighton’s *Possible Worlds*, and the internationally renowned *Tempting Providence* by Robert Chafe. Keiley won the 2006 Betty Mitchell Award for Outstanding Direction for her direction of Pete Balkwell’s *Sailor Boy* for Ghost River Theatre in Calgary. She has also taught at Memorial University and the National Theatre School, and given workshops across Canada on Artistic Fraud’s unique style of working, kaleidography, which is described later in this chapter.
Keiley’s work has continued to garner attention and awards. In 1997, the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council named her the CBC Emerging Artist of the Year. The award “is designed to honour new and undisputed talent” (Newfoundland par. 1). In 1998, she was awarded the John Hirsch Prize by the Canada Council for the Arts. This prize is awarded annually “to an emerging theatre director who has demonstrated great potential in combination with exciting artistic vision” (Balkan par. 2). Most recently in 2004, Keiley won the very prestigious $100,000 Elinore and Lou Siminovitch Prize in Theatre which is given to a director, playwright, or designer “who advances Canadian theatre through a body of work achieved in recent years, while influencing and inspiring younger theatre artists” (Siminovitch par. 1).

When asked to discuss her directorial influences, Keiley mentioned three teachers from her academic life. First was Gordon Jones. As noted before, Jones enthusiastically supported Keiley’s shift from actor to director and used her as his assistant director for the Summer Shakespeare productions. Referring to him as “my hero,” Keiley states, “I am very grateful to him because he gave me so many opportunities” (York par. 5). Jones is also the person who nominated Keiley for the Siminovitch Prize in 2004. Second was a professor during her time at York University: Anatol Schlosser. Beyond exposing her to commedia dell’arte and puppetry, he showed her “other options for how to make theatre besides living rooms.” This was extremely important considering the non-realistic forms of theatre that attract her today. Third was Ron Singer, another professor at York University. “[H]e was really all over the actor and conflict and all that crazy Mamet drama stuff.” While this type of work is “[a]s far away … from what [she is] doing right now as could possibly be,” Keiley still acknowledges its influence: “it still appears [in her work]…. all that stuff still appears.”
Finally, Keiley states that probably she is influenced most “by what’s going on in Canada right now.” She travels quite a bit across Canada attending conferences and teaching, and when she travels she goes to as many shows as possible. She is “really excited about the state of [Canadian theatre]…. It’s really great…. there’s so much good stuff going on that … I can’t even credit one person.”

As with all the other directors interviewed for this thesis except Weiss, Keiley had been trained, mentored, and heavily influenced by an assortment of male directors. Certainly these men did not all direct in exactly the same way, but they do represent a tradition of director training that has its basis in male-designed methods. This can put women directors in conflict with their personal inclinations—inclinations which ironically have also been constructed by a patriarchal system. This push and pull between stereotypically feminine and masculine traits is evidenced in Keiley’s directing style, as will be discussed later.

Our discussion moves on to the terms feminism and feminist. In trying to define them, Keiley quickly separates the two:

[F]eminism is a term that instantly brings me to that fight – and I know it still exists today – but the term seems to still belong to something almost archaic now…. That it’s something that belongs to a time when I couldn’t have been a director…. It kind of belongs to a time when I would’ve had a really – a lot more working against me … as a director or an Artistic Director.

However, she sees the term feminist as more immediate. She defines it as “someone who is keenly interested in the progress of women.” While some people may feel that these terms exclude men, Keiley does not “really buy that.” She shies away from the extreme positions along the feminist spectrum: “I’m not anti-feminist or pro-feminist or anything. I’m kind of a
regular feminist.” She does not acknowledge any influences from her Catholic upbringing on her perspectives of feminism but the impact of this very structured, patriarchal religion may be a contributing factor to her low-key stance.

Keiley’s task became even more difficult when she tried to answer the question, “Do you think of yourself as a feminist director or a director who is a feminist?” After a moment, she responded, “I’m a woman. I’m a director who’s a woman.” For Keiley, the appellation *feminist* does not fit with her directing style because “there’s so little politics that way in my work and I know there probably should be, but it just never comes up for me.” This is a very surprising statement considering the responses from the other directors interviewed about this issue and will be explored further in Chapter 6. As an example, she brought up the premiere of Robert Chafe’s play *Tempting Providence* which she directed for TNL’s seventh annual Gros Morne Theatre Festival (2002) in Cow Head. The play, commissioned by TNL, is about a woman who “revolutionized healthcare in Newfoundland.” Keiley stated, “the fact that she was a woman created some issues for her and her strengths overcame that, but it’s not told from a feminist perspective…. There’s no politic behind it.” This perspective is supported by Deidre Gillard Rowlings who played the main character, Myra Bennett, in this production. Although the story is about “the struggle that she had to find her place and to be happy,” Gillard Rowlings believes it is a struggle that most people are “able to relate to … [and] something you could do anywhere” (qtd. in Vaughn-Jackson B1).

Keiley also mentioned the premiere of Berni Stapleton’s *The Pope and Princess Di*, done by Artistic Fraud in 2004, which was about breast cancer. Keiley admits:

[this was] … a very important topic … All those issues that come up for women about breast cancer and how much more money is put into different
cancers than is put towards breast cancer and how many more women die of breast cancer … [and] those kinds of really political topics, but it just wasn’t in the play.

Reviewer Gordon Jones of the *Telegram* commented on the way “[b]reast cancer issues are addressed aggressively by the take-no-prisoners script,” but these issues were “the anxieties, indignities, nausea and pain of treatment in the oncology ward” and not political aspects of the disease (“Stapleton’s” B6).

When I offered her the option to think of her work as being women-centred and providing a woman’s perspective as opposed to being labelled feminist, Keiley cried in frustration, “I don’t know!” She struggled to find a designation beyond categorizing her work as feminist or women-centred. She cited another Robert Chafe play, *Fear of Flight*, which she and Chafe workshopped with the second- and third-year acting students at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College when Artistic Fraud was in residence there for the winter semester in 2005. The basic premise of the play is “[t]hirty passengers sit restlessly on a long and bumpy trans-continental flight” (Artistic Fraud Upcoming par. 4). Artistic Fraud commissioned writers to “write monologues for us – to write passengers for us” and it turned out that the company had initially asked only two male writers. Keiley’s point is that while Artistic Fraud had asked many more women than men, it was not a conscious decision. It was “totally unintentional.”

Keiley’s difficulties articulating her perspective continued when I asked her, “Does being a woman affect your work opportunities or the scripts that are offered to you or the scripts that you choose?” She responded, “Well, I don’t know. I don’t get a lot of scripts offered … well, I get some scripts offered to me. I don’t know. It’s hard to say. I couldn’t
guess that really, but I certainly … I think it has affected some things.” She was unable, however, to be specific about what exactly had been affected. While Keiley had trouble early in the interview articulating how her gender might impact the work she is offered, further discussion caused the realization, “I am directing a show this summer that I know they wanted me to direct and [I’m] almost sure that they wanted me to direct it because I’m a woman. Almost sure.”

Keiley does readily admit that her casting process is very different from the usual course of action: “I’m sure many people would say that you cast the girls in the girl roles and you cast the boys in the boy roles, but I don’t actually always do that.” For example, when she directed a production of *Julius Caesar* for Dick’s Kids Productions at LSPU Hall in St. John’s in 1995, she explored the question, “What if we cast according to the acting ability and the personas of the actors” and not along gender lines? The casting process worked in the following way: “this person is aggressive, this person can be Brutus … this person is strong but has a beautiful exterior, [this person] can be Anthony.” The result was that Marc Anthony and Brutus were men while Brutus’s co-conspirators and Julius Caesar were women.

During this procedure, Keiley was functioning as what she calls a “blind feminist,” meaning that she was in no way consciously trying to make a feminist statement. “Everybody thought I was being very brave and clever … but it was totally unintentional.” This example is analogous to her earlier examples of working without a conscious political perspective. However, when she looked back on the experience, she was stunned that she did not realize the political statement the production was making at the time:

Oh Jesus Jill, of course! You cast Julius Caesar as a woman and you cast Brutus as a man, like of course! And then it worked out that all these other
women were the other conspirators. So with Brutus as the leader and then all these other women as conspirators … they became representative of those women … who tear down other women.

She realized that “it turned into this fantastic feminist thing.”

Keiley’s recognition of the impact of this casting and the feminist statement it made was not shared, however, in the critical response to the production. In the only review of the production that I could find, John Holmes states that while in this show “the real revolution is that this Caesar is a woman,” in the next line he dismisses its importance: “The only real difference it makes is that Caesar’s spouse, Calpurnia, becomes a man who, with all that bleating about horrible dreams of lions whelping in the streets, comes across as a complete wimp, which is quite comical” (12). He advises his readers not to “let all this cross-genderizing put you off” because “[o]nce you get used to it, the concept works.” Despite this back-handed compliment to the direction, Holmes does not mention Keiley’s name in the review. He states that the director was “uncredited in the printed program” and one assumes he did not feel it was important enough to find out who it was.

Keiley’s naivety about cross-gender casting is not completely convincing. She may not have approached the casting of Julius Caesar from a consciously feminist perspective, but she must have been aware that it might cause some controversy. She has an undergraduate directing degree from York University and it is difficult to believe that the subject was never raised during those four years of training. Perhaps Keiley’s “blind” feminism is a reflection of an unconscious desire for her work to appear apolitical in an effort to avoid being pigeonholed in the way that other women directors such as McIntyre have been.
Another example of Keiley’s unorthodox casting practices is Artistic Fraud’s annual fund-raising event: the 24-hour magical mystery musical. For this production anyone who wants to participate is welcome, from established performers and television personalities to high school students. The process is as follows: all those who are interested in taking part arrive at the theatre before 8:00 pm on the Friday night and put their names into a hat. At 8:00 pm, Keiley announces the musical they will be performing for that particular year. In the past, they have done Beauty and the Beast, The Wizard of Oz, The Sound of Music and Mary Poppins to name a few (Antle, “Cast” B2). Casting is done immediately and is accomplished by randomly drawing names from the hat for each part. Then 24 hours later at 8:00 pm on Saturday, the doors are opened and “the audience witnesses a fully staged, choreographed, somewhat memorized and musically directed version of a production that [was] announced just 24 hours before” (Artistic Fraud Other Activities). Keiley’s ease in working with a large number of people can be attributed to her kaleidography directing practices which often use large casts and crews – sometimes up to 80 people.

During rehearsals, Keiley strives to make the rehearsal space “a gentle place to be.” She echoes other interviewees’ responses that because she is a woman, she does “all this nurturing stuff in rehearsal” and also works hard to create “a very loving, safe place.” However, Keiley goes a step beyond the other directors. Her cast members enjoy “coming to rehearsals because they’re given so much love … I just hug everybody all the time and I tell everybody how great they are and I bake cookies.” Keiley believes that working this way may not be as available to men. As an example, she related how she can physically comfort an actor: “sit down beside [an actor] and give her a little squeeze.” She thought this would probably be difficult for a male director to do because his “being a man … might be
intimidating for some people.” She confesses that pouring “love into them” feels to her like “a privilege.”

At times, Keiley has “dealt with older men who’ve been dicks…. real nasty, vicious, terrible people to work with.” However, she quickly tempered this statement by saying she has “also dealt with older women who’ve been real jerks.” She was unsure to what to attribute this resistance: “… I can credit that to being a woman or I can credit that to being young … or I can credit that to being insecure, or I can credit that to them being insecure.” She specifically attributed the cause to her being a woman in only one case. This involved an “old man,” whom she did not name, that was “aggressively hateful at me being a young woman and actually said so.” Conversely, she has also worked with men who are “almost intentionally gracious.”

Keiley’s mothering qualities in rehearsal suggest an embodiment of the culturally-constructed woman who has the ‘inherent’ need to nurture. She plays out this role to a much deeper extent than the other women interviewed who struggle to find a balance between stereotypical female and male traits in order to work effectively. However, Keiley may also be trying to find a gender trait balance. Her kaleidography directing style is actually much less collaborative and more structured than those of the other directors as she demands a predetermined precision from her actors. Therefore, her profuse nurturing may function as an unconscious response to her own less flexible directing style during rehearsals.

In general, Keiley agrees that leadership is an essential quality for a director, but because most of her work is self-initiated it is not leadership in the usual sense. “I go to the actors and I sell them on my idea,” instead of the “Stratford model: ‘Here actors, we’ve thrown in this director.’” Keiley takes time to establish a relationship with an actor and
discusses her artistic vision before rehearsals begin while the Stratford model demands a more autocratic directing style because of time constraints. Knowles supports this argument, saying that the typical three-week rehearsal period “is too short to allow for much interrogation, experimentation, or mutual trust” (Reading 28). Keiley has “never been given opportunity [to direct] in an A house.” She states, “They say that things change in the upper echelons.” Regardless, she believes that her routine of “very disciplined warm-ups” prepares people for her guidance.

This lack of opportunity for Keiley to direct in A houses is surprising and somewhat disturbing considering the national recognition she has received from established funding agencies such as the Canada Council and from respected award-granting organizations such as the Siminovitch Foundation. This may be due to the demands of kaleidography rather than reflection on Keiley’s gender. Kaleidography, “due to the complexity of design and the novelty of the tasks … often involve[s] very unique and extended development and rehearsal periods” (http://www.artisticfraud.ca/ archives.html). Prolonged rehearsals are not a possibility within the mainstream theatre arrangement. However, Keiley is also experienced at directing within the more traditional three-week rehearsal period, so her lack of employment at the upper echelons of Canadian theatre remains problematic.

Keiley has encountered some people with whom she will not work again and although she says this has happened with women, she declines to name them. For Keiley, it comes down to a question of trust:

There are actors who I can’t work with, who don’t trust … if they want to argue that the design is not working for them or that they have a problem with this line or they don’t agree with the way that I’m doing the scene, and that’s
one thing. But actually to just not trust any decisions on the production, I find that really difficult.

She discovered that working with a doubting actor made her start to doubt herself. Because there are usually only three weeks of rehearsal, “you just can’t afford the time to keep second-guessing yourself.” Keiley has debated with herself for years about whether or not giving “up this good actor because [she does not] know how to keep them in line” is the best solution to this problem. However, it is how she has decided to work for the present: “I only work with actors who trust me.”

Keiley also has two inherent traits that help her to undermine any challenge to her authority. First, she is a very tall woman: over six feet. “I’m a really big person … and I can kind of hold a room … I don’t have to talk very loud to get my point across.” The fact that she is a Newfoundlander also works to her benefit. “People find the accent very disarming.”

Being extremely tall with an amusing accent definitely works to her “advantage” in the rehearsal room. These qualities also help to encourage people to join her challenging experimental projects.

One such project was The Chekhov Variations which was developed by Keiley and her company, Artistic Fraud. It arose out of previous work Keiley did with the RCA Theatre Company when she directed Barbara Nickel’s SchumannBrahmSchumann as the final show of their 1999-2000 season. Nickel’s play “melds past and present in a story of three modern-day musicians who become entangled in a love triangle that parallels the historical relationship between Robert and Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms” (Jackson 14). What particularly fascinated Keiley about this play was that there were actual musicians “representing the ghosts of the three 19th-century figures” (Jackson 14) occupying the
performance space with the actors. These “otherwise mute” musicians provided “musical excerpts, snippets of thematic material and even simple sound effects to complement the unfolding present-day plot” (Jackson 14). Keiley took Nickel’s idea of combining musicians and actors to a new level in her approach to Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*.

Keiley’s idea to use “the rules of music to create theatre” was something that Artistic Fraud had been discussing for some time and exploring through work specifically scripted for this purpose. Keiley even referred to the connection between theatre and music as their “raison d’etre.” The premise behind their discussions was that, because of its mathematical precision, it was possible to create a “perfect piece of music” just as “you can have perfection in math.” Therefore, if they applied the rules of music to theatre, they could “make a perfect piece of theatre.” This process, now known as *kaleidography*, “describes a ‘mathematically-based choreography and directing system in order to produce very specific movement and sound instances on stage, like symphonic music, but created with an actor’s speaking voice, natural movement, technical elements, and blocking’” (qtd in Devine 34).13 See illustrations 11 and 12 for examples.

Of course, Keiley faced new challenges while working on *The Seagull*. First, it was already an established text with fourteen characters. However, Keiley wanted to work for the first time with The Atlantic String Quartet on this project. Therefore, the text was pared down in order to match the four string instruments with the four main characters of the play: Trigorin was represented by the bass, Irena by the viola, Nina by the violin, and Treplev by the cello. The resulting forty-minute production focused on the “kind of love – mother,

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13 The original source is a PowerPoint presentation at the Shifting Tides Conference on Atlantic Canadian Theatre, University of Toronto. 25-28 March 2004.
Illustration 11. Artistic Fraud’s production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Illustration 12. Artistic Fraud’s production of *The Cheat*.
familial relationships – between those four.” This parallels Chevrier’s investigation of love in Chekhov’s plays.

Second, Keiley “decided to do this show based on the music of language and how language already is a song.” Previously she had used a musical score as the basis for her exploration as, for example, in The Cheat where Bach’s Fugue in G minor was used in a “beat-by-beat transformation of a precise musical equation … into a precise theatrical equation (Devine 33). She believes that

… the way I’m talking to you right now is musical and the way that you laugh is musical and how you laugh at one joke tells me one story and how you laugh at another joke tells me another story. Like she thought that was really funny or she’s laughing for my benefit right now. But, you know, like different laughs tell you different stories – very basic stuff.

To fully explore this perspective, Keiley ran rehearsals in a very different way than she usually does.

Initially, Keiley and the cast – without the string quartet – worked through the pared-down text scene by scene, using a traditional Stanislavski approach: looking at character objectives, exploring what each line means, and applying actions to each line of text in order to achieve the objective. When the actor was sure of the action and motivation, then s/he would work to say the line with exactly the same rhythm, emphasis, and tonal quality each time. In this way, each line of text “became like a piece of music.” Next, the individual line of text would be added to the previously rehearsed text. How the actors spoke the memorized text became the musical score for the play.
After working through the whole condensed text in this way, Keiley brought in the string quartet, and the musicians and actors all went back to the beginning of the play. Again, they worked through the script scene by scene, but this time the emphasis was completely on the musical script the actors had created. The first actor would say her/his line with the determined musicality. Then the musician who was representing the character would “sing back to the actor” the tonal and rhythmic quality of the line. When the musician could mimic the actor perfectly, the musician would translate the tones into written notes for their instrument. Then everyone would approach the next line of text in the same way with the musicians creating a musical score based on the music the actors found in Chekhov’s language. It was “[v]ery tedious, but beautiful too.” This part of the rehearsal process was where the “nurturing, loving stuff came in” that Keiley described earlier as her preferred way of working. “We made them, the four [musician-actor pairs], a complete ensemble, a complete interdependent unit and the [musician-actor pair] … who appeared were constantly a team and they really learned how to read each other.”

Here Keiley reiterates the importance of infusing love and nurturing into the rehearsal period and again it can be seen as a way of balancing the ‘masculine’ demands for absolute precision with the ‘feminine’ balm of support and acceptance. She calls for “dispassionate” explorations of the Chekhov’s musical language and a scientific deconstruction of the text. These can be seen as traditionally male ways of approaching a subject and, as Keiley admits, “very tedious.” Doing this work within the traditionally female environment of love and support softens the experience by adding an emotional connection between the actors, musicians, and the process. In balancing the male and female, Keiley creates an environment
within which she gets the work that she wants without the competition stereotypically associated with masculine activities.

For the performance, the floor was painted white and a white cyclorama hung at the back of the stage. Both the string quartet and the four actors were dressed in black and the rest of the set was also painted black. The string quartet was placed upstage against the white cyclorama while the actors used the downstage area to act. Each actor would “say” her/his line with the same emphasis and connection to her/his body as was established in rehearsal, but s/he would not actually speak. Instead, the musician representing that character would play the musical line that had been created for that piece of text. Above all of this, the written text would “fly across” the stage as an opera-like surtitle. Keiley “deconstructed the language so that the audience would actually see the language, understand which word was coming when according to the actor, and hear the music at the same time” (Illustration 13).
Several challenges surfaced in the rehearsal process. One was that the play text has a lot of jokes and therefore Keiley and her ensemble had to grapple with the question, “how do you deliver a joke?” They explored this from a “dispassionate” scientific perspective: “What’s the math of that? What makes a perfect joke?” In the same way that they broke down the condensed text, they broke the jokes down into tones and rhythms. They tried to understand why some people are funnier than others: “Is it because they’re funny, or because they know when to say a punch line?” While Keiley found this exploration of the connections between timbre, intonation, and humour “very interesting,” she did not come away with any firm discoveries that she was able to articulate.

Another challenge that this process highlighted was the extent to which the musicians and actors set about their work differently. The musicians were focused on precision and approached their work from the outside. They worked to recreate the sounds of the actors perfectly, and then through exacting repetition they strove for flawlessness in performance. The actors, on the other hand, were “really dynamic, very lively, passionate … method actors.” They approached their work from the inside. They explored emotional connections to the text and the other characters, and strove for honesty in performance. Keiley’s objective was “to invigorate the musicians with the passion of the actors and get the actors to be as precise as the musicians” in order to find the right balance during the presentation.

When asked what her audiences expected for the show upon their seeing Chekhov’s *Seagull* advertised, Keiley laughed. She felt they did not expect any sort of traditional staging because of Artistic Fraud’s reputation for alternative and experimental work. “[P]eople know not to … they don’t expect that from us anymore.” The play was staged only twice and both times it was within “the context of music.” It was first produced for the eleventh annual
Sound Symposium in July 2002 and then in January 2004, Artistic Fraud remounted the piece for one performance at the School of Music as part of a double bill with Christopher Pratt’s *Looking Back*. Both performances were in musical contexts and not in theatrical milieus so the audiences “weren’t expecting anything of us.”

Keiley also related that the Board of Directors from the National Theatre School attended one of the performances. “They had their board meetings and we had like 100 directors from the NTS. People were like sweating, you know, all these Stratford guys are there watching us crucify Chekhov.” Apparently, the directors were “all very good about it” and responded to the production by saying “that Chekhov would’ve enjoyed it.” Keiley suspected that the response was positive because “they may have thought of it as an interesting experiment” and not really as theatre, given the context of the production. For Keiley,

The point was to listen to Chekhov’s language, the most naturalistic language in the world…. It’s still alive and vibrant and natural. The language is so human…. And listen to how beautiful humans are when we sing to each other. It was about making us birds…. People tune in and listen to birds sing in the forest, but we don’t sit down in the mall and listen to this beautiful song that’s being sung between millions of people, billions of people.

Keiley’s rhetoric – though earnest – is flowery and saccharine. The language she uses in her description of people ‘tuning in’ parallels that which she uses to discuss her rehearsal strategy of making that space a loving and gentle place. It is very emotional and unempirical, and thus correlates to stereotypically female behaviour. It appears that Keiley is unaware of
her effort to retain a markedly feminine persona within a male-dominated theatre world which she insists does not impact her or her work.

When asked if she received any specific feedback on the production that she could clearly connect to her gender, Keiley answered, “No, not really. Not with that one.” However, a previous Artistic Fraud production, *The Pope and Princess Di*, was one that Keiley jokingly says, “people might have guessed that I directed.” Because this was “a play about breast cancer, and about breast cancer treatment and survival,” she felt that there was an expectation that a show about this topic would be directed by a woman (“Raising Funds” B4).

While there are always things that one might have “wanted to do … that didn’t get done,” in general Keiley feels that the ideas she wanted to address in the production of *The Chekhov Variations* were understood by the audience. Her one worry is that the show may have been looked at as “a novelty.” She feels that can be the “danger” with the type of shows she does: “It’s an interesting novelty and then it just passes. It doesn’t actually have any deeper effect or meaning.”

Jones’s review of the production done at the Sound Symposium was very supportive. He wrote, “While appropriating, analyzing and celebrating a modern classic, this tightly disciplined exploration of the interaction of music, performance and text takes you somewhere you have not previously been theatrically” (“Hear” B4). Jones goes on to say: “Indeed, so successful is the convention of substituting music for utterance that it comes as a shock when the final words of the play are spoken, with music being reduced to notes projected on the backdrop” (“Hear” B4). When Artistic Fraud restaged the show in January 2003, there was a preview in the *Telegram* but no reviews in any of the St. John’s
newspapers. Antle’s article recapped how the show was created and also included Keiley’s encouraging words to prospective audience members: “Some of our stuff, people think it's pretty out there, but when they actually go see it, (they find) it's really accessible” (qtd. in Antle, “Chekhov” BB02). Unfortunately, Keiley’s fear of the show’s being seen as a novelty may have been realized as there have been no attempts to remount it either in Newfoundland or elsewhere.

Ultimately, Keiley maintains that her feminist ideology does not influence her work. She insists that the work is not political in any way and that “it just never comes up.” I disagree with her evaluation. Directing shows about a woman’s impact on healthcare (Tempting Providence), women’s struggles with breast cancer (The Pope and Princess Di), not to mention her cross-gender casting of Julius Caesar, clearly indicate a concern for gender issues in her work. That she does not name this concern feminist is confusing, considering that she herself appears to embody her definition that a feminist is “someone who is keenly interested in the progress of women.” Perhaps it is the distinction she makes between terms that causes her to shy away from a political stance.

For Keiley ‘feminist’ is immediate while ‘feminism’ is “almost archaic.” Feminism relates to “that fight” which, although she admits that it continues to exist, is distanced in her experience. Therefore she perceives that shows which are not about “that fight” – and hers are not – are not feminist. She then conflates ‘not feminist’ with not political and so is able to remain free of a label that could impact her employability even more than her unique directing style already does. This is similar to the distinction that many of the other directors have made between feminist work and other work in the same attempt to avoid being restricted by their ideology.
Chapter Six

Adding It Up

“[I]deas worth exploring which have not yet been added to the map.... are new kinds of feminist theatre, and new ways of approaching feminism(s) and theatre(s).”
– Goodman 243

The women interviewed for this thesis – Katrina Dunn, Kathleen Weiss, Hope Mcintyre, Micheline Chevrier, and Jillian Keiley – represent an experiential and geographical cross-section of feminist Canadian women directors. They have started their own theatre companies, been Artistic Directors of established companies, taught in private studios and academic settings, and directed with small alternative groups and in A houses across Canada. What unites them for this study is that they have all also directed texts from the Western theatrical canon. Their productions have challenged traditional interpretations and stagings of these ‘classics of the theatre’ in various ways and these explorations begin to address the implications and impact of canonical texts.

If theatre is, as Carlson suggests, not the telling of stories but the re-telling of stories, then canonical texts are theatre indeed. It is impossible to guess how many times a single text may have been performed throughout its history, but one example of a canonical text’s endurance is A Streetcar Named Desire. As mentioned in Chapter 3, a segment on PBS about the fifty-year anniversary of its first production states that the play “has been produced more than twenty thousand times since it opened” (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec97/streetcar_11-11.html). That averages out to at least one production – not just performance, but production – per day for fifty years. That is a lot of
fragile woman/macho man/sister-blinded-by-love on stage. If one way meaning is created is through repetition, then what meaning has been constructed through the repetition of this text? That battered women will return to their spouses? That all women secretly want to be raped? That the spousal relationship is the most important?

In this work, I am not attempting to uncover the meaning of canonical texts either in general or for the specific texts that are discussed. Instead I am insisting that attention be paid to the fact that these texts create meaning through their repetition and that that meaning is a reflection of the social structures within which they were written. A representation of something ‘real’ is not being offered on stage. What is shown is a construction of a fiction which is presented as a reflection of the real. Thereby a canonical text produces reality “by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths” (Diamond 60). Feminist strategies provide opportunities for fissures to be created in a canonical reality through oppositional readings and productions of these texts.

I have looked at the specific canonical texts directed by these self-defined feminist directors working in Canadian theatre to explore their use of the liminal space of performance – in the slippage between expectation and experience – to challenge and/or expose social structures embedded in those texts. I have tried to convey how these women came to the text and what drove them during the rehearsal process to tell the story. In this chapter I will compare and contrast their various works in an effort to gain a broader understanding of the possibilities of liminal space and how Canadian feminist directors are employing it.

I have also reviewed the critical response – if any – to these shows while keeping in mind Knowles’s caution that a critic (both the critics of these productions and myself as
metacritic) “must necessarily locate him- or herself historically, and must acknowledge a lack of critical objectivity” (Reading 14). Of course, a difficulty with exploring critical response is that the critics’ biases may preclude them from reviewing a performance at all. Comments related by the directors such as a “middle-aged woman’s life is not very interesting to me”¹⁴ (Weiss) and “it’s just woman’s work so only women would be interested” (McIntyre) illustrate the depth of some critics’ biases when it comes to reviewing a ‘woman’s’ show. Even ‘positive’ exposure around producing a season of women-centred work (Chevrier) can feel belittling when a season of men-centred work is not viewed as the same sort of “incredible thing.” This bias against ‘woman’s work’ is further compounded when what constitutes it remains nebulous and can include productions with a woman director, shows with all female-casts, or plays that are written by women and/or deal with what are considered women’s issues. What is especially disheartening is that whether a production is women-centred or not is a more important issue for many critics than the fact that the majority of people attending theatre, and therefore their target audience, are women (Burton 71-72).

Another issue that arises when synthesizing points made during the interviews is the same one that arose for Lizbeth Goodman when researching her book Contemporary Feminist Theatre: To Each Her Own. Goodman found that the most difficult thing was “reaching a definition … of the term ‘feminist’” (15) and consequently determining what is meant by feminist theatre. Can you reduce the idea of feminist theatre to all theatre by feminists? If all theatre is political, as Donkin and Clement contend, then why do apparently politically aware women still distinguish between feminist and other work? The consequence

¹⁴ All quotations in this chapter are from the individual personal interviews referenced in previous chapters unless otherwise indicated.
of these Canadian directors making this distinction themselves is another area explored later in this chapter.

One important factor to keep in mind during the following discussions is that theatre is the creative outlet for each of these five feminists and that Canadian theatre is where they have chosen to make a difference. This speaks positively to the possibilities created in performance and highlights the incredibly slow but steady inroads being made by women into all aspects of theatre, as evidenced in Burton’s *Adding It Up* report.

**Feminism**

These women’s definitions of feminism paint part of the picture of feminism in Canadian theatre. Their perspectives encompass different characteristics of feminism and illustrate the broad spectrum of feminist thought in the country.

Dunn’s broad statement that “feminism is just anything that is not about oppressing women” is a reworking of Keiley’s equally open definition of a feminist as “someone who is keenly interested in the progress of women.” However, Dunn’s openness contains sharp words for those women who believe feminism has fulfilled its purpose or is now going too far. When women refer to feminists as those “other people,” Dunn challenges them by saying, “feminists are the people that got you your job and made sure that you can vote – so you have some control over your reproductive system…. If you don’t acknowledge that, you’re kind of stupid.” Keiley, on the other hand, acknowledges “all the women who have beaten down the ground” before her, but she sees herself as “part of a new generation of young women who grew up not seeing the obstacle.” Interestingly, both Dunn and Keiley are in their thirties, but their experiences seem to have shaped their perspectives in quite different
ways. A possible reason for this difference is the uniqueness of Newfoundland’s theatre history as compared with the rest of Canada. Keiley states that when she returns to Newfoundland, “all the women are in power.” The same could not be said as easily about Vancouver’s artistic community.

While McIntyre is “working for equality across the board,” Weiss feels “it’s about equal opportunity, but also equal representation [emphasis added].” Finally, Chevrier sees feminist work as “having the focus on women … certainly taking that point of view.” These statements can be summarized in this way: Feminism advocates the progress of women, the attainment of equal opportunities as well as equal representation, and the ability to see issues from a woman’s point of view. The perspectives of the five women are positive and inclusive as Dunn, Keiley, and Chevrier readily comment that men can also be feminists while McIntyre and Weiss acknowledge the larger sphere of feminism(s) and situate their definitions within it.

The feminist views of these directors fall generally towards the centre of the spectrum where a fairly moderate perspective dominates. This positioning may be a calculated response to past gender discrimination. In her 1985 CTR article, “Ms. Unseen,” Lynne Fernie refers to an article by Bob Allen for the Vancouver Province (31 Oct. 1975) which noted the prejudice Vancouver women directors had encountered. Kathryn Shaw recounted how she was told in a job interview by a male interviewer, “I’ve never seen a good woman director, ever,” while Pamela Hawthorn was told by the male “director of a large regional theatre … [that] he wouldn’t hire me because he had never believed that a woman director could get a male actor to do anything” (qtd. in Fernie 62-63). Rather than overtly attacking these men,
Vancouver’s women directors quietly and slowly went about changing the system from within.

This moderate position of Canadian women directors is similar to that of their American and British counterparts. When Rebecca Daniels interviewed American women directors about their position on gender differences, they also situated “themselves and their beliefs somewhere midway along a continuum between strict biological determinism and complete cultural construction of gender” (19). While Helen Manfull’s interviews with British women directors were not specifically about their positions on feminism, she was “amazed at just how much had been said on the subject of women’s issues” (130). The directors she interviewed ran the gamut from women who eschewed the feminist label to those who embraced it. However, director Katie Mitchell’s position seemed to sum up the majority of perspectives: “‘If feminism means equality between men and women, equal opportunities for work and life, then I’m a feminist’” (131). These findings stand in contrast to the accepted belief that there is a “prevalence of materialist feminism in America … [and a] prevalence of socialist feminism in Britain” (Goodman 35). This contrast may be due to the tendency of criticism to focus on feminist theatre companies with specific mandates rather than on the plethora of feminist directors who work outside of those groups.

Because of the breadth, both experientially and geographically, of the Canadian women directors interviewed, we might extrapolate from their moderate stance to make a general statement about the view of feminism in Canadian theatre. The majority of feminist women directors in Canadian theatre share a liberal feminist perspective that minimizes gender difference and works for equality within the system. Valerie Senyk, the author of this email, states this concisely: “I think the reality is that the country is teeming with feminist
directors, but some are working where they are likely to be recognized and acknowledged, i.e. Toronto or other large centres, and the rest are working in countless smaller centres throughout this land, all, in their own way, trying to make a difference.”

Feminist Director?

When the women were asked the question, “Do you think of yourself as a feminist director or a director who is a feminist?” their answers illuminated the difficulty of articulating how gender, ideology, and artistry mesh. All define themselves as feminists in some way, but each struggled to express how their belief system and their creativity are balanced.

McIntyre first decided that being a feminist ultimately made her a feminist director. However, as she explored the idea, she started to qualify her initial position. She felt that she would consider herself a feminist director if she was working on a piece that was “inherently feminist.” Conversely, if the piece were not inherently feminist, she would consider herself a director who is a feminist. She would “not necessarily impos[e] the principles of feminist theatre on it.” McIntyre decided that the project would determine the category in which she would place herself.

After some consideration, Weiss concluded that she is a director who is a feminist. Her work is “so much about responding to a particular tack and a particular project and the context of that project.” Directing a project simply because it is a feminist piece is not what determines that she is a feminist. Nonetheless, she brings out her “own belief as a feminist” in each project she tackles. Because she, not the work, defines her feminism, she considers herself a director who is a feminist.
Chevrier thought about her work in the same way as Weiss, but actually came to the opposite conclusion. Like Weiss, she does not work solely on feminist projects. Also like Weiss, her approach to a piece depends entirely on the piece itself. Chevrier believes that the work of a director is to interpret a text and that interpretation implies functioning as both a filter and a conduit in the artistic process: “You have to put yourself in the work and give your point of view.” Because she is a feminist, in the end she concluded that putting herself into the work would make her a feminist director.

Ultimately, Dunn would not define herself as either a feminist director or a director who is a feminist. In the same way as the other directors, she works on both feminist projects and others that may be “written by a man and potentially [be] about male experience.” To her, feminism gives her the “freedom to work on any kind of material that speaks to [her].” Not all of her work is “what most people would call feminist,” but being a feminist artist absolutely influences all the work she does. However, she finally declined to choose either category because she found them limiting.

When the question was put to Keiley, she was unable to answer it. She felt that the feminist label, one way or the other, connotes a conscious political perspective that does not appear in her work. Keiley brought up recent plays she had directed: *Tempting Providence*, *The Pope and Princess Di*, and *Fear of Flight*. She said that although these plays are concerned with women’s lives and experiences, they had “no politic behind” them. Keiley did not connect her personal perspectives on feminism with her work in any way. She called herself “a blind feminist” and said any feminist ideology people interpreted in her work was “totally unintentional.”
One director (McIntyre) said that it is the work that determines the category into which she would fall; one director (Weiss) said that because the work does not define her, she is a director who is a feminist; one director (Chevrier) said that because she defines the work through her interpretation, she is a feminist director; one director (Dunn) refused to place herself in either category as she found them both too constricting; and finally, one director (Keiley) figuratively threw her hands up in frustration and cried, “I don’t know.” This variety of responses exemplifies the difficulty in situating feminist perspectives within rigid categories. The current practice to speak of feminism(s) instead of feminism underscores the plurality of perspectives under the feminist umbrella and the fluid nature of individual viewpoints across the categories. However, the avoidance of the feminist label by these directors only exacerbates the limitations placed on those who use it, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

Keiley’s adamant belief that her work has “so little politics” to it makes it impossible for her to label herself one way or the other. For her, feminism is a political statement and even though she is a feminist, she does not make political statements with her work: “It just never comes up.” In their answers, the other four directors made a similar distinction. They separated the work that they did into feminist work and ‘other’ work with the implication that feminist work makes a political statement while the other work is somehow benign or apolitical.

Donkin and Clement address this perspective of feminist theatre in their book, *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*. When speaking about the works of classic dramatic literature, they state that a woman director “needs to know in advance that many classical texts carry with them an implicit if not a stated social
order in which all women, but particularly women of color and lesbians, either occupy the margins of existence or else are idealized, demonized, or eroticized.” They make this statement to illustrate the point that when feminist directors approach works from classic dramatic literature, the way they direct the piece will “either resist or comply” with this very narrow male-centred world view. They go on to say: “Both positions, the one of compliance and the one of resistance, are highly politicized, although only the activity of resistance will get named as such” (2).

This statement perhaps helps to explain the differences articulated by the five women: only the act of resistance, which they interpreted as feminist work, did they see as political while the act of compliance, for them, was not. This position-taking suggests a surprising naivety on the part of these intelligent and sophisticated directors to believe that they can choose whether or not to make a political statement. Donkin and Clement’s statement about classical texts can be extrapolated to include all works of dramatic literature. All plays imply a social order. Every work captures the playwright’s perspective on a fictional world that on some level reflects a perspective on her/his own society. While the playwright’s perspective may not be political per se, the constructed society presented in her/his play is. Therefore, a director is always faced with either resisting or complying with that perspective whether s/he is conscious of it or not. Therefore, the distinction made by the women between political feminist work and other work is an example of the dichotomy between resistance and unconscious compliance on one level.

However, there are more levels to explore. Perhaps Keiley does not view her work as political because as the founding Artistic Director of her own company, she chooses the work it will do. Therefore, her act of resistance or compliance would occur consciously or
unconsciously during her selection of the material. The work Artistic Fraud produces is her political statement, although she does not conceive of it in that way. She is not faced with the resist/comply decision as a director because the work has already been filtered through that very process at an earlier stage. This may explain why she feels that “a lot of people think” of her work as political even though she herself does not. However, I find it disturbing that she refuses to see any of her choices as political. Her adamant refusal implies a squeamishness about being seen as opinionated – traditionally a very unladylike characteristic – and thus undermines her feminist self-definition.

While the other four directors divide their work into feminist/non-feminist categories, they acknowledge that they bring their individual feminist perspectives to each project on which they work. As feminists, they have made choices based on that ideology in every project, but in their minds the extent to which those choices were overt determined whether or not the work was feminist. So how overt do feminist choices need to be to make the work feminist? This question is a matter of some concern. The feminist appellation clearly influences the kind and amount of critical coverage a production receives, which can translate into audience attendance which in turn translates into production profit or debt. Ultimately these factors influence the career opportunities and corresponding monetary compensation of the director. Therefore the stance by the directors that not all their work is feminist could indicate a deeper understanding of the reality of Canadian theatre: Consistently, overtly feminist directors limit themselves to the margins of theatre production.

Journalistic coverage of openly feminist work can at times be reductive. This is the case regarding the annual FemFest that McIntyre produces in Winnipeg. She is interviewed prior to the festival, but the focus is always on the plays being by and about women. The
critics never actually review any of the productions for their artistic merit and so perpetuate the marginalization of the work. As we saw with the Bard on the Beach Festival, sometimes a company’s publicist will avoid labeling productions feminist or commenting on the director’s feminist perspective because they want the show to receive mainstream coverage. Weiss argues that feminist work does not garner the same amount of critical coverage as non-feminist plays. She attributes this in part to the predominance of male reviewers who often determine that a play about women is not relevant to them. Chevrier believes that, particularly in Toronto, woman-centred work does not received the “splash” that work by male directors earns. She feels that the critics there are still enamored with the image of “the bad boys of theatre.” Women directors are not seen in that way. Dunn has seen critics “go too far” when reviewing work by women. Her example of a male critic chastising a woman playwright for exploiting her rape is a case in point. There is no comparative analysis of critical response to feminist work in either Britain or America, but American playwright and critic Gwen Orel provides a pertinent perspective: “there is still a trope of men’s story–universal, women’s story–quirky and specific. And … a lot of critics still presume a male reader. It’s odd since more theatre tickets are bought by women, but it’s a fact nonetheless” (email).

The imbalance of critical coverage for openly feminist work is not something that will be addressed first by the reviewers themselves. It is essential that feminist theatre artists expose this bias whenever and wherever they encounter it. When these feminist directors divide their work into feminist and non-feminist, they only exacerbate the situation by implying that categorization is both wanted by and necessary for the theatre-going public. Therefore, critics can hide behind the adage of “giving the public what it wants,” or more
specifically, not giving the public what it does not want. Classification only serves to keep feminist work marginalized by somehow suggesting that it is work that would be of interest only to other feminists.

Work Opportunities

The work offered to the five women as well as the work that they choose themselves is definitely influenced by their feminist stance, but not always in a negative way. Dunn feels that being a feminist has given her the confidence and drive to push herself forward in her career. She also feels that because a lot of women are working in theatre, her gender is not the hindrance one might imagine.

For McIntyre, in contrast, a vicious cycle appears to have developed based upon what she is offered and what she chooses. Her decision to “work with a small independent company” so she can do “the type of work that isn’t being done on the main stages” has created a glass ceiling for her career. Because she is not working on Canada’s main stages, she is not offered work on Canada’s main stages and ultimately, she does not earn the same money as those who do get such opportunities: “You’re not just going to get offered a direction of a play here at PTE [Prairie Theatre Exchange] or MTC [Manitoba Theatre Centre] because you direct small independent theatre. They tend to bring in outside directors who work in other regional theatres.” McIntyre sees the hiring practices of Canadian regional theatres as very hierarchical, and being a feminist woman who works with an independent company puts her on the bottom rung of the ladder.

Weiss shares McIntyre’s experience: “[I]t’s really hard for women to move up the ladder in theatre.” She feels her work opportunities reflect those of a large number of women
directors for whom new work and experimental theatre are the mainstays of their careers. Weiss enjoys her work and she keeps focused on the project at hand. However, her statement that establishing herself as an A-house director has never been of any interest to her may have more to do with a lack of opportunity than any deep aversion to the category.

Chevrier laments that for a large portion of her career she was offered “all the girl plays,” and a review of her production credits in Chapter 4 supports this contention. It was as if being a young woman precluded her from understanding or being able to ‘properly direct’ plays by or about men. However, in recent years she has been offered “an amazing array of things.” Ironically, she connects this shift in work opportunities to her being perceived as “almost asexual” as she grows older. As the sexual connotations of her gender have diminished, her horizons have expanded.

Keiley states that her being a feminist woman “has affected some things.” However, she admits that this is a feeling on her part and she is unable to give specific examples. This sense of a hidden bias was expressed by some of the other women as well. While they were concerned about sounding defensive or whiney, they believe that there is still an undercurrent in Canadian theatre that favours male directors. This perspective is again supported by Burton’s October 2006 report where she reveals that women directed “an average of 34%” of the 2000/01-2004/05 productions surveyed, which is well below parity (20).

Yet, this is still a marked improvement over Rina Fraticelli’s 1982 report which found that women directed a mere 13% of the productions surveyed between 1978 and 1981 (114). However, there are two points to take into consideration. The first, which is acknowledged in the 2006 report, is that the percentage is an overall number and is not broken down in relation to the size and type of theatre companies. Therefore, it is impossible to tell whether this rise
in the percentage of women directors working in Canada was due to more work for women across the employment spectrum. It is just as possible that the percentage of women directors is rising for smaller, more experimental theatre companies and that there is little change in the larger more established companies. This perspective is supported by a review of the 2005-06 seasons at Canada’s largest theatre festivals – Shaw and Stratford. Out of a total of 24 shows, only 5 (21%) were directed by women, with Jackie Maxwell, Artistic Director of the Shaw Festival, directing two of them. The 21% of productions women directed at these Canadian A houses is significantly lower than the overall 34% average in Burton’s report.

This supposition that smaller companies provide the predominance of work for women is also supported in the report by a comparison of pay scales by gender. Forty-two percent of Canadian women directors earn $3,000 or less per production while 48% of Canadian men directors earn $5,000 or more per production. Burton states, “… the statistics presented here demonstrate that women are financially disadvantaged as directors because they likely work in smaller venues and do not access the larger, mainstream theatres (which pay higher rates) as frequently as their male counterparts” (47).

The second point to consider is that this survey examined only professional companies in Canada and excluded “amateur and semi-professional troupes, roadhouses, civic theatres and theatre festivals (such as the Fringe)…” (Burton xi). As a result, it is difficult to see where women theatre directors fall in the full spectrum of work in Canada. Again, the likelihood that a larger number of women would be working on these non-union productions than in the surveyed union shows would further expose the economic imbalance for directors based on gender.
These Canadian statistics are comparable to available American statistics. In the “Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?” written in January 2002 for the New York State Council on the Arts Theatre Program by Susan Jonas and Suzanne Bennett, the prospects were even bleaker. During the 2001-02 season listed in American Theatre magazine, women directed only 16% of the productions. As in Canada, there was also a correlative decline in the percentage of American women directors in relation to the size of the production budget: “not surprisingly … as money and stakes increase, percentages of women participating declines proportionately.” The report also states that women in theatre continued to make approximately 70-74% of the salaries earned by their male counterparts throughout the 1990s (http://www.womenarts.org/advocacy/WomenCount NYSCAResult.htm).

Casting and Rehearsals

These women directors approach the casting process in the usual way of either holding open auditions or asking specific actors with whom they have worked previously either to audition or be in the show. While they all follow this routine, each believes that she is more open to physical and/or gender variation when casting than are her male counterparts. Dunn agreed that “sometimes you just need a specific hit,” by which she means that at times a director needs a specific physical type. However, she went on to state that many male directors “tend to think of women actors in very, very ridiculous terms.” Chevrier extended that thought by asserting that there is “a class of male directors that would be swayed” by an auditioner’s good looks. McIntyre echoed that sentiment by insisting that when she is casting, there is “a much more open field aesthetically in terms of what I look for in actors”
than she believes is typical among male directors. American women directors share this viewpoint and believe that they too “are more open to unusual or different choices – casting against type” – than men are (Daniels 158).

Considering that between 65 and 70% of Artistic Directors in Canada are male (Burton 10) and that male Artistic Directors hire twice as many male actors as women (Burton 25), the physical acceptability of a woman has serious repercussions for her employability. Dunn and Weiss related examples of having to deal with the backlash of casting larger women in roles that male directors have traditionally cast with slim women. Both directors praised the performances of these women, but acknowledged that there was criticism from others – both men and women – that the actors did not fulfill the preconceived physical aesthetic of the role. In Dunn’s case, the playwright “just balked. He just thought it was so wrong. He could not get past her body type.” For Weiss, it was the costume people who “complained bitterly and constantly, saying she didn’t look good in her costume because she was too fat.”

Audiences have higher character expectations for canonical shows than for less mainstream shows simply due to their having seen them more often. Again repetition creates meaning and in this case welds it to physical characteristics. Expectations around the character of Juliet are a case in point. In a contemporary production of Romeo and Juliet the audience expects to see a young, slim, attractive girl/woman. These physical attributes conform to contemporary, commercially-driven standards of desirability. Therefore, by fulfilling the constructed image of what is desirable in a woman, the director supports the construction which the audience reads as reality. A truly attractive Juliet will be young and slim. The mistake that many directors make is to assume that this physical depiction of Juliet
is both the best and unchangeable. However, a construction does not necessarily remain constant over time as evidenced by the initial embodiment of Juliet by a young boy. Renaissance audiences expected to see Juliet played by a boy. The arbitrary nature of these physical attributes can be exposed as such when the part is cast against the stereotype.

Dunn and Weiss, as well as the other three directors, have also cast across gender at times. When Dunn has done this, it has been “integral to the concept of the work” and not “just for effect or to be politically correct.” Weiss makes a conscious effort in this area though she divides the practice into three categories. One, she works to cast gender-blind for certain roles. For example, if the script calls for a doctor, the actor’s gender does not influence her casting decision because there are doctors of both genders. Two, at times “gender is so intrinsically tied to the play” that she purposely cross-casts in order to “defy the system” by creating a “different semiotic statement.” Three, for other plays she just wants “to see what happens when you actually do cast” across gender, which is what she did in her production of *Haunted House Hamlet*.

There are no statistics about the frequency of cross-gender casting. Journal articles that discuss this at any level are usually production- or play-specific such as Elizabeth Klett’s “Many Bodies, Many Voices: Performing Androgyny in Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner’s *Richard II*” or Casey Charles’s “Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*.” Otherwise they are concerned with cross-gender casting in a historical context such as Kirk Ormand’s “Oedipus the Queen: Cross-Gendering without Drag,” and do not examine the phenomenon within a larger contemporary context. However, the perception is that women directors –especially feminist women directors – are more likely to cast across gender than are men. Certainly, the women directors Daniels interviewed for her book are open “to non-traditional casting of
women in traditionally male roles when it seems possible and appropriate” (161-62).

However, Dunn feels that “everybody’s doing that now.”

Of the productions of canonical texts discussed here, only Weiss played with cross-gender casting, with Patti Allan playing Banquo, Macduff, and the porter. Dunn, McIntyre, and Chevrier all stayed safely within the bounds of traditional casting in terms of gender and physical expectations. Keiley went so far as to connect the string instruments used in her Chekhov with stereotypical gender vocal pitch. It is disappointing that cross-gender casting was not even contemplated by most of the directors and that Dunn even implies that it is some kind of theatrical experiment that is now passé. Cross-gender casting can still be a provocative and subversive weapon in the feminist director’s arsenal for exposing gender construction, stereotypes, and social expectations. Imagine an audience’s reaction to a male Stanley hitting a male Stella, or a female Stanley raping a female Blanche. In *Streetcar* alone a myriad of thematic possibilities arises when gender is overtly constructed as evidenced in Split Britches’s *Belle Reprieve* where gay men played Blanche and Mitch, and lesbian women played Stanley and Stella.

In terms of the rehearsal process, there has been a long-standing assumption that women work in a more nurturing and truly collaborative way than men. These feminist directors share that point of view which they associate with their gender and not necessarily with their feminist ideologies. Keiley’s rehearsal process is an extreme example of nurturing. She bakes cookies for her cast and “pours … love into them” in an effort to create “a gentle place to be.” She feels that she has “a privilege … that straight men don’t have” in that she can be physically affectionate with her actors without the fear of being perceived as sexually aggressive. Weiss also brings “a level of compassion” into a rehearsal space that she
connects to being female. Chevrier even states that because women actually share their bodies when pregnant, they are more comfortable with a less possessive and more sharing environment in rehearsal. Although all the women do basic table work, they also use different ways to explore a piece, such as improvisation, game playing, and personal image exercises that they believe are less often found in male directors’ rehearsals.

This perception that Canadian women directors are more collaborative in nature than their male counterparts is echoed by both British and American women directors. Manfull, after her interviews with British women directors about their rehearsal processes, concludes, “Exploration, experimentation, improvisation, play, search for truth – all are part of their quests…. None of them dictates or sees her role as associated, in any way, with power, authority, or control” (110). Daniels discovered a similar perspective among American women directors: “[they] believe the emphasis on the importance of being truly open to contribution from other artists is more common among women directors” (101).

Chevrier attributes these gender differences in rehearsals to the different expectations that are imposed on directors based on gender. She believes that many men try to work collaboratively in rehearsal, but that they are unable to completely relax in this kind of environment. Society has branded the drive to succeed so deeply on their psyches that they always need to feel that they are controlling the outcome. Whereas women are “almost expected” to fail and so are not as afraid of relinquishing complete control. Daniels also encountered evidence of men’s struggle between collaboration and control when speaking to American women directors: “…while men have tended to acknowledge the need for collaboration, they have often seemed reluctant to truly give over much of their control to the group process. This need to stay in control seems to make their process less conducive to true
collaboration” (101). American director Sharon Ott offers the following description of the difference between women’s and men’s conceptions of collaboration:

Women really are a little more apt to be collaborative in their general notion of how things should be done than men. I don’t know why that is, but I do believe it’s true. Responsibility is shared laterally. Women are particularly comfortable with that, and not as likely to want to assume a hierarchical order with them at the top but rather a more lateral order that, if they’re the leader, has them at the center. It’s a circle radiating out from something as opposed to a line going from bottom to top. Sometimes that can be problematic because I think that society still is based on a hierarchical behavior model or organizing principle. (qtd in Daniels 104)

However, in what sounds like a contradiction, the Canadian women directors all also agree that the quality of leadership is essential for a good director. They balance the ideas of collaboration and leadership by clearly describing what leadership means to them. “I see leadership very much as guiding,” is how McIntyre defines the term, while for Dunn leadership translates into being clear with actors about what you conceive for a production. Chevrier equates leadership with strong preparation for rehearsals; then she brings in specific ideas with which they can play. Even Weiss, who readily admits that her directing style is “very amorphous,” concedes that eventually she alone makes the final decisions. All of them are clear that they do not define leadership as being autocratic while at the same time they accept that the ultimate decisions for a production are theirs.

It is interesting that while these directors are very secure in their abilities, they have all had their leadership challenged at some point. It is difficult to determine whether this is
because of their less dictatorial directing style or the simple fact that they are women, but each recounted incidents where their authority had been tested. Not surprisingly, these confrontations were usually initiated by men, whether actors, designers, or technical crew. Unfortunately, this type of experience is not unique to Canada. All the British women directors Manfull interviewed related similar situations, as did Daniels’s American women. However, the American women added that they are often perceived as the stereotypical shrew when they exert their power: “they respond negatively to a woman who can take control, especially when she uses behaviours that are recognized as expected and exemplary in a male authority figure” (Daniels 63). This sense of being seen as a harpy was not raised by either the British or Canadian women.

In an effort to avoid these problems, each woman has developed a way to establish her authority from the beginning of the rehearsal period. Keiley uses her height – over six feet – to her advantage while Chevrier, who is 5’5’’ tall, started wearing heels in rehearsal in an attempt to create a stronger physical presence. Dunn projects a very no-nonsense attitude and believes in the “hit early, hit hard” school of discipline. If she perceives that there is a problem, she addresses it immediately and forcefully. The methods used by these women highlight ingrained gender roles. Each woman reverts to stereotypically masculine attributes when she wants to exude authority. Size, a strong physical presence, and an authoritarian attitude expressed in metaphors of violence are the tools on which they fall back. Knowles asserts that traditionally “directors are most often trained to function within rehearsal processes as autocrats” (Reading 25), so it may be inevitable that women theatre artists trained within this system respond to a challenge by exerting “existing power differentials” (Reading 27).
The Directors’ Approaches to a Canonical Text

Transgressing or normalizing social structures is seen in the work of the five Canadian feminist women directors interviewed on specific texts of the traditional Western canon. Each director approached her play with specific gender issues in mind. However, their explorations were different as were the ways in which their work addressed different feminist issues. Dunn and McIntyre both addressed the idea of gender construction: Dunn through objectification and cross-dressing, and McIntyre through a social and cultural exploration. Weiss was also interested in the construction of gender, but used it as a springboard to examine gender inequality and the fear of powerful women. Chevrier’s production was not involved with gender construction itself, but instead explored how society determines the gender expectations upon which the construction is built. Keiley, however, approached The Seagull from such a unique perspective that she did not engage with any exploration of gender construction or social expectations. It is interesting that most of these women who fall into the moderate liberal feminist category clearly address the material feminist concern about the conditions that produce gender. At the same time, the majority of them directed productions that, on the surface at least, appeared to be more conventional than radical in their interpretation, which situates them in the liberal feminist vein. This may be an unconscious enactment of their fear of being perceived as too political. They seem to have absorbed the moderate theatrical perspective that is deemed profitable by producers of mainstream theatre.

In her production of The Merchant of Venice, Dunn wanted to expose the narrow-minded view of Portia as an object who fulfills the traditional passive position to which
women are relegated. Ultimately, she linked objectification and gender construction together in her exploration. Dunn had Portia’s first entrance fulfill common expectations by having an “incredibly beautiful actress in this incredibly beautiful dress” entering to “this beautiful music.” Portia embodied the quintessential object as the audience gazed at her loveliness. Once the image was fixed in the audience’s minds, Dunn had Portia rip off the glittering dress to symbolize her rejection of social dictates and traditional expectations. Dunn challenged the audience to see the customary image of the beautiful, passive Portia as an elaborate construction and to understand that this construction had no intrinsic connection to Shakespeare’s Portia other than as a traditional expectation. Through this staging, Portia’s construction also became a metaphor for gender construction itself. If this time-honoured image of the passive beauty is exposed as a fabrication and not reality, then traditional notions and expectations of woman in general become suspect.

Further challenges to the construction of gender are actually inherent in the play in that Portia returns dressed as a man during the courtroom scene. It is important to note that, without question, everyone in the scene accepts her as a man. Even her lover, Bassanio, is completely unaware until Portia reveals to him at the end of the play that she was disguised as the Doctor of Law. That no one recognizes that Portia is the Doctor supports, in theory at least, the notion of how easily gender can be created. As Marjorie Garber writes, cross-dressing “…only brings to the surface the fact that all theatrical gender assignments are, in a way, ungrounded and contingent” (180). However, this easy gender creation is problematized by whether or not the audience also fails to recognize Portia as the doctor. If they do recognize her, and it is most likely that they do, it could underscore how the ‘essential’
qualities of woman cannot be hidden. If they do not, the final revelation will be an equal surprise to them, thus causing the spectators to question their own ideas about gender.

While Dunn commented that O’Connell threw herself into the opportunity to play a man, she did not mention whether the audience believed O’Connell was the doctor or realized she was Portia in disguise. None of the reviews of the production referred to this issue either. This may be because the reviewers were already familiar with the play and therefore already knew it was Portia in drag. However, here it may be worth reiterating Micheline Wandor’s belief that “cross-dressing, in whatever theatrical form….shows up some of the ridiculous constraints which define femininity and masculinity” (172). This was definitely something Dunn wanted to address in her production.

McIntyre’s production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* placed Blanche at the centre and it became Blanche’s “story of decay” rather than Stanley’s story of victory over Blanche. McIntyre wanted to explore how gender is constructed through social and cultural expectations. She believes that social demands create a fragmented woman. This specular woman reflects the multifaceted expectations of society, but does not embody them. She is merely disjointed parts that are unable to fuse. Ultimately, this fragmented woman becomes lost in the society that creates her; the product and process of gender construction become indistinguishable. McIntyre’s *Streetcar* examined what happens to a woman when the cultural construction begins to crack and finally shatters. She now has no place in society and is, at the end of the day, hidden away in order to continue the social illusion of what a woman is. No one helps her, not even her sister Stella. They no longer recognize her as part of their world because she no longer reflects it.
McIntyre underscored the theme of fragmentation through both costume and set design. Blanche’s costumes became less and less precise and more and more disorganized as the play progressed to illustrate the disintegration of the Southern Belle image she initially reflected. As the illusion dissolved, so did the structure of her costume. Also, the occasional transparency of the set walls destabilized the notion of ‘real’ and clearly articulated how the world, and by extension its gendered components, are created through expectations and illusion.

In her production of *Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth*, Weiss also addressed gender construction and challenged stereotypical expectations of women. By having Patti Allan play both female and male parts, Weiss destabilized the idea of gender essentialism. However, unlike O’Connell in *Merchant*, Allan played both gender roles without elaborate costuming or makeup. She moved fluidly between roles with only small changes to denote a new character without drawing attention to a change in gender. Therefore, while Weiss was exposing gender as a construction, she emphasized gender similarity instead of difference. Allan was able to embody the power traditionally associated with the male subject, but not the female object. This, in turn, pushed the audience to see both women and men as equally active participants in the world of the play and to question gender inequality in their own society.

Chevrier’s *The “Vaudevilles” of Chekhov* was perhaps the most traditional of the productions examined in terms of staging. Both costumes and set were historically accurate and the translation of the text by the two Canadian playwrights was faithful to the original plots if not to Chekhov’s “insight into the foibles of humanity” (Armstrong 30). While Chevrier linked the four one-act plays through the convention of an acting troupe putting on
a show, she did not challenge the integrity of the plays themselves. Instead, she highlighted the theme of the social expectations about love found within the plays through comical intermezzi that became short love stories in their own right. This Brechtian technique of clearly exposing the plays as fiction as opposed to reality helped to create distance for the audience to question what was being presented. Also having all the actors wear the Chekhov mask at some point, regardless of gender, further highlighted the idea of a constructed reality by playfully constructing of the playwright. Thus, the theme of the social construction of “tension between men and women and that particular dynamic in a love context” was subtly emphasized.

If Chevrier’s production was the most conventionally staged, Keiley’s was the most original. Her attempt to create “a perfect piece of theatre” by using the precision of a musical score eliminated any resemblance to a traditional presentation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. She reduced the standard fourteen-character play to the four main protagonists which subsequently balanced the play in terms of gender representation. The accompanying Atlantic String Quartet was also gender balanced with two women and two men who played instruments representing characters of the same gender. This complete disregard for conventional staging can be seen as a feminist subversion in itself as it does not fulfill the expectations associated with this canonical text. Also the fact that the reduced numbers of characters coupled with the gender balance were able to capture the themes of the play put the female and male characters on an even footing in terms of their importance.

However, it is difficult to attribute any deeper feminist exploration to this production. Although Keiley’s staging was unique, her work on the text of *The Seagull* was very unadventurous. She framed the text work with Stanislavski-like objectives and actions which
did not specifically address any of the social structures or gender biases inherent in the play. She also assigned the instruments to characters based on pitch – the higher women’s voices were played by violin and viola while the men’s lower voices were played by cello and bass – without exploring possible variations or their implications. Keiley’s drive to expose the music of the play’s language left the social expectations expressed in that language unexplored.

While Keiley’s production was the most untraditional visually, Weiss’s production was the most overtly feminist of those examined. Interestingly, the critical response to it seems to support Donkin and Clement’s assertion that “only the activity of resistance will” be seen as political (2). The journalistic and critical coverage for these five productions was as varied as the shows themselves. There were no reviews for McIntyre’s presentation while reviews of Keiley’s work commented on it in a strictly musical rather than theatrical context. Chevrier and Dunn’s shows were previewed and reviewed quite extensively and very favourably, but without any mention of the directors’ feminist perspectives. Only Weiss’s show – the most overtly feminist – was reviewed negatively and not just in production terms. First, the reviewer challenged the validity of the feminist perspective of the production by suggesting that it should have focussed on “the…more interesting question of the psychic life of a man” instead (Dykk, “Macbeth” D7). Then he concluded with a stinging comment that condemned the very existence of the show: “People should refrain from recounting their dreams in public” (Dykk, “Macbeth” D7). That the critic could so widely miss the point of the show and at the same time so easily dismiss Weiss’s exploration as unworthy of his time exposes his deep-seated bias. This critic should have refrained from recounting his intolerance in public.
This assemblage of the five women directors’ perspectives and responses raises some interesting questions. What impact does the differentiation between feminist and other work have on the acceptance of feminist ideology in Canadian theatre? Why do these women directors avoid always using the feminist label? Can using the liminal space of performance actually have an impact on the reception of canonical texts? Is it possible to find equality within a system that is populated by those trained in male-dominated theatre practice? These questions are explored in Chapter 7.
Chapter Seven

Conclusions

The substantial amount of theatre based on feminist analyses ... has not been incorporated in any significant way into any level of the institution of Canadian theatre.

Lynn Fernie (59)

So what conclusions can be drawn from the experiences and work of these five Canadian women? All five fall generally into a moderate feminist category. They are all working within the current Canadian theatre system and although they acknowledge its weaknesses, they are not attempting to radically alter or abandon it. Each has found a place within this arrangement that provides them a way of expressing their creativity while at the same time articulating their feminist perspectives within the work. For two, McIntyre and Keiley, establishing their own theatre companies (Sarasvàti Productions and Artistic Fraud) has provided the major creative outlet supplemented by freelance work. For another two, Dunn and Chevrier, freelance work combined with periods of the Artistic Directorship of previously founded companies (Dunn currently at Touchstone Theatre and Chevrier previously at the Great Canadian Theatre Company) has given them the freedom to explore work of interest to them. This combination has also situated each of them higher up within the hierarchy of Canadian theatre directors of both genders. Finally, Weiss has found that even after running a major alternative theatre company (Tamahnous) and co-founding and eventually directing the Women In View festival along with freelance work, it is the academic sphere at the University of Alberta that provides her with real artistic freedom.
However, these women’s relatively moderate feminist stance does not preclude them from addressing issues of a more material feminist nature. In particular, society’s participation in the construction of the Canadian woman has been at the forefront of the work explored here. Each of the directors except Keiley specifically targeted gender construction and/or the impact of society’s expectations on that construction. Dunn used provocative visual images in *Merchant* such as Portia’s ripping off her dress which symbolized the social restraints imposed upon her. She also created an alternative all-female world with the addition of unscripted ladies-in-waiting to highlight the patriarchal structure of the society that was deciding Portia’s fate. McIntyre refocused the interpretation of *Streetcar* away from Stanley’s sexual power and towards Blanche’s disintegration from social butterfly to social outcast because of her inability to sustain the image required. Weiss exposed the limitations society imposes on women’s authority by having traditional male power embodied by a woman. Finally, Chevrier employed Brechtian alienation techniques to clearly expose the theatrical construction of Chekhov’s one-act plays. In this way, she undermined realism’s pretence of reflecting reality and exposed the social and cultural edifice that it is.

Even though these directors explored specifically feminist issues in their direction of these canonical texts, only Weiss considered her production feminist. Even more confusing is that each of these women made a clear distinction between their feminist work and other work while at the same time acknowledging that their feminist perspectives influence all their work. So why are they avoiding a feminist label? They appear to feel a need to circumvent being categorized as a feminist director in order to get work across genres and subject matter. In other words, being considered a feminist director further limits a woman’s already limited employment opportunities.
This leaves feminist directors with a choice: create work that is publicized as feminist and operate in the margins of Canadian theatre, or express their feminist perspectives subtly and without public comment to ‘pass’ in mainstream theatre. Creating expressly feminist work may lock them into a career category that does not allow for movement as a director into the higher-paying A houses. This appears to be the case with McIntyre and to some extent Weiss who have accepted their low status in the mainstream director hierarchy. Creating subtly feminist work that is not described as such may provide career advancement but ultimately results in the feminist perspective being unrecognized. This is seen in Dunn and Chevrier’s work. They are advancing in their careers monetarily and are reaching what is considered the upper echelons of directing in Canada. However, they have tempered their feminist views to a point where those perspectives have gone unnoticed in media reviews. This lack of awareness is compounded further by the fact that the directors have not made their perspectives part of the publicity for their shows. Since reviewers are not prompted to look for a feminist stance in the work, they blithely presume there is not one. This assumption positions feminist text analysis as something apart from ‘normal’ theatre rather than seeing it as an integral part of the work for many directors.

The media response to the canonical texts explored in this thesis substantiates this analysis. Other than the ridicule heaped on Weiss’s overtly feminist reinterpretation of Macbeth, the predominantly male critics either ignored (as with McIntyre) or completely missed (as with Dunn and Chevrier) the statements being made by these women. Without cues from the directors in interviews or in the publicity materials, the reviewers assumed they were watching non-feminist productions and continued along traditional analytical paths.
Therefore they missed the opportunity to embrace feminist interpretations of classic plays as another exciting example of how theatre remains vital and relevant in society.

The reviewers’ ignorance of the feminist perspectives presented in these productions is further compounded by a general critical bias that ‘women’s work’ is not relevant or of interest to a wide theatre audience. This bias continues to marginalize feminist productions and develops a vicious cycle for media criticism. It pushes overtly feminist productions to the edges of Canadian theatre by leaving them unknown to the general public. Then because the exposure to them is limited, they do not garner large audiences. Finally because attendance at these productions is small, critics do not review them because they are obviously not of interest to their wider readership. Therefore, critics help create and then reinforce the marginalization of feminist productions. However, the definition suggested by the directors’ composite explanations of feminism – feminism advocates the progress of women, the attainment of equal opportunities as well as equal representation, and the ability to see issues from a woman’s point of view – hardly seems like a radical perspective. It would not scare off most audience members and is certainly not irrelevant to an audience the majority of which is actually women.

Where this leaves the impact of productions of canonical texts directed by Canadian women who self-define as feminist is difficult to assess. It is clear that each director used the liminal space of performance to offer alternative perspectives of the characters and their motivations in order to shed light on the construction of gender and some of the elements that determine that construction. It is also clear that for the most part the critics did not acknowledge their work. However, it is impossible to determine the impact of these explorations on individual audience members. As a result of comments from the audience,
many of the directors felt that what they wanted to communicate through their production was understood. While the directors spoke to only a small section of that audience and probably were not present for the entire run of the show, their use of liminal space appears to have had some effect. This is an important point to acknowledge considering that the political intentions of oppositional directors can “be contained or subverted by apparently neutral processes that nevertheless allow the ‘common sense’ of a naturalized dominant ideology to speak through the exploratory process as culturally transcendent truth” (Knowles, *Reading* 28).

The effectiveness of using liminal space for feminist explorations may be minimal in these instances. Yet the continuing impact of these canonical texts on audiences and theatre artists alike is vast. And the indoctrination into the importance of these texts begins in theatre training programs across the country. Ric Knowles argues that the training aspect of theatre – how professionals both female and male have been trained in a hierarchical, male-theorist dominated academy (*Reading* 24) – makes us continually, and at times unconsciously, fall back onto the idea that canonical texts are sacrosanct. However, there is a way to change this pattern of theatre education.

First, canon creation must be demystified and its effects acknowledged. Students are given the impression that some universal and impartial judge of what is good has given these texts the status they have achieved. They are not made aware that the selection of these texts is a reflection of the preferences and prejudices of theatre experts who were producing anthologies in response to the demands of an expanding educational landscape. Students must also be made conscious of the fact that these experts have been almost exclusively male and thus women playwrights are underrepresented in the canon, but they are not nonexistent.
Then the effects of creating a canon should be discussed, particularly its influence on popular theatrical tastes and the impact of the continual exclusion of women theatre artists.

Second, canonical texts must be recognized as products of their cultures and not treated as if they exist in some apolitical universality. The artistry of these texts will not necessarily diminish when they are contextualized, but the social prejudices and gender constructs embedded within them will be exposed. This should generate a fuller understanding of the texts and of the interdependent relationship between theatre and the society in which it is created.

Third, when a canonical text is taught, time should be given to discuss a variety of interpretations and theatrical stagings. If this were done, students would become conscious of the fact that there is no ‘right’ way to interpret or stage a play and would begin to engage with plays in ways that are personally significant. They would realize that theatre remains relevant in an ever changing social and cultural sphere through presenting a multiplicity of perspectives.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the under-representation of women in academic positions, which is “in keeping with the trends found in the larger labour force” (Burton 103). The number of women academics across all disciplines is growing, but there is still a large disparity in gender representation especially at the rank of Full Professor. This lack of adequate female role models for female theatre students “reinforces the socialized sense of inferiority that women often experience” (Burton 104). The lack of adequate female role models for both female and male theatre students undermines the validity of women’s perspectives in theatre. Thus the marginalization of ‘women’s work’ is reinforced in our academic institutions.
And finally, feminist women in the theatre arts need to stand up and be counted, not shy away from the label in fear of professional repercussions. Exactly what makes theatre work feminist has never really been addressed and, as a result, ‘feminist theatre’ in Canada continues to be connected solely to theatre companies like Nightwood and not to individual practice. Therefore, feminist theatre remains this unknown, disturbing, and possibly belligerent entity that mainstream theatre does not know what to do with and so ignores. If feminist theatre artists were to show the breadth and frequency of their explorations, feminism would emerge as another framework within which people could think about theatre, just like other political ideologies. Lynn Fernie’s statement at the beginning of this chapter that Canadian theatre has not significantly incorporated feminist analyses was made in 1985; the sad reality is that over twenty years later it is still true.

Feminist interpretations of canonical texts actively participate in social change. They are also positive indicators of the function of theatre in our culture. Theatre creates a space where we can come together to retell stories that have been important in our society. Feminist-inspired performances of canonical plays create a liminal space where the retelling of these stories can be made relevant to the half of society that has been previously omitted from the discourse. Contextualizing canonical texts and welcoming new feminist interpretations of them will begin to address the fact that gender is still one of the greatest determinants when it comes to a director’s getting work, getting reviewed, and getting taken seriously.
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APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background

To start, I’d like to find out about your background

1. Where were you born, where did you grow up, and where do you live now?
2. How did you get started in theatre and what kind of training – academic and/or experiential – do you have?
3. How did you get started directing?
4. Who or what has been a major influence on you as a director?

Feminism Background

Now, I’d like to ask you some general questions about feminism and gender.

1. How do you define feminism and feminist?
2. Do you think of yourself as a feminist director or a director who is a feminist?
3. Does being a woman and a feminist affect your work opportunities, the scripts offered to you, or the scripts you choose?
4. How does being a feminist director or a director who is a feminist influence casting and your rehearsal process?
5. The characteristic of leadership “is the most often acknowledged quality of a good director” (Daniels 45). Do you agree with this statement?
   a. Do you feel being a woman has influenced how your authority is received?
   b. Do you do anything consciously to define your authority initially to avoid problems during the production?
6. Do you think defining yourself as a feminist has ever impacted critical response to your productions through reviews, previews or publicity opportunities and/or experiences?

Production Specific Questions

Now, let’s move on to questions about the specific production we’ve chosen to discuss.

1. How and when did the opportunity for this work arise?
2. Why did you accept the job?
3. Were you familiar with the play before hand?
4. What surfaced as important themes, images, symbols, etc. after reading it (again)?
5. What influenced your decision to present the play in a traditional or non-traditional way?
6. Did the geographical place of the production (theatre, city, province) influence your choices? If so, how?
7. Could you take me through initial thoughts about casting, set, costume design, etc.
8. Tell me about the rehearsal process
   a. How did you structure your rehearsals?
   b. What were your expectations for the actors?
   c. Were the characters’ genders points of discussion and/or motivation? For example, “A woman (or a man) would respond in a specific way or want a specific outcome in this situation.”
9. What was the critical response to the production and was it mirrored in audience attendance?
10. Did you receive any specific feedback on the production that you could clearly connect to your gender or feminist perspectives?

**Reflections**

1. Did you feel that the issues you wanted to address in this production were understood?
2. What, if anything, would you have done differently and why?
3. Did doing this specific work have a personal or professional impact?
4. Being able now to look back at the process and production, would you do it again?
APPENDIX II

Consent Form
Feminist Canadian Women Directors:
Using the Canon for Social Change

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Jerry Wasserman, Professor
Depts. English/Theatre
University of British Columbia
(604) 822-4485

Co-Investigator(s):

Sarah Ferguson, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Theatre
University of British Columbia
(604) 422-8220

This research will be used towards a Doctoral degree at the University of British Columbia. It will be part of a thesis which is a public document to which all will have access.

Purpose:

The purpose of this work is to look for interconnecting threads between the interviews I will have with Canadian women directors who define themselves as feminists and who have worked with at least one text from the traditional Western Theatre canon. These threads will provide a starting place to understand how Canadian women see themselves (or not) through these popular and oft produced texts, and how that may speak to how they see themselves in more general terms.

Study Procedures:

If you consent to be part of the study, a time will be agreed upon during which you will be asked a series of interview questions about your background, your work in general, and then about a specific production of a canonical text. The questions will be sent to you prior to the interview.

There would be one interview of approximately 1-2 hours with the possibility of a follow-up interview to clarify any points that arise. In total, your time commitment,
including interview, review of transcript, and any needed follow-up, will not exceed more than 5 hours. All interviews will be audio taped.

Also, you will also be asked to supply copies of any documentation in your possession regarding the specific production such as director observations and interpretations, notes from design and/or production meetings, casting calls, rehearsal observations, etc.

Confidentiality:

Each participant’s identity will be clearly established and all quotations taken from an interview will be attributed to the interviewee. However, the interviews’ audiotapes will be kept in a locked file drawer and the transcribed documents will be password protected for security.

Also, each participant will be provided with a copy of their interview transcription and will be given the opportunity to address any issue(s) they feel should be clarified.

Contact for information about the study:
If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Sarah Ferguson at (604) 422-8220 or her supervisor, Dr. Jerry Wasserman at (604) 822-4485.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:
If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Further, the results of this research may be used for future work such as further research papers and/or a book. Your signature indicates that you consent to this possible future use of the data.
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Printed Name of the Subject
# Certificate of Approval

**Principal Investigator:** Wasserman, J.  
**Department:** English  
**Number:** B04-0781

**Institution(s) Where Research Will Be Carried Out:**

**Co-Investigators:** Ferguson, Sarah, English

**Sponsoring Agencies:**

**Title:** Feminist Canadian Women Directors: Using the Canon for Social Change

**Approval Date:** Dec 9 2004  
**Term (Years):** 1

**Certification:**

The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the Committee and the experimental procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

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*Approval of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:*

Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair,  
Dr. Susan Rowley, Associate Chair

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures.