

***LES BELLES-SOEURS:***  
**AN ORATORIO FOR 15 WOMEN**

by

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## **Abstract**

Through the following pages I will catalogue my directorial process of researching, rehearsing and reflecting on my thesis production of *Les Belles-soeurs* by Michel Tremblay. The production ran at the Frederic Wood Theatre from March 16 to April 1, 2017 and was a critical and popular success. *Les Belles-soeurs* utilized the talents of fifteen women actors from the UBC theatre program, as well as student designers, production personnel and crew. This written thesis will attempt to illustrate my creative choices, script analysis, and staging ideas in relation to my research, and in collaboration with the other artists and design team. An effort will be made to highlight what worked well, what changed, and what perhaps should have changed. There are also notes from my Director's Diary beginning at the start of my Masters work. These notes chronicle, over two years, my learning curve here at UBC and are included because they informed the process of my thesis production. In addition to a detailed analysis of my process with *Les Belles-soeurs*, therefore, there is also some analysis of other plays that led up to my thesis production. All of this informed my work on *Les Belles-soeurs* and are reflected upon within this document as part of my Masters work.

## **Lay Summary**

This written thesis will detail my directorial process of researching, rehearsing and reflecting on my thesis production of *Les Belles-soeurs* by Michel Tremblay. The production ran at the Frederic Wood Theatre from March 16 to April 1, 2017 and was a critical and popular success.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original, unpublished and independent work by the author, Diane Brown.

This document comprises the written portion of a project that includes the preparation, analysis, rehearsal and performance of Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* and presented as a part of the UBC Department of Theatre and Film's 2016 – 2017 season.



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*For my beautiful Dylan, forever the light of my life.*

*Anthony, my love.*

*My mom, Leah, who first inspired me.*

## **Introduction: Why *Les Belles-soeurs*?**

I chose this seminal French-Canadian work because it furthers and enhances the work of my professional life. As Artistic Director of Ruby Slippers Theatre, I have spent much of the past 26 years commissioning English language translations of contemporary Quebecois plays and then directing them. Some acclaimed productions of English-language translations I have directed include *After Me* by Christian Bégin, translated by Leanna Brodie; *Down Dangerous Passes Road* by Michel Marc Bouchard, translated by Linda Gaboriau; *The Winners* by François Archambault, translated by Shelley Tepperman; *Life Savers* by Serge Boucher, translated by Shelley Tepperman; and *You Will Remember Me* and *The Leisure Society* by François Archambault, translated by Bobby Theodore.

For nearly three decades Ruby Slippers Theatre and I have been at the forefront in Vancouver as the premiere producers of French-Canadian plays in English translation (for a time, another local company – Pink Ink Theatre – also shared this passion, but their mandate has since changed). But sometimes you need to return to the beginning to build on the future. *Les Belles-soeurs* is the root of a uniquely Quebecois drama, and the key to understanding much of the work that has come since. It is the birthplace and the heart of the Quebec “new wave”.

*Les Belles-soeurs* is a two-act play written by Michel Tremblay in 1965. It premiered in French in 1968 and Canadian theatre has never been the same since. One of the most ground-breaking elements of the play is that it dared to use a working-class Quebec dialect or “joual” in the original French production; furthermore, it put 15 working-class women talking about working-class issues on upper middle-class stages.

Written during Quebec's Quiet Revolution, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* paints a brutally honest portrait of his childhood neighbourhood in east Montreal and the women he grew up around. It has since been translated into over 30 languages and is Tremblay's most popular work.

"I want to put a bomb in the family cell. I hate what the family did to me, and the people of my country" (Usmiani, *Tremblay* 52).

Tremblay wrote the play as an act of protest, unabashedly exposing these working-class women's misery and oppression, humour and humanity, religious hypocrisy and hopelessness.

"One woman complaining is pitiful. Five women saying they are unhappy with their lives at the same time is the beginning of a revolution" (Anthony 282).

*Les Belles-soeurs* is not only still relevant in its searing indictment of systemic sexism (Quebec women at that time were considered dependants, and so were not allowed to divorce, to access safe and legal abortions, or to enjoy equal rights under the law), it is also a powerful illustration of our envy economy in action, and how status is gained and maintained within the tribe.

Everything is a competition, even who is most unhappy.

In this era of Trump, where racism, misogyny, and other hate-values of rudderless capitalism are being normalized, it is disturbing to realize how timely this piece is, how well it reveals what "everyone out for themselves" looks like, and at what cost to the characters personally.

*Les Belles-soeurs* premiered at Théâtre du Rideau Vert on August 8, 1968. It was directed by André Brassard. The English version, translated by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco, had its first run at the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto on April 3, 1973. The English production was



also directed and designed by André Brassard. It was subsequently produced across Canada, the first Quebec play ever to receive that level of recognition.

When the play exploded onto the stage in 1968, Quebec audiences were treated to the fireworks of many new theatrical innovations. The use of a working-class dialect, “joual”, and a realistic setting depicting working poor Quebecers forced people to look at themselves as in a mirror and cringe at their lives. Moreover, in addition to demystifying the idea of the holy French-Canadian family, audiences were confronted with alienation techniques à la Brecht, with choruses and direct address monologues while others “froze” onstage. The alienation techniques were used to prompt individual self-reflection and critical thought, raising awareness and discomfort within audiences.

The history of theatre in Quebec can be traced back to Le Théâtre de Neptune, a masque written by Marc Lescarbot in 1606. It was the first piece of theatre ever produced in New France and likely the first theatrical production in North America. Then, on February 1, 1694, Bishop Jean-Baptiste de La Croix de Chevrieres de Saint-Vallier censured a planned production of *Tartuffe*, Moliere's famous religious satire. Much later, in 1948, Gratien Gélinas premiered *Tit-Coq*, a play that reflected the reality of life in French Canada as opposed to that of the “mother country.” It was a significant evolutionary step. In 1968, kicked off by the explosive premiere of *Les Belles-soeurs*, a much more aggressive era of Quebecois theatre was born, revolutionary in theme, language idiom and technique. A flurry of controversy surrounded the plays opening in French and in English due to the use of “joual”, the progressive theatricality of the piece, and its indictment of the institution of the family and the Church. (Wasserman).

As such, *Les Belles-soeurs* is widely considered to be the catalyst for the new wave of Quebec

drama and one of the most controversial events in Canadian theatre history. In fact, in 1972, the then minister of cultural affairs did not allow *Les Belles-soeurs* to play in Paris, as it was invited to do so, and sent instead the innocuous *Yesterday the Children Were Dancing* by Gèlinas (Usmiani, *Tremblay* 4).

Tremblay is the grandfather of modern Quebec drama, beginning with *Les Belles-soeurs*, and is credited for opening the floodgates for the next generation of Quebec playwrights who have subsequently been translated into many languages and produced around the world. *Les Belles-soeurs* gave birth to a “new Quebecois theatre, both realistic and revolutionary,” and the task of theatre became “to denounce the past and to liberate – as well as create – a sense of identity” (Usmiani, *Tremblay* 13). Shockingly, this seminal Canadian play has to date never been professionally produced in Vancouver.

*Les Belles-soeurs* changed the way we, Canadians, think about ourselves, and how we do theatre by dealing a serious blow to the power of the Church and the ruling English as to what could and does go onstage. It married a brutal realism with a heightened style rich with choral speaking, huge emotional breadth, and sudden breaks to the fourth wall. It savagely and honestly portrayed Canadian families like they had never been seen before, exposing the brutality of our capitalist culture and its resulting poverty class, French/English racism, ageism, and sexism. This play stands today as one of the most robust and most produced Canadian plays, and Michel Tremblay’s most popular. And it seems that putting 15 women onstage is still, sadly, extraordinary.



Figure 1: Les Belles-sœurs hear the arrival of Thérèse and Olivine. N. Backerman, S. Hicks, T. Scott, B. Henderson, R. Denis, T. Grauman, S. Michaud. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

## **Director's Diary, First Year**

### **September 2015**

I am very excited and honoured to be here. As a seasoned practitioner, there is much for me to learn academically, and I feel so fortunate for this opportunity to deepen and expand myself as an artist and to take the time to simply consider my craft.

Meetings with Stephen Malloy have revolved around text analysis. The minutiae of language and circumstances within very small plays have opened a large arena of heightened awareness for me. He and the faculty seem very supportive of my thesis project, *Les Belles-soeurs*, and how it feeds directly into and out of my professional work.

We are embarking on structured text analysis of three French-Canadian plays for my directed studies this term, à la Francis Hodge. I realize how intuitively I work and welcome revisiting this concrete structure buried in my tool box. I am also enjoying – among other things – *The Fundamentals of Play Directing*, particularly the section on Composition. It has been very useful for me right now, as I plan and attend design meetings for my upcoming production at the Cultch, *You Will Remember Me* by François Archambault, and think about staging for *Les Belles-soeurs*.

Tomson Highway spoke for an hour at UBC today. Such an elegant speaker – I could have listened to him for hours. Such talent, grace, humour.

### **October 2015**

Looking at various versions of script analysis with Stephen Malloy, as well as action analysis, which I am finding particularly useful with the more poetic, non-linear scripts (eg. *The List* by Jennifer Tremblay, translated by Shelley Tepperman).

The big takeaway: notice when something changes.

## **November 2015**

*You Will Remember Me*, by François Archambault and translated by Bobby Theodore; first week of rehearsals are done. The whole play has had a first pass, rough blocking of every scene. Now we will go back and deepen and adjust as our knowledge of these characters deepens, adding detail in week two. Week three will focus on further detailing and runs.

I pay a lot of attention to the first day of rehearsal and put a lot of pressure on myself to come in prepared and be able to provide answers to everyone's questions. I am a big believer in research-backed opinions regarding the play's hows and whys, information about the playwright, while still leaving some things open-ended that the company can explore together. With lots of research done on dementia and Quebec's recent history including the Quiet Revolution and the many referendums (which the play refers to a lot), I tried to establish a clear playing ground for our story to be set upon. The action of the play is disintegration: the lead character's mind, the family unit, and thus everyone's identity in relation to it (nicely mirroring Quebec's struggle for identity within Canada, which is a significant theme in the play.) My intent is to keep the conversation going and deepening, keep the research coming (from myself and from the company) and to display everything on the walls of the rehearsal hall. There has also been some research discussed and books made available on suicide and how it impacts family survivors.

Some of the themes of this French-Canadian play echo sentiments in *Les Belles-soeurs*, although there are decades between them (generational conflict; imploding nuclear family).

I feel that the first day went really well, and am exhausted/exhilarated by it.

I always work in a very intense way during rehearsals. There isn't a wasted moment or thought for me. Since starting the MFA program I am consciously trying to give myself little mental breaks not only for the sake of being alert and fresh, but also to ensure that I am working from a place of love and curiosity, not fear.

Establishing communication styles with each actor is challenging as most of these actors I have never worked with before. I am finding it the most challenging with the television actor in the room who is also the most alienated from their body and tends to work from the head up.

Strategy: I am stressing actions and politely asking "what are you doing?" or "what do you want?" to help clarify for this person and for all of them what exactly they are doing at any moment onstage. This I hope will help engage the actor's entire body and inspire specificity in their choices.

Stephen Malloy suggests that I remember why I cast this person in the first place, and focus on their strengths. Excellent advice. Things improve in this area.

I am paying much closer attention to the language I use in rehearsal, the exact words, and to the language in the scenes, deriving a lot of information from what the characters are actually saying (and in some instances, not saying) within the given circumstances. This is directly related to the work we have been doing in Stephen Malloy's class.

The design process has been ongoing for many months and I am very happy with how the sound and video designs are evolving. My set designer comes highly recommended and I would like to encourage more women in this generally male dominated field.

Rehearsals for *You Will Remember Me* are going well. Morale is high and people are digging deep, getting specific, and trusting me. I am happy with this positive and mature work environment. We work six days a week for at least eight hours a day.

Tech run through: All looks really good, except something is undermining the scene work...I can't put my finger on it. The fresh eyes of Stephen Malloy wonder if it is because the transitions are so well lit. I take the transition lights down by about 50% and it makes a tremendous difference regarding the impact of the scene work and supports a more seamless, flowing unravelling of the story.

## **December 2015**

The show has closed and I am delighted with the way the production turned out and was received. I am not thrilled with some aspects of the set, but I did manage to solve some of the set issues with lighting. In hindsight, I think the set needed to not be white and not so boxy. The painting on the floor did not have the desired impact I wanted, because it was not supported by anything else on the set, and I wondered if the reeds – depending on how they were lit – sometimes distracted.

Overall, though, this show was put together in a very deliberate and thoughtful way by myself and the whole team, and I am proud of the clarity and poetry we attained. Stephen Heatley remarked that the elements were well integrated and harmonious, a beautiful show. An audience member on opening said to me that it was a truly moving and mature production. I am thrilled the Gateway is picking up this production to showcase on their mainstage next season.

## January/February 2016

Tom's class on Stanislavski and Brecht is really interesting. I may actually be starting to understand The System. Some thoughts about this class:

*Re: Stanislavski:* Organic Truth: it seems to mean the actor putting his/her emotional and psychological experience into the role; that is, personal experience fused with text and direction and infused into action. Every thought is specified (inner logic and sequence.) Owning the Given Circumstances helps an actor breathe life into a role. The goal is to marry the actor's personal inner truth with the truth of the role: harmony.

Mise en scène emerges through a process, Stanislavski believed later, not dictated by the director. Earlier in his career he was a very authoritative director, coming into rehearsals with an entire production plan pre-made.

My understanding of the "Method of Physical Actions" has definitely evolved. The underlying philosophical idea is to lead an actor from the conscious to the unconscious in the goal of achieving believability onstage. The simple concrete action the actor chooses to perform "stirs the psychological side of the psychophysical act" (Moore 21) and results in lifelike behavior onstage that is engaging his mind, body and emotions.

Most significantly to me, though, has been our work around Active Analysis. This has been very impactful and a device I am planning to use. Here are some general thoughts I wrote down during our work on Active Analysis:

Theatre is action, not literature; acting is action, not emoting; character is revealed through action, not words. Therefore, it stands to reason that a character is defined by what they do, not what they say, nor by what other characters say about them, nor by what an actor thinks of the



character. However, a marriage of sorts occurs; the character emerges through the action, and the actor tries to own it. This requires that the actor bring as much of her/himself as possible to the role, investing her/himself personally as a component to the work. You don't have to have the personal experiences of the character, but you have to make links, use "what if" within the given circumstances, and be personally grounded in the character.

*Re: Brecht:* I loved reading and talking about "The Street Scene." It was a really clear demonstration of Brecht's ideas around theatre being a demonstration. The simplicity was helpful, too. It is easy to break down the components of epic theatre with this traffic accident metaphor. Moreover, it stressed the importance of accessibility to all by being on a street, by being "not too perfect." But that simplicity is somewhat misleading because what it also contains is "social causes seen in their causal relationships" in order to be able to critique "the highly involved incidents of the class war" (Willet 121).

What also strikes me and what I am taking away from this re-visitation of Brecht's work is that theatre is a demonstration *and* it is entertaining. To look critically at something is also *fun*. Brecht assumes that being intellectually engaged and conscious of the complexity and hypocrisy in the world is enjoyable. I quite agree, but not everyone embraces this notion.

Therefore, theatre can be socially instructive and fun. There are "nodes" in a play, places where the action could go this way or that – and Epic theatre makes it clear to the audience that a choice has been made at these crossroads. And it is asked of the audience to judge those choices, and to become conscious of the fact that other actions *were not* taken. This is also fun. It empowers the audience by inviting them to think.

The differences between Epic (Brecht's) theatre and Dramatic (Stanislavski's) theatre are numerous. It has been helpful to go back and read what they are. If Dramatic theatre is plot driven, then Epic is narrative. If Dramatic theatre presents a representation of reality that the audience is implicated in and encouraged to accept without thinking, and the audience identifies with the characters through pity and fear, then Epic Theatre presents an argument, ideas, and the audience is an outside observer encouraged to think critically and make choices. If Dramatic implicates the spectator in something, Epic makes him face something. If Dramatic takes the human being for granted, Epic makes him the subject of the inquiry. If Dramatic theatre suggests something, Epic theatre argues something. Scenes grow vs. montage; people feel vs. people make decisions; thought determines being vs. social being determines thought.

All this makes perfect sense when you are reminded of the fact that Brecht was a materialist Marxist rationalist who survived the First World War. Having witnessed atrocities at a young age and then the rise of Fascism in Germany in the 1930s, ultimately being forced to leave Germany in 1933, it's no wonder he wanted to make theatre where the ending was not inevitable, but changeable. With reason as his guide, he wanted to show the audience that they are complicit and that they have to make choices. He wanted his spectators to realize that their decisions impact the world around you, your neighbour, the girl down the street, the stranger across town, and so it is incumbent upon us all to pay attention and choose wisely. Not choosing is not a choice, it is a passive and harmful response supported, Brecht believed, by the philosophical infrastructure of dramatic theatre whose aim was to put its audience under an illusion of comfort and inevitability, of bourgeois helplessness.

Getting back to "fun", actually doing Brecht's plays is fun, partly because there's a lightness to them, a strong yet energetic rhythm, and then suddenly a song, or a declaration, or a choral piece,

and then on to something else. His cabaret training is very clear in the energy it takes to do his work, and the montage style he demands. The montage, as opposed to scenes spilling into each other and building over time, does not allow for long dramatic arcs to form, for a wave of emotional and psychological phenomena to cascade over us and “hypnotize” us. It does not allow us to get swept away or forget ourselves.

Brecht embraced the notion that directing is a collaboration with actors. The performers are just as respected and as significant as the director and everyone else. There seems to be a period of time when you observe and guide, and not until you are well into the process can you start to be a bit prescriptive as a director. Ann Bogart talks about when to dive in and when to hold back. There’s a thorough process of rehearsal.

But because Brecht didn’t *tell* people what to think, he was not really accepted by the Marxists. He wanted to illuminate choices with his work, not dictate them; he wanted to make people do the work themselves of coming to a rational decision. Doing that work of coming to a decision was part of the fun.

Working with the actors in the room with Active Analysis and utilizing Brechtian techniques was fabulous. It reminded me of when I was involved in producing and directing Brecht in the Park for many years. And although the production side of it was often a nightmare, we had great fun in rehearsals with the plays. And I had forgotten that when it really makes you laugh, there’s a price you pay – it kind of hurts. And when it really makes you sad, there’s a kind of pathos at work that defies sentimentality. There are so many examples of this, but the obvious one that leaps to mind is Pirate Jenny’s song in *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht and Weill’s masterpiece socialist critique of a capitalist world.

Anyway, back to our classroom experiment. When we worked on *Rex* and asked the actors to do the exercise of simply stating “Jen said” or “Eric said” out to the audience at the end of their lines, the results were startling. I was immediately taken with the change in rhythm; it was made strange. It was slower and much more deliberate. Things took on an increased importance, and I wondered what the characters were not saying to each other. I was instantly suspicious that all was not well, and the everyday scene of a couple having dinner together was suddenly loaded with stakes. This amazed me and I will certainly be using this exercise as an alienation technique.

Another thing I noticed during this first exercise was that the rhythm increased as the emotional stakes of the scene increased, and this provided a lot of humour. The running neutral commentary contrasted with the characters’ explosiveness, and this made me see all the more clearly that they were being ridiculous. I was not inside it with them, empathizing, but outside it thinking critically, and enjoying that privilege.

This juxtaposition of emotional characters and rational narration coupled with the strong rhythm did not allow us to get seduced into feeling for one character or another, but rather allowed us to hear the arguments and to look at it from a distance and recognize the foolishness at work, possibly even laugh at it, enjoying it while judging it.

The third exercise we did was to do the scene on its feet with the “said Jen” “said Eric” in their minds. The actors maintained this for a time, and when they did manage it, there was an undeniable clarity to their actions, a forcefulness that had come out of the third person exercise. Starting from zero with each line, with no emotional momentum to ride, demands a kind of clear attack from the actor, and thus a clear choice.

This third person exercise seemed to empower the actors because they were afforded the time to think before they spoke. In television, the goal is often to get the actors and audience to think the same thing at the same time, Tom pointed out. That struck me as very relevant in this context as Brecht seemingly wants the opposite from his actors and his audience.

When we ventured into the land of “Not...but”, things really started to get good and complex. Writing down what your character is not saying became such a rich and rewarding thing to do that the list seemed endless. Time consuming for sure, but this exercise was surprisingly informative about the characters.

The actors and us directors watching had a lot of ideas about what the characters were not saying. Investing this kind of time was well worth it. When the actors did get around to reading part of the scene again, it began to blossom with subtext, of what was not being said. And what was revealed with this exercise is what people’s hidden agendas were, and the surreptitious ways in which they go about fulfilling those agendas. This will be very useful in *Les Belles-soeurs* as we navigate the journey of fifteen often passive aggressive women with agendas.

The “Not...but” exercise was an unsentimental way of seeing the mechanics of motivation, of the scene, and how people interact. People’s brutality is exposed because it is not washed over or naturalized; even the slightest thing, the subtlest moment, can be a brutal moment, like not asking how your partner feels. When something is done consciously, even if you are consciously *not* doing something, it becomes detectable.

I note with interest that both Stanislavski and Brecht think that the theatres’ relationship with its audience is paramount. What is expected of them is quite different. The dramatic theatre is representational and asks us to empathize, sympathize, and enjoy an emotional catharsis. The

epic theatre, presentational, calls on its audience to act – to think, judge, and enjoy a rational response. The actors, too, are empowered by both styles of theatre, although very different things are asked of them as well.

Overall, my best experiences in the theatre are a marriage of these two; a production that calls upon all of my capacities as a feeling, compassionate, social creature and as a thinking being capable of rational thought and responsible action. For isn't social action, at the end of the day, out of compassion and outrage for those that are suffering, out of *caring for* and *feeling empathy* for those who are the victims of injustice? As opposed to simply stopping there at feeling compassion, epic and all good theatre, in my opinion, asks a little more from us. It challenges us to live our values and walk the walk. In doing so, the world can be changed. My goal is to specifically utilize both Stanislavskian and Brechtian techniques during my studies here, particularly with my thesis production of *Les Belles-soeurs*.

## **Spring 2016**

Animate corners; “window moments.”

I am utilizing *Considered Practice* and a bit of active analysis for my one act, *Sans Cru*. I am defining my terms clearly in order to inspire actors to rise to the emotional challenges of the roles and own the circumstances.

*Sans Cru* is a difficult, text-heavy and exciting new script by Chloe Packer. I see it as a spiritual weigh station; a “no exit” type scenario where crippled, paralyzed souls are stuck until they grow. You can't get out until you look at yourself critically and act. Change. According to the playwright, the title of the piece means “no growth”; another connotation is “no belief”. Both meanings point to being spiritually void.

The characters are stuck in this weigh station until they break their patterns of behavior, how they relate to each other and the world. The emotional and psychological patterns of dysfunction and addiction are intertwined and laid bare. The characters are brutally repetitious, not literally but emotionally and psychologically. So the exact same thing does not happen every day, but variations of the same patterns are being played out.

The play is smart and sad and funny and insightful. But what's funny is tragic, and the humour comes at a price. I am a fan of social satire.

I love the use of language; these characters are intelligent. They use language as weapon, seducer, master manipulator, and trap. Most of all, they use language to *avoid* actually communicating. I love the silences. They are dense with meaning. And the rhythms reveal a lot about their emotional and psychological state. Rhythm, silence, the sculpture of satire really interests me. It is so powerful. The “nodes” (points in the script where the action could go either way) in the play are very important to identify, so that the audience is tortured by habitual behaviour all evening, but begins to see where choices are being made, where change might occur.

First rehearsal – I engage everyone – even stage management – in the rehearsal's initial play discussions, games and a song. We are kicking off this project with a note of fun and ensemble building. We are all open and generous in the games. I assign some homework à la Ann Bogart, items to bring in to rehearsal that spring from the major themes in the play. Source work. I hope this will help personalize the characters for them and engage their creativity.

The play is challenging in its text-heavy repetitiveness. Every character needs a very strong objective driving their engine; the layers need to be peeled away with every pass or it will be a tedious night indeed for the audience. What are we doing? Each character answers these

questions differently. I ask myself, what is being revealed? Why does this matter? What question / thoughts am I challenging the audience to grapple with, ultimately? We are working slowly and methodically. Actors are being challenged to define their actions at every moment. I usually work much faster and am being forced to slow down. I find this difficult at first but know it is a good thing. The team is fantastic. I remind myself that creativity takes time.

I so appreciate my talks with Stephen Heatley during this process. He understands this style of play, and has an extensive history with new work. His remarks are clear and concise and are helping me see through the mire of repetitive words, helping me establish real stakes for each character, isolate “window moments” (moments where we see into the character), and add a much-needed level of humanity to the piece. I am paying attention to where the nodes are.

We are mid-way through rehearsal. It is grinding. I am struck by how exhausted people are, but throwing themselves into the work anyway. I need to inspire their imaginations. We do some group activities at the top of each rehearsal. I must think of something to add to the mix.

Last night in rehearsal I gave everyone a secret. This helped deepen and inform every moment onstage. We are finally entering interesting territory with this tricky script. All the work to date is starting to pay off.

The show closed last night. I set out to explore rhythm, silence, subtext, and moments of decision (“nodes”). The sculpture of satire. The play is very character-driven, but the characters were indeed shaped by the rhythm and silences of their choices. When the rhythms were off, the meaning was diluted. The intensity and repressed energy needed to shape the rhythms also deepened the stakes and allowed the actors to embrace and more fully own the given circumstances. We were so close; I feel that in one tech run we reached the plateau upon which I



wanted the show to live. That highly energized run-through of the show attained the level of being horribly funny and horribly sad, and no sentiment.

There is a fine line in satire where you own and balance your character's extraordinary want (specific subtext) with performance energy levity; this results in razor sharp humour and profound pathos to breed onstage.

One more week of run-throughs (repetition) could have made the difference in being able to sustain that level more fully. However, I feel within the given circumstances of this production, and a brand-new script, we were quite successful. The actors were fearless. We explored source work with the major ideas in the play, personalized as much as possible, embarked on physical explorations, internal explorations, and worked very specifically and technically with rhythm. The actors did grounded, specific, confident work. With one more week of rehearsal, the next level may have been more fully realized. That being said, two of my professors, some audience members, and the BFA movement instructor's feedback to me was that the detail and specificity of the work was apparent, grounded and efficacious.

## Director's Diary, Second Year



Figure 2: Germaine's kitchen. C. Phillips-Grande, H. Elric, T. Scott, B. Henderson, S. Hicks, N. Backerman, S. Struthers, S. Nisbet, S. Michaud, S. Niewerth, D. Rusu-Banu. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

### September 2016: Design Process for *Les Belles-soeurs* Production

We have had two design meetings re: *Les Belles-Soeurs*. An interesting challenge for this process is working with two set designers who are both architects but have never designed a set. I go in with a positive attitude, hopeful that this is an opportunity to explore new terrain.

Things clarified and discussed today:

Re-affirmed the heightened nature of the set; non-naturalistic, with a few iconic set pieces in a semi confined and grotesque version of a tenement kitchen from east Montréal, circa 1965.

We also clarified that there will not be multiple appliances, as one designer suggested; just three grotesque versions of 1. a fridge, 2. a stove and 3. a washing clothes device. These represent

three “oppressors” Germaine wants new versions of. The older generation is stifled and unhappy, and yet they will not change. They just crave material goods. The two designers suggest that the appliances be made out of paper, made to look real, but slightly oversized. This would allow the actors to pick them up and “dance” with them at the top of the second half. An idea has formed that we will do a pathos-laden, love making dance between the main character (Germaine) and her dream kitchen appliances. The appliances could be painted in glow in the dark paint and the whole number lit with a black light. Also, the cohesiveness of material – paper being the stamps but also very flimsy and not permanent – is a nice touch. Germaine’s house of paper falls apart by the end.

In addition to a cross on the wall, I think the transistor radio should loom large and be way up one side of a lopsided, wall-paper peeling wall; it is where they get the Voice of God. Or maybe it is on a shelf way up high and Germaine has to climb the pantry like a ladder to get at it and turn it off and on. It’s a stairway to heaven of sorts, and a lot of work to get there. The cord from the radio hangs down at an angle, very messy, adding to the decrepit poverty of the place.

Great lighting design meeting; floor lights, yes! This will be excellent for the extended downstage area that will be used for numbers like “stupid rotten life” – a step dance with chairs – a grotesque chorus line downstage centre. The footlights will accentuate their long shadows on the giant kitchen wall behind them, and distort their faces. I like the in-your-face-ness and personal / intimate quality with the audience for this play. It allows the actors to more easily confront them, confide in them, humour them, plead with them, convince them, and be witnessed by them. This is why we are adding the downstage piece of stage and will use it for particularly intimate, confrontational moments and dance numbers. It will be very Brechtian in its alienation effect, underscoring the cabaret nature of the direct address group numbers.

Costumes will be defined by generation (exaggerated colour and style) and will place us in 1965. Older people in oppressive and dour, non-sexual, practical housewife dresses. Boxy. Younger folks will be in bright spring colours and sexy short skirts. The battle of the generations will be manifest in their clothing and how it flaunts or hides their sexuality.

Set pieces are being chosen for their resonance and their essentialness distilled and exaggerated for this heightened, absurdly confined world. Three appliances will be built that look real although slightly oversized and made of paper that can be lifted and danced with. Circus chairs that can be stacked, or perhaps just reinforced kitchen chairs, will be used for choreography. A mountain of garbage/carnage will accumulate centre stage by the end of the play that Germaine eventually climbs, and then the rain of stamps during “O Canada” showers her when she reaches the apex.

I’ve been greatly influenced by seeing and hearing Tremblay talk about *Les Belles-soeurs* and his work on YouTube (the NFB did a great little piece about him and André Brassard). He is very clear in his view that the English and Roman Catholic Church were the oppressors, and that French Canadians have been oppressed for 300 years. “We want something else. Our own country, for starters” (*Backyard Theatre*)

Tremblay was a Separatist at the time; this is the inspiration for the piece, in large part, and it is important to honour that crystal-clear rage. He attempted to show people who they were and that they desperately needed to change. He also wanted to destroy the institutions that supported the status quo.

When he spoke in the NFB 1972 interview called *Backyard Theatre*, I was struck by his clear, quiet anger. His writing and *Les Belles-soeurs* were part of the larger social and cultural

revolution that was going on at the time (the Quiet Revolution.) Women in the neighbourhood where he grew up, the working poor of east Montreal where *Les Belles-soeurs* is set, refused to speak English. Their husbands did only to get work. That alone says a lot about this play, and the political/social tensions that were going on. And to some degree still are. The black humour of *Les Belles-soeurs* is rooted in real human misery and oppression that goes back generations.

Tremblay is also very clear that he wrote about 15 women because “no one else was.” Their plight was awful and he does not sugar coat it. The trapped, suffocating world they inhabited was Tremblay’s childhood. He grew up with them. Women were not considered equal under the law until 1964! Up until that point, they were considered dependents, like children. They couldn’t get abortions until 1968, and divorce was shunned. With no social or political power, all they could do to raise themselves up was shop, snipe at each other, gossip, bully or be bullied.

An aspect of some research I stumbled upon a while ago (while working on another project) in the area of economic theory seems increasingly relevant to this play. I was speaking to a friend of mine who studied economics and had read with great interest Eric Falkenstein’s 1998 book *Finding Alpha: The Search for Alpha When Risk and Return Break Down*. My friend explained to me quite simply that a basic assumption behind the CAPM or Capital Asset Pricing Model – a model used to evaluate an appropriate rate of return on an asset - is that the economy is greed-based. This motive is not only the engine driving our economy, but also trillions of dollars worth of investments managed worldwide.

However, this book and other more recent studies go on to suggest otherwise. For example, widely respected Cornell economist Robert H. Frank reveals with his book *Falling Behind* that most people would choose a world where they lived in a relatively large house if their

neighbours lived in a tiny house, over the option of living in a massive house and their neighbours also living in a massive house (Frank 2).

The implications of this paradigm shift between a greed/individualist-based economy and an envy/context-based economy are significant. At its philosophical core, what it means is that our actions are not motivated by a desire for absolute wealth, but by *relative* wealth. Moreover, as opposed to thinking of Capitalist society as a collection of rugged individuals seeking success and therefore happiness, we are a tribe of interdependent beings comparing ourselves to each other to determine our worth and happiness. This distinction is profound, and speaks to social context.

Which speaks directly to the world that Tremblay has created with *Les Belles-soeurs*, and is one of the inspirations thematically behind my production. And although I know it was not intentional on Tremblay's part to be ahead of his time by embracing a tenet of modern economic theory, it nevertheless makes the play that much more relevant and timely to have this knowledge consciously inform the production and illustrate painfully clearly a desperate tribe of interdependent people trying to maintain and raise their status within it, and deriving their only form of self-worth from those competitive comparisons within their specific context.

I am also struck by a short movie I watched written by Michel Tremblay and André Brassard and directed by André Brassard entitled *Françoise Derocher, Waitress*. Made in the early 1970s, this film is peppered with *Les Belles-soeurs*-type characters, all of them waitresses in the same restaurant, all with the same name.

In the film, we experience a slice of life in the day at a café in working poor east Montreal.

Robotic, rhythmic, deadpan, choral chanting haunts the entire movie. The waitresses deliver their

rant, an endless order of sandwiches and coke, directly to the camera or are echoing in the background as a scene in the restaurant unfolds. The waitresses are interchangeable, all saying the same thing. And like *Les Belles-soeurs*, there is no awareness of their collective power, that they are all indeed saying the same thing. There is instead a sense of isolation within a tribe, and self and mutual loathing.

Brassard inserts a few powerful scenes with surreal, slow motion and sometimes no motion moments that are very suspenseful and somehow intimate. We get a glimpse of hope and vulnerability; what might happen? It's almost as if these are the "nodes" in his play, where the characters were considering doing something differently, about to make a conscious choice. Then, like a group trance resuming, the droning choral monologue resumes and they continue as before. They are both trapped and haunted by their circumstance, but they consciously choose, in a Brechtian way, familiar self-loathing over pro-active change. The words are layered and textured over the action, like music; tribal, hypnotic and repetitive, but the repetition is oppressive, like their lives. All these kinds of qualities and conventions I wish to explore in my production of *Les Belles-soeurs* (Brassard).

This film could be a part of the *Cycle des Belles-Soeurs*, which consists of the following plays by Michel Tremblay: *Les Belles-soeurs*, 1965; *En pièces détachées*, *La Duchesse de Langeais*, 1968; *Trois petite tourts*, 1969; *Demain matin, Montréal, m'attend*, 1970; *A toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou*, 1971; *Hosanna*, 1973; *Bonjour, là, bonjour!*, 1974; *Surprise! Surprise!*, 1975; *Sainte Carmen de la Main*, 1976; and *Damnée Manon*, *Sacrée Sandra*, 1977. All of these plays are written in "joual", and take place in the working-class milieu of the Plateau Mont- Royal in east Montréal, or in the bars and brothels of the "Main" – St. Laurent Street. These plays share territory, language, theatrical conventions, and many of the same characters.

With his major literary work *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*, Tremblay manages to put in the novel form what he has been producing on stage for many years.

Tremblay wrote the *Chroniques* from 1978 to 1997. It was in response to people wanting to understand how the characters had managed to turn out the way they did, how they became the sisters-in-law. This was a prequel. From the *Chroniques* comes *Les Belles-soeurs*. (Wasserman).

### **September 2016: *You Will Remember Me* Remount at the Gateway Theatre**

I have a meeting tomorrow morning with the set and lighting designers to discuss the challenges associated with translating the set onto the main stage of the Gateway Theatre. Their stage there is a bit wider than the Cultch, where we mounted it before, and farther away from the audience, so I am thinking that we may have to move it downstage. I'm not sure we can afford to widen the set; therefore, I may consider fanning the long stalks out wider that surround the set. This area, however, is very difficult to light, so it would not be useable. There is much to discuss and think through. Also, if I do move the set downstage, I lose playing space. The video designer assures me that the size of the screen will be appropriate in the space, especially if I choose to move everything slightly down stage. I have secured the tenth draft of the script from the playwright and distributed to everyone. Our new actor, Kevin Loring, who is replacing Craig Erickson, is really excited to join the team, which makes me very happy.

### **October 7, 2016: *LBS* Design Meeting**

This is our third design meeting and so far, it is going extremely well. I was a little concerned with one of the architect/set designers who seemed a bit lost at first. I am consciously slowing down and communicating more clearly and deliberately.

Initially, some of their ideas were very symmetrical and clean in the lines; exactly the opposite of



what I think the setting needs. I am steering us away from symmetry. Nikolay, one of the designers, found a very interesting German post-modern artist who makes objects out of paper. I think we could use his idea to make our oversized appliances, and love the relationship of the paper to the stamps and booklets, but also worry that they will be too clean looking. Therefore, I focused this meeting to clarify further the rough edges and dilapidated conditions we are looking for, the “grotesque” which I defined as taking the essential elements of a 1965 tenement kitchen and exaggerating them: non-naturalistic, and more expressionistic. We defined exactly which three appliances need to be built, and we decided together where the balcony would go and the front door and the door implied to the rest of the apartment. These ideas were recorded.

They did not have any visuals to inform their set sketch from the east Montreal neighbourhood, so we searched some up on a computer and this was a very fruitful decision. They are going to redo their set sketch incorporating a few essential elements of the neighbourhood – most notably the view of the rotting balconies outside, long wooden staircases, the rows of hanging laundry, and maybe a glimpse of the dirty alley below where the kids played. And even if they don’t get all these elements in there, it was important that we all better understand what the neighbourhood / world is that we are playing off of.

After the meeting, I decided to positively reinforce what is clear, clarify what still needs to be clear, and of course be supportive as this is their first set design. My note to them read:

Hi Nikolay and Sara,

Just a reminder that the radio will be brought in by an actor during a scene. Germaine actually goes off to find it. So the doorway audience left (stage right) will imply the rest of the house, and then she will have to climb that wonderful ladder/pantry as we discussed and hang it.

I really appreciate your explanations as to why the choices you have made are integral to the world we are creating. I am very excited by the direction we are going in. The window as a large blown-up photograph is a wonderful idea and opens many possibilities visually; your idea around the fabric walls is also taking shape.

Looking forward to seeing drawings or something re: appliances; I think we are all much clearer as a group about what we mean by “grotesque” e.g. exaggerating the essential, disproportional, lack of symmetry and dilapidated. It’s good to keep talking and specifying. Please bring in visuals as discussed.

Huge thanks also for taping out the floor to reveal the actual size of the space. That was enormously helpful for me to envision the kitchen.

They are a very creative duo, eager and full of imaginative ideas, and I am really excited to be collaborating with them. For example, we are going to make the walls crumble at the end of the play, a metaphor for how Germaine loses it all. We discussed how this also resonates on other levels; e.g. how their way of life is not sustainable and is falling apart. Not just the oppressive life of French-Canadian women in 1965 east Montreal, but also on a larger scale – the envy economy is not sustainable, and eventually will collapse. We are witnessing it now in the “age of extinction”: the patriarchal, rudderless, morally bankrupt capitalist system that runs the world then and now is destroying our planet.

The costume designer brought in some great visuals and had a colour wheel for the younger generation and one for the older one. We discussed five characters that she had sketched up and made little changes, but basically, she is doing really carefully thought out work and I am enjoying working with her very much.

A sound designer has now been attached to the project which is wonderful. I assigned her to research some traditional Acadian Folk Music (pre-and post-show) and to tape some “joual” from YouTube. If she can’t find any, we can record it with either our actors that we cast or some French Canadians I know in the city. I would like to loop this and use it as underscoring for some of the scenes: the text that would be looped will be taken from “this stupid, rotten life”, a choral piece, and drone underneath at times possibly. I may just do it live, however. Most of the sound score will be live and produced by the actors speaking and stamping their feet and slamming hands on tables, etc.: tribal, low tech, rhythmic, repetitive.

As mentioned earlier, I was deeply impacted by a short film I saw recently directed by André Brassard and written by Michel Tremblay, *Françoise Derocher, Waittress*, in which this kind of droning underscoring was used. The film featured characters that could have been from the play *Les Belles-soeurs*, and much choral speaking and of course “joual” was incorporated.

We are meeting every two weeks as a group for these design meetings. Having everyone present is extremely advantageous to the holistic integration of all elements into creating this world. I am so grateful the department encouraged this.

### **October 2016: LBS Choreography Thoughts**

In preparation for a meeting with Choreographer Tara Cheyenne Friedenberg for LBS, I wrote her this note:

Here are more detailed thoughts to consider regarding choreography:

1. A grotesque, high energy “pantomime” at the top of the show – short. All characters burst / explode / crawl through the space. Non-naturalistic. Like rats in a cage looking for a scrap of cheese. Or cock roaches in a kitchen. They enter from all over the theatre and crawl onto the

stage, scrambling over things, all yammering and complaining. This may be underscored by the “joual” loop. It happens so fast, and then they scatter.

2. Page 11: “This stupid, rotten life” – rhythmic, thumping, feet and hands on table. I see them possibly downstage in a long chorus line maybe sitting on chairs, feet stamping in a distorted version of Quebec step dance, direct address.

3. Top of Act 2: Glow in the dark, huge, disproportional cut-outs of appliances dancing in the dark, manipulated by actors in black, or just Germaine dancing lovingly with them.

4. Page 68/69: “The Road to Hell” – rhythmic/tribal; Angéline on trial. Seriously direct, aggressive, focussed movement.

5. Page 76/78: “Ode to Bingo” – an absurdly enthusiastic celebration. Standing on tables and/or chairs, moving over and under and around, whole space.

6. Page 99/101: A big, choreographed brawl wherein they build a tower with tables and chairs stacked on top of each other. Germaine climbs the tower during this time and gets to the top only to sing “O Canada”, and have stamps rain down across the stage. The rest hang like gargoyles. The walls collapse.

None of these are long, 30 seconds to a minute or so. The last piece may be longer. All very rhythmic, percussive. The play is a piece of music. Each character has an aria, and much is choral, guttural, grounded. A primal oratorio for fifteen female voices.

Themes: Self-loathing, self-victimization, rage, as the result of oppression. Trying to maintain or gain status within the tribe, within an economy of envy – worth based on comparisons to others, a myopic social context.

More thoughts: With “This stupid, rotten life” piece, down stage with chairs in a chorus line, we also integrate choral movement. “Domestic work” moves. They all do the same thing in their own way; monotonous, monotone. “But at night, we watch TV” perhaps they slump back in their chairs, a moment of repose.



Figure 3: “This stupid rotten life!” number. T. Grauman, S. Michaud, S. Hicks, N. Backerman, T. Scott. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

Characters maybe have “instruments” that suit them – Lisette a coke bottle she tings with a fork? Other possibilities of appliances/kitchen stuff that actually makes a noise: pot hit with wooden spoon; a jar of pennies someone shakes or a metal container holding cutlery; pounding on the laundry detergent box. We can experiment with this idea in rehearsal.

### **October 21, 2016: LBS Design Meeting at Props Master’s Lynn Burton’s Office**

A lot of conversation around the chairs and the fact that not all of them need to be “circus chairs,” which means stackable and sturdy so that actors can stand on them as well. Six chairs. The window was discussed and could be a blown-up photograph or a projection. Three different sizes and heights of the tables were confirmed. It was great to have Lynn in the room so that we can

start to talk about what she thinks is actually doable within the budget constraints. The fridge/stove/washing devices, which will animate the “dance of the appliances” at the top of the second half of the show, were discussed and how this can be achieved. We are going to try Styrofoam, 3 dimensional appliances slightly exaggerated, to build the appliances (pending costing.) And we will do some lighting experiments with paint regarding how to make these appliances look beaten up during the course of the play, and very shiny and glowing and idealized in the “dream sequence” at the top of the second half of the show. This would also be an opportunity to have fiddle playing live if I find an actor who can and is comfortable.

### **October 29, 2016: *LBS* Callbacks**

We held call-backs today in just under three hours! Morale is very high and everyone read for a different character than what they auditioned for (except Sarah read Rose.) I am really excited about this. My UBC dream cast for LBS is:

Germaine – Bronwyn

Linda – Heidi

Rose – Sarah

Gabrielle – Stefanie

Lisette – Taylor

Marie-Ange – Tai

Yvette – Natalie

Des-Nieges – Rowan

Thérèse – Sophia

Olivine – Daria

Angéline – Sabrina

Rhémauna – Olivia

Lise Pacquette – Sachi

Ginette – Shona

Pierrette – Cassandra

All the final years get a pretty good crack at something and the intermediates get lots of stage time. I also took into account that some finals had medium roles in the last show, and felt they should get something better in this one. Also, as this is an ensemble piece, everyone will get great experience, challenges, and responsibility.

### **Notes on Relevant Quebec Theatre History**

The Catholic Church impaired Quebec theatre development right up into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A breakthrough came with a priest named Émile Legault and his development of Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent. His idea was to use drama to inculcate religious values (Racine, Corneille, 17<sup>th</sup> century neoclassical drama that was highly moralistic.)

This group in the 1940s developed into an actual theatre company. Legault himself trained his actors, and they entered the Dominion Drama Festival. By the late 1940s they were semi-professional, acquired their own theatre building, and started to do a repertory of plays that weren't just morality lessons. They crossed the border from religious to secular theatre, and from

amateur to professional. In 1952, Legault left the company Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent, and they disbanded. A number of actors from that company then created Theatre de Nouveau Monde, which became a significant force in the evolution of Quebec theatre ecology (Wasserman).

It is also important to note that around this time Gratien G  linas created a character named Fridolin, a character like him from east Montreal. Fridolin was a street kid, very precocious, and this character became so popular that in 1941 G  linas started to do an annual stage show/revue called *Les Fridolinades*. He wrote sketches for this show and they were hugely successful from 1941-1948. Then, in 1948, he wrote *Tit-Coq* and it became the most popular Quebec play ever. The title character, Tit-Coq, is a soldier in WWII, and a “bastard” (his parents were not married.) In the play, he falls in love with a middle-class woman, Marie-Ange. He not only falls in love with her, but also her seemingly ideal family. She falls in love with him too. There are very sentimental scenes featuring a big warm happy family, and then Tit-Coq gets shipped off to Europe. While he is at war, her family convinces Marie-Ange to marry someone else. Eventually, she concedes, and sends her love a Dear John letter. Tit-Coq is shattered.

Tit-Coq comes home and confronts Marie-Ange. She recants, falls back in love with him, and decides to run away with him even though she is forbidden to marry him. Tit-Coq confides in the Chaplain, and the Chaplain tells him that he cannot run away with her, unmarried, because his children will then be bastards, like him. Tit-Coq decides not to run away with her, because he does not want to inflict his fate on his own children, and walks away. It is a tragic ending.



The play is a massive hit in Canada. However, when it goes to Broadway, it gets panned.

According to UBC Professor Jerry Wasserman, the reason for this is because it is so Canadian/Catholic that the New York critics/audiences simply couldn't understand it.

Gratien G  linas founded his own company in Montreal and he wrote two other very successful plays. He is a major figure in post-war Quebec theatre, intrinsically Quebecois. He did speak an east Montreal idiom with his working-class character of Fridolin, which is about halfway to "joual". It is worth noting that CBC *Radio Canada* played a huge role in keeping G  linas and his contemporaries (Th   tre du Nouveau Monde, Th   tre du Rideau Vert, L'  quipe) in the black during this time by hiring them as writers and actors, and thus unwittingly supported the evolution of a distinctly Quebecois theatre.

The character of Fridolin that G  linas created embodied the French-Canadian spirit; a child of the slum district of east Montreal, he embraced humour and pathos. His life is awful, but he never gives up trying. He leads a gang of boys and girls in the back alleys of his neighbourhood on adventures through the garbage cans. He embodies the French-Canadian quality of *survivance*. "Forced to live in a sordid, depressing, and often hopeless reality, he escapes by creating for himself a fictional dream world in which all problems are resolved ..." (Usmiani, *G  linas* 24).

Fridolin goes down in defeat whenever dream and reality crash. However, he gets back up and tries again, full of optimism and idealism, creating humour and pathos. Mirroring the themes of Don Quixote, the character's autobiography is called *My Life, That Bitch*.

G  linas founded a theatre in 1958 called Com  die Canadienne.

Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* is very similar in some ways to the work of G  linas' Fridolin:

"The general feeling that emanates from the text is one of hopelessness...they are doomed by the

circumstances of their life, by economic limitations, by lack of education, and even more by their own inner limitations: their inability to understand or to communicate with each other” (Usmiani, *Gélinas* 31).

With Gélinas, it was redemption through laughter for the audience, recognizing themselves and thus transformation through catharsis. With Tremblay, there is no catharsis. He does not let the audience off the hook. Like Gélinas there is humour and pathos, but unlike Gélinas Tremblay is holding the mirror up so that people can see how they need to change. There is no transformation or happy ending. Tremblay’s work at this time is part of a larger social critique that was happening in the 1960s, and a step further down the same road that Gélinas was on in the 1940s.

### **Radical about Tremblay**

Tremblay also destroys the myth of the idealized Quebecois family. If Gélinas upholds the ideal as in *Tit-Coq*, and longs to attain it, *Les Belles-soeurs* is almost a direct response to *Tit-Coq* and annihilates the notion of the ideal Quebec family. Largely non-naturalistic and utterly bleak, Tremblay married raw realism and non-naturalistic staging techniques from the contemporary theatre outside of Canada. Tremblay was reading Tennessee Williams at the time of writing *Les Belles-soeurs* and knew of the French existential playwrights. He established his own signature style by synthesizing “joul”, conditions of life, realism, and non-naturalistic modernist staging devices. He was greatly influenced by the Greek plays (hence the chorus and unity of time and place), Bertolt Brecht, (alienation effect of direct address), and Samuel Beckett (the absurdity of the women’s situation, and their existential dilemma/inability to do anything about it). Indeed, throughout *Les Belles-soeurs* we witness the compelling use of the chorus, a dark existential world of people wanting things to be different but not actually willing to change themselves a la

Beckett, and therefore choices being consciously made with significant social ramifications as in Brecht.

*Les Belles-soeurs* falls right on the cusp between old Quebec and new Quebec. Marshall McLuhan said the two biggest things that brought Quebec from medieval to modern times within ten years were

- Television
- Birth control pill

There was a massive shift in 1960s Quebec economics and culture under Jean Lesage at the time of Tremblay writing *Les Belles-soeurs*. The Ministry of Education was created as a separate entity from the Catholic Church; Expo 67 brought over 50 million visitors to Montreal; an ideology of Quebec National Sovereignty began to replace the idea of Quebecois “purity” that had run through the Duplessis era. (Wasserman).

A small group of Marxist-Leninist extremists took Quebec sovereignty to the extreme and began a concerted guerilla campaign. It started in 1963 and lasted until the arrest of their leaders in 1970.

Also changing was the status of women with the advent of the birth control pill and women finally being recognized as equals under the law. Moreover, divorce became legal in 1968. The enormity of these radical and quick social transformations is dramatically revealed in Tremblay’s play through the clash and intergenerational struggles, most notably between Germaine and her daughter Linda. With the world seemingly whirling out of control without a moral compass, the old and new generations seek to hang onto either old ways of being, or feverishly establish new values and customs. As David Ball points out in *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual*

*for Reading Plays*, “First comes stasis, then intrusion – and then all the resources of the play’s world swing into gear. High energy forces battle each other until a new stasis comes about” (22).

### **Some Social/Historical Context**

Tremblay’s first play was written in 1959, the year Maurice Duplessis died.

Maurice Duplessis served as the 16th Premier of the Canadian province of Quebec from 1936 to 1939 and 1944 to 1959. His new conservative party, the Union Nationale and their long reign later became known as La Grande Noirceur or “The Great Darkness.” During this time, the Liberal opposition was unsuccessful in challenging Duplessis’ power. He favoured rural areas, provincial rights, anti-Communism, and opposed the trade unions. He is also remembered for barely funding social services. The Roman Catholic Church supported the Union Nationale in its political campaigns and employed the slogan *Le ciel est bleu; l’enfer est rouge*: Heaven is blue – UN; Hell is red – Liberal (Verna).

When Duplessis’s oppressive regime came to an end, an explosion of change that he and his supporters had been trying to stop flooded through Quebec culture and society. One notable one was that education was taken over from the Catholic Church by Jean Lesage’s Liberal Government, modernized and secularized, guided by the basic tenet that a higher education should be free and every citizen’s right, not a privilege.

The speed and intensity with which social, cultural and economic change happened in Quebec was incredible. The Quiet Revolution led to the Parti Quebecois being born and taking power in the 1970s. (Wasserman).

During the Quiet Revolution, Quebec experienced the FLQ crisis, civil rights movement, and the women's rights movement. It was an intense tornado of transformation for a very short time frame from which a new and utterly unique Quebecois theatre could and did emerge.

Since the French defeat on the Plains of Abraham, Colonial Canadian theatre was mostly British plays and American touring companies for hundreds of years; there was also a thing called Garrison theatre, amateur theatricals that literally originated in army garrisons. But what is the birthplace of made-in-Quebec professional theatre?

As stated earlier, modern professional theatre in Quebec is often equated with Gélinas' *Tit-Coq*, but it also evolved from an amateur tradition that soon became a professional one, from companies like Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent, Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, Théâtre du Rideau Vert and L'Équipe.

Le Théâtre du Rideau Vert premiered *Les Belles-soeurs* in 1968. The female side of Quebec theatre at this time, Le Théâtre du Rideau Vert was founded in 1949 by Yvette Brind'Amour and Mercedes Palamino (who split from Campagnons) and focused on strong roles for women. They were the only competition for Les Compagnons de Saint-Laurent until the founding of Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in 1951. Their first production was of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, however they produced mostly Boulevard plays, which were melodramas or light comedies meant to entertain but not to challenge. However, things changed in the 1960s when they purchased their own 400-seat theatre in Montreal and expanded their repertoire to include some of the classics and some French-Canadian fare in their programming. Producing *Les Belles-soeurs* and later touring a show to Europe in 1968 (they were the first Canadian theatre company to play in Russian) cemented their reputation in Canadian theatre history. Rideau Vert and Nouveau Monde

competed heavily in the '50s and '60s, and the women running Rideau Vert noted that theirs was a harder battle because the other company was run by men and focused on male-heavy plays. Brind'Amour states in *The Opening Act* by Susan McNicoll that the Canada Council was worried about giving Rideau Vert money because, "They wondered if we would spend the money shopping" (McNicoll 249).

This comment is extremely relevant, even today, underscoring the systemic sexism of Canadian society and theatre. Today, the Professional Association of Canadian Theatre's Diversity Committee and the Playwrights Guild of Canada Women's Caucus have published revealing studies about the numbers of women in positions of power. Revealed: women represent far less than 30% of regional or large theatre company artistic directors, produced playwrights, or hired directors (Burton 5). This number is even more shocking when one considers the fact that over 50% of working theatre professionals are female. Tremblay's underlining theme of the oppressed working-class woman is further exacerbated and resonant due to the fact that systemic sexism still exists, even in the seemingly "progressive arts," and transcends class.

### **Owning the Social/Historical Context in this Thesis Production**

Within the play *Les Belles-soeurs*, we are exposed to a generational divide that is enormous and turbulent. The older women in the play represent the past, women from the era of The Great Darkness, while the younger ones are the hope for the future, particularly the young women's desire for independence and a different life than their mothers. It is an exquisitely sharp turning point to balance the action of the play upon, the entire social fabric seemingly unravelling as Germaine's life unravels.

The older women in *Les Belles-soeurs* are in equal parts cynical and devoted to the Catholic

Church, making wisecracks and taking the Lord's name in vain, but dutifully reciting the rosary anyway. They also harshly criticize their own children and husbands, and everyone else's, and chant in chorus, "kids are so ungrateful!" (Tremblay 25).

The young women have no time for rosaries or children, and just want to get good jobs and define their own future. Tremblay seems to be highlighting the tumultuous social change of that time, the politics of change vs. hypocrisy and complacency, and putting them in a pressure cooker called Germaine's kitchen. It is an explosive environment, Germaine's kitchen, mirroring the world outside, and no one escapes unscathed. This flammable, dangerous, competitive and unreliable world is full of tension and distrust, with clashing values and generations, and I will try to emulate that in this production. The kitchen itself will be a dilapidated old tenement kitchen; the world as they know it literally falling apart around them. The pace will be manic (except for the suspended moments of relief via monologue, no motion, or private duologue), and the stakes will be very high for every character, their emotional breadth and weight palpable. The only respite allowed the characters is through their monologues or confessionals to the audience, and the occasional private group scene played separately from the madding crowd. Otherwise, the characters put on their armour and head into Germaine's kitchen. This constant tension will rely on the actors and I being very specific about their actions and objectives, about where the nodes are, and will also rely on the degree to which they can own the given circumstances. I anticipate this to be very challenging for student actors. The heightened style of the piece, the tight choreography of every scene, and the precise rhythms of the banter, will aid in keeping the tension and stakes high.

## **November 12, 2016: Thoughts on the Opening of *LBS***

Possibility One: The soundscape of the east Montreal neighbourhood very gradually builds and morphs into the “joual” loop of “this stupid rotten life” in French. During this build the audience lights dim, and there is a cross-fade focus onto the four boxes of Gold Star Stamps. As the lights go to black all around, a sharp and very intense spotlight rises on the boxes, and continues to rise with the crescendo of the voices – then it peaks, cuts out sharp, moment of silence, and we have curtains open immediately on Germaine’s kitchen. Linda is standing there. Play begins.

Possibility Two: We do number one but add a very quick cockroach crawl-through of the major characters.

A month later, I cut the “joual” loop; why introduce French into this English translation? I decide that the loop itself is a good idea, in English; it’s repetitive and menacing like much of the other choral work, so I bring it back at the end to haunt Germaine as she climbs the “tower of envy”.

The other characters will chant “This stupid rotten life” as they slowly become gargoyles of greed hanging from the tower while she pleads from the tower’s apex to a Godless universe, “My Stamps! My Stamps!”

Shortly after writing this, I also cut the idea of a dance of cockroaches crawling across the stage. I had, at this point, a very clear idea about the choreography and physical vocabulary we were going to create, and it would incorporate – through actors climbing all over the furniture and set pieces, as well as each other – the idea of rats in a cage or cockroaches scurrying overtop of one another in a kitchen. Another reason for cutting the dance at the top of the show was that the sound designer and I were developing a rather immersive aural idea for the top of the show, Possibility Number One above, that I felt would not be serviced by a dance number. It would



also then be more of a surprise when we introduced the first choreographed rant to the audience, and I wanted that kind of impact for “Stupid Rotten Life” as it is the leitmotif of the production.

### **November 18, 2016: Set and Lights**

The design meeting with lighting and set (Tory and Sara) yesterday was great. Clarified the need for five inkies as footlights, black light, many specials. Also with Sara we agreed that the three major appliances in the Dance of the Appliances remain the same, (a stove, a fridge and a washing machine), but we also added two smaller hand-held devices; an electric hand mixer, and a pair of oven gloves.

We also discussed the props regarding stamps and finished booklets; possibly three or five tables for them to work on. There will be two or three main boxes down stage centre with Gold Star Stamps on it, and this is where actors have to go to fill up on stuff and also put back finished booklets.

### **November 18, 2016: Sound and Rhythm Ideas**

The deeper I get into this, the more I think this is an oratorio for 15 female voices, and the sound/rhythm design should reflect that. In other words, lots of live human voices and feet stomping. Carey, Sammie and I are discussing putting a contact microphone on the main table and some kind of amplification on the downstage floor. (The microphone idea is later cut as we want to maintain a low tech, primitive, human-made quality to the show.)

Our entry point for exploration and creation is the theme: “Maintaining or raising status within the tribe.” From this, traditional Quebec step dancing, folk music, and choral work will inspire the sound, music and movement design. Workshop exploration will emphasize actor-created live sound: the sound of the human voice working chorally with text, communicating deep tribal

feelings. It will be rhythmic and repetitive; the step dancing and foot stomping will be exaggerated and stylized, complementing the heightened reality of the play. Live percussive sounds will be made onstage utilizing props, parts of the set, and footwear. We are still interested in using “This stupid rotten life” as underscoring. (The latter idea becomes a live rather than a recorded element.)

### **January 13, 2017: Sound and Rhythm Ideas**

Intermission will be recorded traditional Quebec fiddle/step dancing music. The live fiddle playing is cut because the actor I found who can play fiddle is not comfortable doing it.



Figure 4: Germaine begins “Dance of the Appliances.” B. Henderson. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

At the top of Act 2 we will have the Dance of the Appliances to a pop song of the era. We are discussing various songs and will settle on the one that most exemplifies Germaine's "love affair" with her dream appliances. We hope this fun opening to the top of the act with the Dance of the Appliances (which will glow in the dark) will expand the audience's expectational horizons, and deepen the social satire of the piece.

## ***Les Belles-soeurs* Script Analysis**

### **Given Circumstances**

It is 1965, Montreal, in a low-rent tenement. Germaine has just won a kind of lottery wherein she will receive one million stamps. Once she pastes them all into booklets, they are redeemable for furniture and appliances. She invites her sisters, her daughter, neighbours and friends over to help her paste.

### **Environmental Facts**

1. East end of Montreal
2. Season is summer 1965
3. Low-rent tenement apartment
4. Political environment is a few years into the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, where political and cultural reforms of all kinds stormed throughout the 1960s. Volatile.
5. Social environment is in flux; intense clashes between generations are happening with traditional, Catholic values vs. civil rights and women's rights movements. The once all-powerful Catholic Church is starting to lose its grip on the people of Quebec – especially the working poor Francophones who have been oppressed by it and by the English elite for 300 years. Church and State are massively undermined by the Quiet Revolution, in which *Les Belles-soeurs* played a very significant role when it was first produced in 1968.

Also happening in 1965: Martin Luther King Jr. began to advocate for black rights; first U.S. troops arrive in Vietnam; the Maple Leaf became Canada's national flag symbol; Malcolm X

was shot in New York on February 21; U.S. Astronaut Edward White first man to walk in space; and the Montreal Canadiens won the Stanley Cup.

6. The religious environment is staunchly Catholic.

### **Previous Action**

Germaine has won one million trading stamps. She must paste them into booklets to redeem them for appliances and other household items.

### **Polar Attitudes**

The young generation, except for Ginette, (Linda, Lise, Pierrette) do not want to succumb to the doctrine and social practices dictated by the Catholic Church, or become housewives trapped in a loveless marriage with no money and nothing but kids and housework; they do not want to become their mothers. The older generation (Germaine, Rose, Gabrielle, etc.), plus young Ginette, want either admiration or pity. They are very conscious of their status within the tribe and want to raise their own while diminishing each other's. Germaine has technically raised her status within the tribe by winning the stamps, and all the others of her generation turn against her, ensuring the reinstatement of her low status while raising their own by taking her stamps.

Germaine, within the context of her tribe, has shifted everyone's relative status with her stamp-winnings.

### **Dialogue**

#### **Choice of Words**

Working class, not educated. Sentences peppered with slang to denote their class and temperament. Lots of swearing.

### **Choice of Phrases and Sentence Structure**

Short, choppy sentences. There is a percussive rhythm to the phrases, especially when the characters speak chorally. Their words are driven often by dissatisfaction, envy, anger or self-pity.

### **Choice of Image**

The images are crude and aggressive, e.g. "I don't want to die in this shit while Mme Fatso here goes swimming in velvet!" (Tremblay 11).

### **Choice of Peculiar Characteristics**

Repetition and choral speaking is used to great theatrical effect in the language and I will be using this in the choreography and live sound - stamping, chanting, characters making noises; very tribal and guttural. Certain characters repeat phrases.

### **Sound of the Dialogue**

I think one of the most resonant and important notes to make about the dialogue is that almost any one of the older characters could be saying any of the lines. They are interchangeable between characters. It is less about individual stories and more about the story of the oppressed working class, and their endless, meaningful tirades about their repetitive, meaningless lives. The fact that they speak so much chorally underscores the endless, repetition of their lives and their same-ness

### **Structure of Lines and Speeches**

However, when they speak chorally, they are not saying "we", as though there might be a kind of consciousness being raised among the group, and they are not saying "she", like a Brechtian or even Greek narration technique that also points to some kind of consciousness or awareness

about the characters plight. The characters say “I”; first-person singular. They are all, individually, stuck in the same mud, but they have no consciousness around that. Tremblay makes it clear that their lack of education and their poverty-choked lives make any kind of social awareness about their potential collective power next to impossible. He shows us how people are, and why, but he does not guarantee that they will change. It is like the moment before social awareness. He does give us some hope with the younger generation’s presence in the play, but we are left wondering if indeed the younger generation will be able to transcend their past. It is not certain.

### **Dramatic Action**

Stasis – Germaine and her family live in a run-down tenement apartment building in working-class Montreal and are the working poor.

Turning point #1 – Germaine wins a million trading stamps and asks her neighbours and sisters over to help her paste them into booklets so she can get new appliances and furniture.

Turning point #2 – they all start stealing the stamps from Germaine.

Turning point #3 – Germaine realizes they are all stealing from her and tries in vain to get her stamps back.

Stasis – Germaine and her family live in a run-down tenement apartment building in working-class Montreal and remain the working poor.

### **Character**

#### **Desire and Will**

(scene objectives phrased “I want you to...” in relation to another person in the scene).

*Act One, Scene One, pages 5-8:*

Germaine: "I want you to cancel your plans for tonight."

Linda: "I want you to let me go to the movies with Robert tonight."

*Act One, Scene Two: pages 10 – 17:*

Pages 10-12: Marie-Ange: "I want you to resent Germaine and pity me" to everyone in the scene.

The cap would be that they say as much. Everyone else to everyone else and the audience: "I want you to pity and admire me." The cap would be that the audience applauds for them.

Page 13-15: Lisette to everyone: "I want you to envy my fabulous exotic lifestyle and know that I am better than you." The cap would be if they said they admired her and meant it.

Page 16-17: Lisette and everyone else in the scene: "I want you to accept me in this tribe, to think I share your biases against the people of the Canary Islands where Yvette's daughter took her honeymoon, and for Italians, and for Europeans." The cap would be their verbal and emotional agreement and acceptance of Lisette into the tribe.

*Act One Scene Three:*

Page 18: Germaine: "I want you, Mme Longpre, to feel shame for not inviting any of us to your daughter's wedding." The cap would be Yvette apologizing to Germaine for not inviting her. St. Therese is mentioned by Germaine when Gabrielle reminds her that the rosary is on the radio: Perhaps this Saint is chosen by Tremblay because Wikipedia defines her as such: Therese's spirituality is of doing the ordinary, with extraordinary love. The women have chosen a female Saint who, like them, is defined by doing ordinary tasks.



Page 19-20: the women get down on their knees to the drone of the rosary on the radio, going through the motions, wanting to be the most holy in the room. It is a competition. “I want you to admire me.” The cap would be someone else saying that you are the most devout Catholic.

Germaine is most concerned about her “novena.” A novena is defined by Wikipedia: (from Latin: Novem, meaning Nine) is an act of religious pious devotion originating in ancient Christianity, often consisting of private or public prayers repeated for nine successive days in belief of obtaining special intercessory graces.

Entrance of Thérèse and her mother-in-law Olivine: Thérèse wants the other people in the room to admire and pity her for what she puts up with from her elderly mother-in-law. The cap is if someone says as much to her. The others shower her with praise, and Lisette even says that Thérèse is “a real saint.” Lisette and the others are competing to be the most complimentary; it’s a sycophantic competition, the cap of which is which one Thérèse acknowledges.

Pages 24-25: “Kids are so ungrateful!” – all the women want everyone else to agree that the next generation is not as good as them. “I want everyone in the room to admit that our generation is better than theirs.”

Pages 26-27: Rose wants everyone else to not only agree that the younger generation isn’t as good, but that they aren’t as good at raising children in particular. Yvette wants Rose to like her; Rose has a lot of power within the tribe, and Yvette’s social stock is sliding due to the fact that her daughter Claudette didn’t invite any of these women to her wedding. The cap would be if Rose said anything pleasant to Yvette at all, which she doesn’t.

Pages 28-29: Thérèse wants the others to shower her with praise; again, the cap would be that they call her a “Saint.” The others vie for who is the best at showering praise on her, who does she acknowledge.

Pages 30-31: Germaine wants Marie-Ange to not be angry, not make others angry for fear of losing them as workers, and calm down. Ultimately, she just wants Marie-Ange to stay and help paste. Marie-Ange wants everyone to resent Germaine by letting them know how unfair random contests are. “All these lotteries and contests are unfair. I’m against them.” (Tremblay 31). She wants to prove they are all equally in need of good luck and new stuff. From this point on, Marie-Ange starts stealing the booklets from Germaine. The cap for Marie-Ange is everyone else stealing the stamps with her from Germaine.

Page 34-35: Yvette wants the audience to say that she is so fortunate with her wonderful life, and also that she is very clever for cutting that hole in the glass. They do not. Her status within the tribe is very low.

Des-Neiges, being influenced by Marie-Ange, is starting to resent Germaine’s good fortune, and starts stealing stamps. She wants the others to resent Germaine too. The cap would be if all the others started to steal with her and they took them all. She and Thérèse Dubuc and Marie-Ange Brouillette all hide two or three booklets on the top of page 36.

Over the course of several pages now, the characters have been discussing contests they have entered over the years – and none of them have ever won. The accumulation of these stories results in a general group resentment growing toward Germaine. A mob mentality is accruing. They want to knock Germaine down a few pegs, undermine her good fortune. They want Germaine to be unhappy. The cap will be Germaine not having this wealth or happiness.

Page 37: Lisette is trying to make the others jealous by bragging about the new stole she is getting, and by offering to sell her old one to Gabrielle's husband to give to Gabrielle for her birthday. The cap will be acceptance of this deal. Rose is trying to humiliate Lisette by verbally smacking Lisette off her high horse rather brutally. The cap will be Lisette shutting up. Lisette wants the others to see she is not shaken by Rose's brutality. Yvette tries to save the moment, to get the others to lighten up, with her interjection about the objects game she figured out that was in the paper; the cap will be the others being happy and interested in what she has to say, and for the arguing to stop. It does not work.

Pages 38-39: Des-Neiges wants to make the others laugh to raise her status within the tribe. She wants the others to be shocked and surprised. The cap is that they are. However, they then suspect there is something between Des-Neiges and the brush salesman, and judge her for it.

Pages 41-42: Des-Neiges wants the audience to feel sorry for her and to absolve her of any guilt she has regarding her feelings for the brush salesman. She wants someone to say to her, "You are not guilty. I understand. You deserve to be happy." This would be the cap.

Page 42: Enter the younger generation, Linda, Lise, and Ginette. Germaine wants the girls to apologize and feel bad about themselves for being late to the stamp pasting party. Rose defends Linda. Germaine turns Rose against Linda by telling Rose what Linda said about Rose when Rose phoned. Rose then attacks Linda, to make her feel bad about herself and to publicly shame her. The cap would be Linda apologizing to Rose. Germaine wants Linda to relinquish control of her life to her, Germaine. The cap would be Linda doing what Germaine tells her, and not talking back.

Olivine spills her water to shut the women up. She then falls out of her chair to try to escape. Olivine wants to escape from Thérèse, and this whole awful world. The others try and restore order and help Olivine while the three older sisters refuse to help the old lady up. The three older sisters want Olivine to go away. She is a symbol of their grim future. They treat her terribly in the hopes that she will be taken out of the room. Thérèse abuses her mother in law because she attracts pity away from her, and is a lot of work. There is no love here.

Lisette de Courval has not participated in any of the previous chaos, but has kept on quietly pasting her stamps. She wants to leave this pit of despair; she wants the others to disappear, or be hidden away somewhere. She wants to prove to the audience she is not a petty, vindictive person like them.

Page 48: With Lisette's monologue to the audience, she is confiding to them that she is not like the others – she wants the audience to understand that she is a refined and respectable lady with class; not a cheap, lower-class person. She wants the audience to acknowledge that she is in a different class than these people, and to be ashamed of her neighbours with her. The cap: she wants the audience to agree with her, thus absolving her and raising her status.

Pages 48-49: Linda wants her mother to stop screaming and threatening her. Linda shames her mother by walking out to shut her up and to humiliate her.

Enter Rhéauna and Angéline, which makes Linda and her entourage stay. Linda says to her mother that she is only staying because they arrived, and that she is not afraid of Germaine; by standing up to Germaine, Linda wants Germaine to relinquish whatever power she thinks she has over Linda, to stop trying to control her. The cap would be that Germaine shuts up, stops yelling at her. She does not.

Page 54: Rhéauna and Angéline each want the other to feel sorry for them. It is a competition as to who has suffered more, who has more insight, and who is more compassionate. They want the others to admire them through their gossipy details of Baril's death and funeral. The cap would be the listening women gasping with astonishment and praising them.

Pierrette's name is brought up – Germaine, Rose and Gabrielle all speak about their youngest sister and want the audience and the characters on stage to hate Pierrette for betraying them with “goddamn Johnny.” They both fear and are envious of Pierrette. If Pierrette is happy and successful in life, then they – the three older sisters – have wasted theirs needlessly. Pierrette did not follow their lives' oppressive protocol and dared to dream of and do something else. They want to vilify her for that. The three older sisters want to abolish Pierrette from planet earth. Again, “maintaining status within the tribe” means towing the line, and not doing anything out of the ordinary – not dreaming of another possibility, not thinking yourself worthy of anything better, like Pierrette dared. Even though it's a miserable life and they all want it to change, they are not willing to change themselves. This weirdly defeatist hypocrisy is part of the self-victimization that is a result of a sexist, oppressive patriarchy, a result of powerlessness.

Page 59 through to the end: Rose wants to get the old lady out of the house. Thérèse wants Rose to stop attacking her and her mother in law, even though she herself is physically hitting her (lots of hypocrisy in the play.) Arguing ensues between lots of people, the younger folks bring in chairs which end up everywhere, a big messy tussle, and an opportunity for everyone to steal more stamps.

Pierrette enters, thus dropping a metaphoric bomb on all the characters. She wants to shock them all. She wants Germaine to give her some of her money (share some of her good fortune) so that she, Pierrette, can start a new life. She wants the other sisters to let her back into the tribe/family.

### End of Act One



Figure 5: The Trial of Angéline. S. Vellanii, O. Lang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

The Trial of Angéline: Angéline tries to worm out of exposure by Pierrette, who mentions that she, Angéline, frequents the club. She admits to it because she is cornered. Angéline wants Rhéauna to forgive her. Pierrette defends Angéline, and wants the others – especially Rhéauna – to understand and forgive Angéline. The others condemn her. Angéline leaves in shame.

Pages 73-76: Lisette cajoles the others to lighten the mood – she wants everyone to lighten up – by talking about the upcoming Variety Night at their church. The cap would be that they are

happy and interested in what she is saying. She gets only derision from Rose, who wants to knock Lisette down a peg and shut her up.

Pages 76-78: Ode to Bingo is a celebration of their only outlet in life – trying to win big at Bingo. Bingo is a source of hope, power, escape and relief from mindless hopelessness and repetition of their work-a-day lives. The women all individually want the audience to shout in ecstasy with them that Bingo is a reason to live! The women are not acting as a chorus, but as a group of self-absorbed individuals unaware of the others feelings. They use the words “I” and “me” throughout the choral Bingo section.



Figure 6: “Bingo!” number. B. Henderson, S. Niewerth, T. Scott, S. Hicks. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

Pages 78-81: Lise wants help/advice/support from Linda regarding what to do about her pregnancy. The cap would be an abortion doctor. Pierrette helps by recommending a doctor for an abortion. Pierrette wants Lise to be positive about the future, so Pierrette pretends life is good at the Club to give Lise hope that she too can make a life for herself that is not the norm, and

some money. The cap will be Lise seeing the doctor and getting on with her life. Ginette wants to know what the girls are talking about, but they don't tell her because they think she will judge them and tell the others; Ginette is more conservative than they are. Ginette wants acceptance from Lise so as to raise her status within their tribe. Lise wants Ginette to beat it.

Page 83: Ginette sidles up to Rose, seeks validation from Rose; Rose verbally gives it to her and that's the cap.

Page 84: Through Pierrette's monologue, she wants the audience's sympathy, understanding, and for them to help her, to save her. She's appealing to them, begging them, confiding and confessing. She seeks their sympathy, and money.

Lise's monologue is a mirror of Pierrette's monologue. Pierrette tells Lise everything will be fine, lying to give her hope. More pathos.

Page 86: Thérèse is caught stealing stamps by Rhéauna. Thérèse wants Rhéauna to steal with her, and Thérèse justifies the stealing of the stamps. Rhéauna tries to convince Thérèse not to steal, tries to make Thérèse feel guilty and make herself superior. Rhéauna then lies when Germaine comes over by saying that they are just discussing a recipe. Rhéauna lies, covers up what is actually going on, so as not to implicate herself. The cap is Germaine buying it. Rhéauna starts to internally compromise, but doesn't actually steal until page 94.

Germaine wants Linda her daughter to tell her what Lise wrote down, and what is going on between them all and Pierrette. Linda lies to her mother, wants her mother to leave her alone by standing up for her independence, rejecting her mother's authority.



Rose condemns unwed mothers, bullying the others with her anger and fears regarding her own daughter. Rose wants all the others onstage to agree with her that unwed mothers are the worst. The others do agree except Lise, Linda, and Pierrette. Ginette agrees with Rose, wants Rose to like her; Ginette finds strength and solace in Rose's harsh traditional condemnations, and agrees with her to get Rose's approval. The cap would be getting that approval through ongoing friendship and verbal support.

Rose's monologue about the plight of women and holy matrimony; she is trying to get the audience to wake up, to see the world the way it is, and to feel utterly sorry for her in particular while admiring what she has suffered through. Rose ultimately wants the audience to promise her that her daughter will not end up like her.

Page 94: Rhéauna steals her first stamps; now she is a bona fide hypocrite. She wants Germaine to be knocked down a few pegs. The cap will be a humble and generous Germaine sharing her good fortune with them all.

Top of 95: Gabrielle tries to divert Germaine's attention so she won't figure out that they are all stealing her stamps. Gabrielle wants Germaine to remain oblivious. The cap will be blown when Germaine figures out the scheme.

Page 96 to end: Germaine is bullying everyone to admit or confess what is really going on; when she figures out that most of them are stealing from her, she demands her stamps back. She wants everyone to give her stamps back. Those that are stealing from her are justifying it. Marie-Ange makes a call to arms, which inspires them all to openly revolt and steal violently: "You don't deserve all those stamps... There's lots more in the boxes. Let's help ourselves!" (Tremblay p. 98.) All hell breaks loose with everybody (except Pierrette, Linda, Angéline and Lise) grabbing

and stealing. Germaine scrambles in vain, with Pierrette's help, to get her stamps back. As the others steal, someone sings "O Canada." Dialogue is overlapping, lots of screaming.

Germaine's final plea "My stamps!" is layered over all this and is to the audience and to heaven; she climbs the tower of envy snatching at stamps and desperately begs the theatre audience to help her get them back! To save her! Germaine wants God to help her. The cap would be that a giant hand comes down from on high and snatches the others away, leaving Germaine with her fortune. Embracing irony and pathos, Tremblay has the stamps rain down on Germaine from heaven while the others continue stealing.

## **End of Play**

### **Moral Stance**

The older generation, with the exception of Angéline, are basically hypocrites. They pose as God-fearing Catholics, but complain about doing their novena, swear like truckers, and gossip/slander their neighbours and each other. Eventually, they all steal from Germaine, also hypocritical to their faith. The older generation all resent and fear Pierrette; she has dared to live life on her own terms. If she is happy, if she is proven right in her choices and values, then they have wasted their lives. Pierrette straddles the two generations in the play, and is conflicted internally, being both unhappy with her life and unwilling to accept the dead-end life of her older siblings. The younger generation is more progressively minded and looking to escape the claustrophobic world of their elders. But will they be able to transcend their circumstances of poverty and lack of education, even within the Quiet Revolution? We are left to wonder. Angéline is the one character who seems to balance respect for tradition with an open-

mindedness to new ideas and other people. She is squashed, however, by the disapproval of her peers (particularly Rhéauna).

### **Decorum**

No one behaves modestly other than Angéline. It is an environment of vicious innuendo, slander, and unhappiness being vented at all times, sometimes to great amusement. The older generation dresses traditionally and practically so they can do their housework. No effort is made to look attractive. The younger generation dresses to look attractive and to shock the older. The Decorum of the older characters is dowdy, grim, bland, deadly, conventional; the Decorum of the younger characters is edgy, bright, bold, life-affirming.

### **Summary Adjectives**

The Moral Stance of the older characters is to maintain the status quo. Therefore, they share the following adjectives: to nullify; immobilize; fill with inertia; drown out; undermine; humiliate; mock; shame; set fire to; sacrifice. The Moral Stance of the younger characters is to break free from the past; to reinvent; transcend; shock; defy; trailblaze.

### **Initial Character Mood and Intensity**

Heartbeat – fast; excited.

Perspiration – constant.

Stomach condition – nervous; upset.

Muscle tension – high.

Breathing rate – rapid.

## **Ideas**

*Themes:* Self-loathing, self-victimization, rage, as the result of oppression. Maintaining and raising status within the tribe. The economy of envy within a context of poverty. This is what everyone living without hope looks like; what everyone out for themselves looks like.

*Actions:* One-upmanship; raising yourself up, literally and metaphorically, by putting others down. Using humour, self pity, confession and derision to rise above the rest. Passive-aggressive manipulation.

## **Meaning of the Title**

They are all in this together. The suffocating family and extended family (neighbours) are all in the same sinking boat – or rats in a cage – and despite their closeness in relation to one another, they betray each other at the drop of a hat. The title is ironic and bitter.

## **Philosophical Statements in the Play**

“This stupid rotten life” – this sums up the over-arching philosophical statement of the play.

Tremblay is painting, over the course of the entire play, the terrible and hopeless context within which working poor French Canadians lived for hundreds of years under Catholic/English rule. He is also expressing the impossibility for people to come together and realize their collective power without an education. This is done through the use of each character saying the same complaints over and over, chorally and individually throughout the play, but they are unaware that they are all saying the same thing; unaware of their collective power. They hear their own voice only, which is part of the comedy/tragedy.

Angéline says in her monologue “It’s easy to judge people” (Tremblay 72) and this reflects her desire not to be judged, but to be understood. Yet they live in a world where they do nothing but

judge each other, because of a complete lack of hope, awareness and love (tying into the above statement).

“Do I look like someone who’s ever won anything?” This phrase, repeated many times in the play, underscores that they feel they are too wretched and poor to ever be winners.”

“Life is life, and no goddamn Frenchman ever made a movie about that!” On page 92, Rose’s monologue demystifies holy matrimony and sex by telling us the reality of her horrific domestic situation, her life of marital rape, thus utterly obliterating any romantic notions around marriage and sex that may exist in the room.

“There’s nothing in the world I like more than Bingo.” Spoken chorally, this – like the chorally spoken “at night, we watch TV”—are philosophical statements that clearly indicate that these distractions from housework and a demanding family, (and, in the case of the Bingo line, the one thing that they can actually *win* at), is all that makes them happy. It is a very sad state of affairs.

The women, even the older ones, swear aggressively in the play, taking the Lord’s name in vain, calling their own daughter “bitch”, etc. Philosophically, this reveals their very conflicted relationship with the Catholic Church, and their greatly repressed anger and resentment. Psychologically, it exposes their self-loathing and sense of hopelessness.

“Kids are so ungrateful” underscores the philosophical statement that the older generation is right and the young ones are wrong, which also underscores the older generations’ hypocrisy. They no longer believe in the Catholic Church, for example, but they refuse to change.

“A club! The fastest road to hell!” emphasizes the older generations’ fear of change, and fear of the younger generation. Their values and world views collide as the club represents drinking, sex,

dancing, fun, all things that Catholics are not allowed – especially Catholic women – but all the things that their husbands do, or would like to.

“Youth is blind!” The next generation is stupid, we are smarter.



Figure 7: Linda, Pierrette and Lise consider an abortion for Lise. H. Elric, C. Phillips-Grande, S. Nisbet. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

### **Implications of the Action**

The characters complain and compete for sympathy and admiration throughout the play. It is as though there is a prize for the one who most convincingly digs the deepest hole to the core of their unhappiness and swallows everyone else up in it.

The given circumstances of their poverty-riddled, oppressive lives mean that they only have the power to put each other down, thus trying to raise themselves up, all within the tiny confines of their respective kitchens.

Therefore, the action of raising themselves up while maintaining or lowering the status of the others is connected to the stories they tell, but also to the stealing of the stamps. They steal the stamps with greater and greater urgency as time passes; the urgency to get as many as possible before Germaine notices is what drives them forward, and their own envy. Everyone participates in the stealing except Pierrette, Angéline, Linda and Lise.

The betrayal culminates in the action of Germaine literally climbing the metaphorical “tower of envy”, a tower built of tables and chairs in her kitchen. It is a last gasp to raise herself up above the others. She gets to the summit, and as she reaches up to God begging for justice, God responds by raining stamps down on her head as the others scramble to get as many stamps as they can, like cockroaches or rats, scurrying across the stage and over each other. Or maybe we will have a slow-motion chant as the others surround Germaine. When Germaine screeches in agony “My stamps! My stamps!”, this is the climax of the play. Meanwhile, Olivine has initiated “O Canada” and this is layered throughout Germaine’s last plea to God. Perhaps the characters gradually, one by one, as they hear her the song, freeze in a frightening tableau, right where they are, to sing the national anthem. Not sure how I will stylize the ending yet.

But I am sure of the stage picture being that of Germaine’s last attempt to transcend her circumstances and get out of her kitchen, climbing the furniture that is heaped in the middle of her now destroyed kitchen. The belles-soeurs remain onstage, still stuck, except the younger generation, who must somehow get out. I will have them exit. Germaine freezes at the top of the mountain of envy she has created with arms raised to God.

Dead silence. Lights out. End of play.



Figure 8: Stamps rain down on Germaine. B. Henderson, S. Hicks, S. Michaud, T. Scott, T. Grauman, N. Backerman, R. Denis, S. Niewerth, D. Rusu-Banu, O. Lang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

### Consider Each Scene

#### *Act One.*

The first scene of the play is between Germaine and her daughter Linda. It establishes the basic premise of the play that Germaine has won a million trading stamps and she is hosting a stamp-pasting party that night with her sisters and neighbours/friends. Linda is expected to help too. She rather harshly forces her daughter to break a date with her boyfriend. This establishes how this and all the families in the neighbourhood operate: brutally and without love or respect for each other.



The next scene has the arrival of the five core women in Germaine's life: Gabrielle, Rose, Yvette, Lisette, Marie-Ange. They have reluctantly shown up to help paste stamps, vent their disapproval behind Germaine's back, and confess to the audience that they are the most miserable people in the world and should be pitied. Marie-Ange says flat out that she is jealous of Germaine. This scene establishes the convention of choral speaking and direct address; it also cements the notion that not only are these people unhappy, but they are competitively so, and that this competition is the major action of the play. The winner will be the most miserable of all, as judged by the audience. They metaphorically (and I will stage it physically) crawl all over each other and the furniture like cockroaches or rats in a cage to get the upper hand, to rise above the others, and at the same time, to lower the others.

The next scene has Lisette bragging about having been to the Canary Islands, a pattern that establishes Lisette as always trying to out-class the others; she feels that she is not part of their working-poor world, and she likes to remind them and herself of that. Racism amongst the women is also revealed in this scene when they talk about "dirty Italians" and Europeans as unclean. Their racism underscores the fact that a lack of education and opportunity and thus hope – e.g. poverty-stricken French-Canadian women at this time in history – breeds ignorance and prejudice.

Germaine feels the need to do her novena to Saint Thérèse. She grabs her daughter's radio to hear it and recite along with it. She quickly abandons this activity when it proves too difficult to sustain, and the idea established by this scene is that these devoutly Catholic women don't really take their religion all that seriously. An important hypocrisy is revealed that builds throughout the play, and this is a major demarcation between the older generation and the younger generation. We see some hope for change and transcendence with the younger characters, but we

see that the older characters – as illustrated by their relationship with the Catholic Church – are set in their ways and will not change, even if their old ideas and habits are ones they don't believe in, are oppressive, and keep them unhappy.

The next scene, the scene that interrupts the rosary to Saint Thérèse (known as “The Little Flower”), is the entrance of the character of Thérèse. This cannot be an accident. Tremblay bookends one of the most beloved saints of modern times with the entrance of this wretched, screaming, abusive woman, who openly hits her mother-in-law and complains bitterly about having to take care of her. This shocking juxtaposition rattles us to the core, and the idea deepens that these Christian women do not practice what they preach and are absolute hypocrites out for pity, admiration, and whatever they can get to raise their status.

Marie-Ange has a scene that clearly states how unfair she thinks these contests are, how jealous she is that Germaine won and not her. From page 32 on, Marie-Ange will steal every booklet she fills. The others see this and will, in their own time, follow suit. The idea of *envy* as the driving force within this world is exemplified, and the level and breadth of *betrayal* now deepens over time for the audience to see. It is a sickening, silent descent into avarice from here to the end of the play.

The next scene, in which the women talk about their children, really drives home the idea that they have no respect for them at all. The language is searing and mean-spirited, and the divide between the generations widens. It also becomes clear that they take no responsibility for their offspring and resent them. The lack of love in this world is painful.

Des-Nieges tells a joke on page 38 that is overtly offensive. The scene exposes the fact that these women have internalized the misogyny of their culture. It further details Tremblay's overall

picture of what happens to people who are trapped in poverty, oppressed by the powers that be, and have no education or hope of self-determination.

Pierrette is talked about near the end of the first act before her appearance. The idea of the “outcast” is clearly defined. Pierrette dared to try to make something of her life, to exercise critical thinking and move outside of the circumscribed cycle of Church, marriage, children, endless housework, death. She is condemned for it by her sisters and the older generation of women in the room. The younger ones, particularly Linda, admire Pierrette’s courage and see her as a possible role model and way to escape the awful existence prescribed by their mothers.

Linda storms out of the house on page 50, which furthers the notion that she is aligning with Pierrette. This idea will deepen in the second half of the play. She re-enters right away, but that is just because Rhéauna and Angéline enter.

The Rhéauna and Angéline duet is a poignant exposé of competing egos. Tremblay utilizes black humour to nakedly expose these two supposedly pious women as also competing for who is more pious and who has suffered more. They are a product too of their environment. The hypocrisy is hilarious and choking.

The next scene sees the women slandering Pierrette some more, right before her entrance. Angéline says something sympathetic about Pierrette, which spurs Rose and Gabrielle on to express some concern for their youngest sister. At one point, Rose even says, “she must need our help sometime. She must get so lonely...” but this humane sentiment is quickly squashed by the judgemental Rhéauna and the hate-festival continues, topped off with Thérèse smashing her mother-in-law on the head.

The final scene of Act One sees the entrance of Pierrette, and Pierrette recognizing her friend at the club, pious old Angéline. Everyone stares at Angéline in surprised disgust as we go to intermission, and we wonder how much worse this world can get.

### *Act Two*

The Trial of Angéline: the first scene of this act has Angéline confessing to the women that she sometimes goes to the club where Pierrette works. She explains that she gets lonely and wants to have a little fun. She is severely judged and condemned, mostly by her closest friend and roommate Rhéauna, and Angéline eventually leaves in shame. This scene will be staged expressionistically with characters on many levels, stomping, shouting, hissing chorally at Angéline through harsh lighting that delineates accused and accusers; a horrific courtroom scene. I see Angeline alone downstage in a small white special.

The choral work will pit the younger generation, who are siding with Angéline, against the older generation; perhaps the young ones at the very back high up on the kitchen counter, lit in red; the older ones on the tables and chairs, lit in blue. The audience is the jury.

The Bingo scene is exhilarating. The one thing that these women feel they might win at, that provides excitement and a chance to forget everything, is Bingo. Their colossal enthusiasm over this meaningless little game exudes pathos. The choral work is muscular and defiant. The underlining idea is to further cement the pathetic nature of their lives; if Bingo is the best thing that ever happens to you, the ultimate experience, then your life is pretty dismal. But this scene also allows us, the audience, to see these women happy. It is refreshing and much needed at this point in the play to have some positive energy from them. It is a relief and a celebration.

The Lise/Pierrette/Linda scene, when they discuss the abortion Lise wants to obtain, reveals that even Linda, a young woman who wants a different life than her mother Germaine, is not as liberal-minded as we thought. It reminds us how socially unacceptable abortion was just a few years ago, not to mention illegal. The fact that they cannot even tell their friend and peer Ginette, because she is too conservative in her attitudes and might tell the others, shows us how high the stakes are and how secretive women had to be. If you openly admitted that you were seeking an abortion you would become a social outcast, a pariah. The misogyny of this cannot be denied.

The scene where Rose talks about her marriage, her sex life, is a wallop. Marital rape is basically what she has been putting up with for decades, and there is no end in sight. This confession, like all the confessions/monologues, does not change anything. It is as though each soliloquy is another nail in their collective coffins of hopelessness. But the emotional vulnerability and honesty of these monologues, especially this one by Rose, touches the audience's hearts deeply and we are, despite ourselves, rooting for these women to wake up and together find a way out of their predicaments. It is a tension that accumulates over the course of the play; we want to help them, we can't help them. We want them to wake up and come together; they don't wake up. This monologue will be staged downstage centre, as close to the audience as possible, and spoken slowly and gently from the heart.

The scene where Germaine discovers that her stamps and booklets are being stolen by everyone in the room (except Pierrette, Linda and Lise) is a powerful blow, and the climax of the play. With the betrayal revealed, the reaction is absolute chaos and anarchy, as the women desperately grab what they can get while Germaine violently wails and scolds and pleads with her family and friends, her heart breaking and bleeding right in front of us, her dreams of transcending her circumstances utterly ripped out from under her. Even though Pierrette offers to help Germaine,

Germaine rejects Pierrette – she makes a very dark, significant choice here to not question her own values, actions, or understand and accept Pierrette as human.

Finally, the drama of this scene is heightened by the singing of “O Canada,” the national anthem of the country that has these women locked in this God-forsaken hell hole. The irony is bitter.

### **Tempo and Mood**

In general, the tempo of the scenes is quick and crisp, with a competitive edge to them. They sometimes accelerate to a blistering rate and nearly derail, and then a monologue happens, which suspends all action onstage. The monologues are direct address to the audience and are much slower, more personal in tone, and confessional. We jump from the battlefield of their lives to the private place of confiding in the audience, and then back to the battlefield. I hear these monologues as suspensions; not dips in energy, but plateaus.

As stated earlier, Michel Tremblay once said of *Les Belles-soeurs*: “One woman complaining is pitiful. Five women saying they are unhappy with their lives at the same time is the beginning of a revolution.” (Anthony 282).

And although the women are not conscious of their collective power, it is a small step away from that kind of social awareness. It is the beginning.

### **Important Stealing Moments in the Play**

Page 32: Marie-Ange instigates the stealing of the stamps.

Page 35: Des-Neiges joins in.

Page 36: Add Thérèse

Page 61: Marie-Ange encourages everyone to steal

Page 94: Rhéauna joins in the stealing

## Rehearsal Process



Figure 9: Thérèse longs for a better life. S. Niewerth. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

### **February 4, 2017: First Rehearsal of *LBS*: February 4, 2017**

We read the script, did design presentations, read the script, then much discussion. Much enthusiasm. Also distributed background social/political context for when Tremblay was writing: Quiet Revolution, Separatist Movement, etc.

### **February 6, 2017**

Choreography for two hours with Tara Cheyenne with the whole ensemble, which established the beginnings of a general physical vocabulary, and got people introduced to safely standing on chairs, on tables, and walking across both while speaking. Then we roughly choreographed the first of four “numbers”, This Stupid Rotten Life, followed by roughly blocking the first five pages. At this pace, we can block the whole play (first pass) by Saturday. The second and third passes will be much slower and more detailed. Tara is not available anymore; just to touch up

things in March for one rehearsal. I will have to choreograph the numbers myself. I am grateful that we at least have the beginnings of a physical vocabulary for me to work from.

### **February 9, 2017**

We have almost blocked the whole play. This sketch will provide us with a departure point. It is time to start doing the deeper work, the given circumstances, the stakes. Here is our focus for the Saturday work-through and for the rest of the rehearsal process (they need to answer these four questions for each line they speak):

1. Why are you saying what you are saying? (What is it you want/what is the desired response?)
2. What is your personal relationship to what you are saying?
3. Who specifically are you talking to?
4. What are your actions to try and achieve your objective?

Tom pointed out to me that I had used the word “sentimental” in rehearsal, and wondered if everyone knew what I had meant by that. I thought I had defined it prior, but to make sure, I defined it again for them as meaning “always play an action”, otherwise a performance can get generalized, emotive, sentimental. Everyone understood.

### **February 11 and February 13, 2017**

Both of these rehearsals focused on specifying the above for scene work and monologues. We also reviewed in detail what **given circumstances** means, and how they each have to be very clear about the details of these for their character and write it all down. I went through the three types of given circumstances from Francis Hodge:



### **1. Previous Action:**

Any action mentioned in the play's dialogue that reveals any incident or action that took place BEFORE the current action of the play began. Often called, "EXPOSITION."

### **2. Environmental Facts: There Are Six Kinds of Environmental Factors:**

- a) Geographic Location: The specific area in which the play takes place. The exact place. This includes the climate.
- b) Date, year, season, time of day: What about the date is significant?
- c) Economical Environment: The character's relationship to wealth or poverty, and the class of the character in relationship to the society in which they live.
- d) Social Environment: The morals and social institutions under which the characters live; their values and societal beliefs.
- e) Political Environment: The character's relationship to the form of government under which they live.
- f) Religious environment: The formal or informal psychological controls placed upon a character because of their religious beliefs.

### **3. Polar Attitudes:**

Beliefs held by a character that are in direct opposition to the world in which the character lives. This opposition creates CONFLICT. Conflict creates DRAMATIC ACTION.

We are about half way through Act One with this more detailed second pass.

The plan moving forward is to continue our second pass through of the play working the above specifics. This work will culminate around next Saturday afternoon, when we will do a stumble-through for lights and sound. Then we will do our third pass through the play over reading week, going deeper and continuing to specify.

### **February 18, 2017**

A very full and productive day. We continued work on monologues, specifying the objectives and specific actions, and the given circumstances. It is challenging for these young folks to own their given circumstances, understandably, and we are talking them through and finding playable ways in for them.

We finished our second pass through of the play and then decided to stumble through the whole thing for the first time and see where we are. This was extremely useful for the actors to begin to get a sense of their journey, or arc, on their feet. For the director, it was also useful; I made extensive notes of what needs to be worked and prioritized these items for the upcoming Reading Week of full 10-6 rehearsals. We worked notes on our feet after the stumble through. My goal for the upcoming week is to get through another specific and detailed pass of the play, the third, and to do several more run-throughs.

### **February 21, 2017**

The stumble through yesterday went really well and the group is ready to take the next step. We have begun our third pass through the play. Detailing and specifying is part of the goal, as well as intensifying. In particular, I am looking to flag and clarify moments that are public or private, signposts that signify the stages of “fed-’up-ness” (e.g. Each time Germaine makes them go back to work), stage pictures that also tell this story (Germaine breaks up a stage picture to try and get

them seated and stamping); passive-aggressive moments; jealous moments; nodes in the play.

I continue to work individually and collectively on monologues, collectively if the other characters are needed in the room for someone's speech. We are working on deepening and opening; that these monologues are a risk for the characters but also an opportunity to open up to the audience and confide; seek solace from; seek forgiveness from; seek sympathy, money, praise, anything from. In speaking to Tom after the run through yesterday, I was struck by the image of "deep sea diving" when going into these monologues, and that they are in great contrast to the scenes, where nobody trusts anybody enough to say these things.

### **February 24, 2017**

We have done a couple of run-throughs this week and many specific work sessions. It is paying off. Lines continue to be an issue sometimes, however, and cues, so I have called for line runs three times this week – an hour and a half per session. This is helping. It is a text heavy play.

Morale overall is good. I had a private chat with an actor yesterday who was worried she wasn't doing her best work. She approached me. I reassured her that her work was very strong, and that I would tell her if I thought otherwise. She admitted to being really tired and probably that was part of her emotional stress. (These eight-hour days during reading week have taken their toll on the cast's energy.) Today she was beaming and really did a fabulous run-through.

I reinforced for the whole cast at end of day that I thought they were all doing excellent work, that this was already a strong show, and that we are making great progress every rehearsal. I thanked them for their work, and tomorrow is a slightly shorter day.

**March 2, 2017**

We have been running in the Freddy Wood Theatre this week and learning spatially from that experience. I feel like we need now to go back to focus a bit more on some monologue work, and scene work, which will be our focus for Saturday. We have less room onstage than anticipated so things are being tweaked here and there. The sense of rats in a cage, however, is exemplified by lack of space and it is terrific to see all these women piled into the kitchen, all over the furniture, and sitting aloft the pantry shelf. I am glad that the set designers agreed with my decision to move the back wall down stage a few feet; the kitchen needs to be cramped.

**March 10, 2017**

Paper tech, levels session and Q2Q have been accomplished over the last several days. I am also doing acting rehearsals during the day with some folks that I feel are in need of it. One of the acting challenges of this show is to be emotionally connected to the material and able to play in a style that is heightened.

Getting the actors to own the given circumstances continues to be a major priority, and I am doing my best to give them ideas and tools to do that. Sometimes I suggest borrowing situations from their life to meet the needs of a scene, sometimes I suggest using their imaginations in conjunction with that. On a technical level, I ask them to slow down and try to find specific images for what they are saying, and actions. Reminding them to breathe is also crucial; to stay grounded even though the stakes are high.

From a technical and design point of view, I have been pretty satisfied with the process. The set designers and I have had a fulsome process starting in the fall, as have I and the sound designer and costume designer. The lighting designer was unable to make any of the group design

meetings scheduled from September to February. We met once at a coffee shop in the evening. This has been difficult. As a result, her plot was not based on conversations or a process with me, but solely on her assumptions about the script. And even though we did paper tech all together, the cues were not where I had indicated them, she seemed to not understand the world of the play as I envisioned it, nor were the cues the length I had requested at the paper tech. As a result, this has been a challenging experience. Patience and my optimum communication skills are key to this working out eventually.

I endeavored to employ my best communication skills during tech and as it turned out, we ended cue to cue early. My stage manager has been fantastic through all this.

### **March 16, 2017: Opening Night**



Figure 10: Rose explains holy matrimony. S. Hicks. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

What a powerful event! The actors were on high-octane energy and delivered a tight tour de force! Standing ovation and peals of laughter. I hope they can sustain this rhythm and specificity throughout the run. A bit loud at times, perhaps, but they'll settle into it. The world of these women *is* raucous, and their monologues provide a soft and vulnerable respite as the characters appeal to the audience in various ways. This contrast, between the public and private worlds, was very effective and affecting to the audience. During speeches, you could have heard a pin drop, as they say.

## The Back Page

What literally happens:

Germain Lauzon wins a million stamps. She invites her two sisters and a bunch of friends and neighbours over to help her paste them into booklets so she can redeem them for furniture and appliances. Her friends and family steal the stamps from her.

What I want the audience to think about after:

**Themes:** Trying to maintain or raise status within the tribe. The economy of envy in an oppressive and confined context, its resulting self-loathing, victimization, rage.

The Big Picture in the Trump World [sadly, we're not post-Trump yet]: This is what it looks like when everyone is out for themselves.

I also want to simply raise the audience's awareness regarding what it was like to be a French-Canadian woman in working-poor east Montreal in 1965; to taste the smothering brutality.

Women did not have equal rights under the law with men (women were considered dependants) and, as Tremblay illustrates in *Les Belles-soeurs* and other works, women were often mistreated by their husbands; women could not access birth control or abortions due to Catholicism, could not divorce, could not afford (nor was it socially acceptable) a higher education and thus other possibilities for themselves. What women did was get married and pregnant, begin the cycle of raising kids on very little money in run-down tenement buildings where the back alley was the playground, and do endless house work. The ramifications of this kind of existence is that "family relations are a nightmare of painful and negative emotions that result from a total lack of love: and the institution of the family itself is viewed by both older and younger members as a

virtually escape-proof trap” (Usmiani, *Tremblay* 55). The family is basically seen by Tremblay as a means for the Powers that Be to control and oppress.

Tremblay wrote this play in homage to the women he grew up with, but also to expose them. He wanted to kill any sentimental notion of the ideal French-Canadian family.

This idea of the *economy of envy* is throughout Tremblay’s play. It fuels the women. What is the audience’s relationship to envy in their lives?

Does this period piece impact their self-image as a Canadian?

As referenced at the beginning of this thesis, we know through the recent work of some economists that *envy* or relative wealth in North American society is a stronger motivator than greed. Evidently, we Canadians live in an economy of envy. Studies done around the ‘envy economy’ have revealed that not only is envy a great motivator, but that the vast majority of people when given a choice between great wealth and less wealth will take less wealth if they are assured that their peers have even less than them. Context is everything. Status within the tribe, therefore, is more important than one’s own personal happiness. It is also a sign that *schadenfreude* is an intricate part of the envy economy.

Tremblay exposes this in *Les Belles-soeurs* without preaching. He illustrates graphically envy in context impacting a group of Quebecois working poor in Montreal circa 1965. The women do nothing but bitterly complain about their lot in life, compare themselves to each other, try and tear each other down a notch, and at the same time build themselves up. It is an orgy of self-loathing, mutual hatred, and misplaced frustration. We also, as an audience, experience the oppressiveness of classism and poverty, and the blatant sexism of Canadian society at that time. These things cannot be overstated. This is Canada, after all, and not that long ago. We have to



own it, and as a society develop a real ability to be self-critical, not just while looking back but also in the present. Racist, misogynist attitudes morph and remain, insidiously, within our polite society. For example, diversity in the work place (diversity meaning gender, cultural background, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability) is not equitable in Canadian theatre. We have looked at some of the harrowing numbers from Rebecca Burtons study with regards to gender inequity, but there are even more harrowing numbers when it comes to other forms of diversity. Perhaps things do not change without legislation or incentive. If you force behavior to change with law or financial incentive, attitudes will soon follow.



Figure 11: Pierrette gets Angéline to confess. C. Phillips-Grande, S. Vellani. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

## **Post-Production Thoughts**

### **March 22, 2017: Talkback**

The show is holding up pretty well. A bit sloppier, but not too much; a couple of dropped cues, usually by the same actors, and rhythm not quite as tight in Act One. I am giving some notes to the stage manager Patricia to pass along.

The audience tonight was very attentive, and about 40 stayed for the talkback. Great questions: Why did the walls fall? What is it like for 20-year-old student actors to play middle-aged working-class women? Why did you choose this play/why is it still relevant? Everyone got a chance to speak. I introduced the designers, as did Tom, and the set designers spoke about the design choices they had made and why. The chat lasted over 30 minutes. Very engaging.

### **Challenges**

I stated earlier that I thought that a big challenge would be (and it was) maintaining the razor-sharp tension, the high stakes in Germaine's battleground kitchen, throughout the play, as this requires so much from the actors. With incredibly high stakes, internal choices need to be very specific and in relationship to specific other people at all times, and the energy to maintain that is enormous. The show also requires that these young actors be able to deeply own their characters' given circumstances. As these are young student actors, this is an ongoing challenge to play women so much older and so much more experienced and world-weary.

As a result, there is sometimes too much yelling. A woman in the audience pointed that out tonight, that she felt that the first act had too much yelling. I would agree that this was a problem for some of the performances. There were nights when the given circumstances and clarity of action were better fulfilled, and thus it did not come across as simply yelling. Something I have

observed is that when the actors are able to be specific and really own their given circumstances, the volume of the group dynamics in the kitchen does not seem to be as much of an issue. I think also that English Canadians are not used to families who are loud with each other, and this is a cultural difference. I had some French Canadians from Montreal in the audience one night tell me that this is the volume at which their family operated, and it seemed true to them. However, this does not negate the comment by the woman who stated that she felt the first act had too much yelling in it; I am simply contextualizing the choice.

### **April 11, 2017**

“Vive le Quebec libre!” When Charles de Gaulle uttered these words while visiting Montréal in 1967 for Expo, he stirred strong passions in the people, and unwittingly gave them hope for a better future. How Tremblay translates this into the play is through false hope; the empty and meaningless hope that comes from winning stuff for free.

Our Bingo sequence in the play was a light-hearted romp with flashing lights and fun choreography; granted it was ironic, but I wonder if an even darker approach might have been an interesting and effective way to go. The Chinese Dogs and the Ashtray Floor lamps could have been imbued with profound importance, a deeper and more nationalistic pride, in the spirit of de Gaulle’s statement, “Long Live Free Quebec!”

Moreover, the absurdity and utter hopelessness of worshipping and believing in the acquisition of cheap ornaments would perhaps have struck a blacker chord, and been more in keeping with my take on the rest of the play, and the hollowness of being at the bottom of the food chain in an envy economy.

In the beginning, there was an idea floated that the women would be playing “instruments” in

some of the choral pieces. This idea was let go of. Originally, characters may have banged on things in a crude way: someone with a coke bottle she tings with a fork; other appliances/kitchen stuff that actually make noise used like instruments; a metal container holding cutlery someone shakes; or pounding on the laundry detergent box. This idea was dismissed because it seemed not to fit with the very primal, grounded act of simply stomping one's feet and pounding one's fists on the tables. I did not want to undermine the simplicity, the power of the stomping feet and pounding fists, did not want to decorate this up with what started to seem like a gimmick, so the instrument idea was not pursued. I am not sure if this was the correct decision, and if given more rehearsal time I think I would have persevered with this as an exploration and a possibility.



Figure 12: Choral complaining. S. Hicks, N. Backerman. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

Regarding the women not having the awareness of their collective power, I tried to keep them all isolated with lighting, so that even when the five are downstage in a kind of chorus line with

their chairs in “This stupid rotten life”, they each have a separate footlight illuminating them. In the Bingo scene, I had them isolated by lighting and by space and levels, all on different levels (chairs, tables, the floor, etc.) and in specials. With their physical actions, they were all unique from each character, but alike in their repetitiveness and maybe a couple of things that were physically similar. I think these staging ideas underscored well the isolation and obliviousness of the women to each other and their collective predicament. I think that I would go further, if there is a next time, with the isolation effects: e.g. the women spread out farther across a wider stage, with clearer delineation between them, actual darkness between them, more levels.

**April 27, 2017**

*Maudite vie plate!* Staging the end of the play:

It was important to me that we echo this phrase somewhere besides Marie-Ange’s tirade, so I decided to have it repeated at the end of the play. When Germaine is realizing that she has lost everything, and her friends and family have deeply betrayed her, the very people that took her dreams from her surround her and chant “This stupid rotten life.” Instead of any kind of solace or trace of an apology, the knife is twisted, and those she trusted most basically chant, *you will never escape*, with the words *this stupid rotten life*. Based on audience feedback and what I perceived while sitting in the audience, this was very impactful, and continuing the robotic choral work Tremblay sets up early in the play made sense within the world created.

The gradual build from whisper to roar seemed also to really affect the audience. At the characters’ final show-down, when they snap to the audience and directly address them with the last shout out of “This stupid rotten life!”, it allowed me to hold the ensuing stage picture in a strong final tableau: Germaine at the top of Mount Envy (tables stacked during the chaos of the



stamp stealing), arms outstretched pleading to God, the stamps gently falling on her as the walls of her world literally fell to the ground. As the walls fall, Olivine sings a chorus of “O Canada.” Many people commented on how powerful the final stage picture was, and the build up to it. (*The Georgia Straight* reviewer Andrea Warner, my fellow MFA cohort Lauren Taylor, and reviewer Jo Ledingham.).



Figure 13: Germaine begs God for her stamps back. B. Henderson, S. Hicks, S. Michaud, T. Scott, T. Grauman, N. Backerman, R. Denis, S. Niewerth, D. Rusu-Banu, O. Lang. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

The top of Act Two saw the scene I called “The Trial of Angéline.” This was staged on many levels, with the older generation on top of and surrounding the two big tables, some on chairs, and Angéline on trial downstage left (with Pierrette, her only ally,) and the younger generation at the very back standing on the kitchen countertop, speaking over top of the older judgmental women. It was gut-wrenching to watch Angéline pleading for understanding from Rhéauna, who was downstage centre, as the other women condemned her brutally. Their unison speech,

stomping feet and hands, and choreographed movement made them seem an angry mob, but also an irrational and frighteningly organized mass of conservative society. They were physically raised up and lit in blue, a frightening spectacle of power. The youth yelling interjections over top of them provided a glimpse of hope and protest, lit in bright red. I chose these colours as a cheeky reference to blue (Union Nationale Party) equalling heaven and red (Liberal Party) equalling hell, as the UNP propaganda used to state. The overwhelming conclusion of this scene is that the status quo prevails; no one sat down until the condemnation was fulfilled by Rhéauna's final act of rejection – walking away from Angéline after giving her the ultimatum, "It's me or the club" (Tremblay 70). The stage picture melted after that, with everyone slowly resuming their seats around their stamping tables, and Angéline and Pierrette left on the outskirts of civil society, banished to the downstage right corner where the outcasts in this world meet and contrive and support each other. The feedback I received was that this was a powerful scene. My observations (from the six performances that I saw) was that it was consistently so, as people were absolutely silent and transfixed on Angéline,

Carey, Sammie and I had discussed putting a contact mic on the main table and some kind of amplification on the downstage floor, but this idea was released. In rehearsal, we discovered that the live unadulterated sound of stomping feet and fists hitting the tables was more primitive and tribal in feeling; it underscored their desperation, poverty, and humanity with its simplicity. As a result, a kind of low-tech integrity was maintained.

The other spot of respite on our stage for those who disagreed with the status quo of this suffocating world, for the young and Pierrette, was the top shelf of the pantry. Again, utilizing height as a means of getting up and out of this sinking pit of misery, I often had Pierrette perched at the top of the enormous pantry unit, joined by Lise and sometimes Linda during the course of

the play. Playing with levels as a way of illustrating social status – real or imagined – was also woven into this convention. Climbing the tall pantry also represented risk; it was a very high climb, especially in heels, and although the actors were perfectly safe because it was well-built and screwed to the floor, the audiences experience was that of watching them do something contextually bold and courageous. A small act of defiance.



Figure 14: Pierrette and Linda conspire atop the pantry. C. Phillips-Grande, H. Elric. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

I realized that there is a relentless darkness to this play, and some audience members found this emotionally exhausting. The choreography and inventive physicality of the production surprised some people, and seemed to help keep them engaged. My choices around having the furniture walked over, crawled over, stood upon and danced upon, really paid off. It also furthered the idea that these people are rats trapped in a cage, that they have little respect for their own homes or each other's, and that they are all trying to climb out of this sink hole even if it means crawling



over each other or stacking and climbing the furniture. This idea was born early on when I had the notion to have a “cockroach” dance at the top of the show, a movement pastiche where every character crawls across the stage over each other in a frenzy, a metaphor for them being trapped. We developed the idea into a vocabulary that informed the entire production as opposed to just putting it into a “number” at the top of the show.

*The Dance of the Appliances* (which we created and added – it is not in the play) was staged at the top of Act Two as a way of thwarting audience expectations. I assumed that the audience, having been left hanging with Pierrette’s shocking entrance at the end of Act One, would be expecting the play to pick up right where it left off. In this way, their expectations were thwarted. Unfolding before the second act actually starts, the dance was intended to strike a chord of Brechtian pathos, with Germaine wearing oven gloves, dancing seductively with her glow-in-the-dark appliances all lit by black lights. Audiences consistently roared with laughter, and I hope my desired intent was effective.

The point was to showcase Germaine’s acquisitive lust for material goods. Black light was chosen as it was popular in the 1960s, and it was a way of having the appliances look shabby and ugly by regular stage light, and then magically transform and become aglow and larger than life in Germaine’s dream/dance sequence.

The dance number was also intended to alienate us from becoming sentimental about Germaine’s plight, and to exhilarate us after much exhausting in-fighting during Act One. By having Germaine make love to her kitchen appliances through direct address dance (to the song “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons), bombastically and

unashamedly, with a cheesy black light effect, I was hoping to satirize her lust for materiality, thereby alienating and exhilarating the audience while also thwarting our expectations.

Another motivation for the dance was that I was aware that if the world of Germaine's kitchen is too intolerable, then we need moments of humour as relief, and to add texture and contrast. This dance seemed to serve that end well, as did the monologues, although in a different way.

Staged as very intimate confessionals in spotlights, direct address to the audience and thus breaking the fourth wall, the monologues were a chance for vulnerability, a slower tempo, a real human connection between audience and performer. Judging from the dead quiet of the audience during these monologues, and the intense focus and subtle reactions I could hear during the speeches (especially Rose's speech about her marital problems), this seemed to work really well. We created a harrowing roller coaster ride as we roared through the scenes, and then suspend the audience – perhaps upside down – in these oasis moments of deeper and more intimate understanding.



Figure 15: Angéline, ostracized, pleads for understanding. S. Vellani. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

“Brown sets up an Act 2 that is devastatingly real and raw, and her cast delivers beautifully. The bitterness that has hardened these women is borne directly from their suffocating oppression, a point that’s made all too real when the brash, short-fused Rose (Sarah Jane) opens up about what her marriage is really like. ‘Women are grabbed by the throat and they stay that way, right to the end,’ she says” (Warner).

The choreography, as I discussed earlier, was inspired by Quebecois step dancing, but made more grotesque and hardened. We created our own physical vocabulary based on stomping; it had an earthy, rhythmic, angry, tribal feel that seemed absolutely right for this world. People used feet and hands to stomp or hit the tabletops. The repetitive simplicity of this was to have an accumulative effect. Like inmates sentenced to life (characters) pleading and complaining to the guards (audience), the sound choices were meant to underscore a kind of base, desperate hopelessness. These sound choices furthered my notion that this play is very musical, rhythmic: an oratorio for 15 women.

Everything was flavoured by the phrase “This stupid rotten life.” The existential dilemma of these women permeated the scenes, duologues, and physicality. Only in the monologues to the audience was there a glimmer of longing, of humanity, of dreams still to be realized if only things were different, if only the audience would help them.

From the motif, “This stupid rotten life,” springs the characters’ hopelessness, self-victimization, frustration, jealousy, and desire to raise their status within the tribe at any cost. Anyone who doesn’t buy into the “stupid rotten life” fatalistic point of view, such as Pierrette, is condemned and ostracized from the tribe. Pierrette dares to dream of a life outside of the prescribed perimeter of a working poor Catholic housewife in east Montreal, and if she is happy and

successful, the others have wasted their lives in drudgery for nothing. Pierrette is also sexually liberated, which in Germaine's world means she is going to hell. But Pierrette is not happy, unbeknownst to the rest of them, and in Tremblay's world and in our production, there is a sense that Pierrette is at the end of her tether and that this is her last-ditch effort to try and reconnect with her family and get some support so she can invent a new life from her current one. She pleads with her sister Germaine at the end of the play, saying that she is on her side.

Germaine rejects Pierrette outright, even though Pierrette has been helping Germaine try and get her stamps back. Germaine consciously refuses to accept her sister. This was an important node to clarify, and we worked on it in rehearsal as a conscious, specific moment. Germaine could accept Pierrette, she could forgive her, she could open her mind and heart, but she *consciously chooses* not to. It's an important Brechtian moment. To make this absolutely clear, I chose to have the frenzied stamp stealing scene suddenly snap into slow motion, all except Pierrette and Germaine who were downstage centre in a spotlight. I hope this helped us all focus on the climactic choice, and reveal the vulgar faces of the women surrounding Pierrette and Germaine in their slow-motion attack of each other. My intent was to make it like a close-up of the ugliness of their world, and Germaine is offered a chance within that ugliness to redeem herself with Pierrette, a chance she forgoes.

I choose to have Pierrette leave the stage slowly, disillusioned, realizing there is nothing she can do to win the love and support of her family because they are too deeply poisoned, they will never change. And without that hope for change, Pierrette leaves the stage without a plan or support. She is condemned to freedom, and must take responsibility for herself alone now. The audience and I do not know if she will be able to. It is not resolved.

There is a possibility of change, and therefore hope, with Linda and her friends, the younger generation. I chose to have them exit laughing at the end of the play, which is not in the script. I chose this so that they are seen acknowledging the ludicrous, petty behavior of their parents' generation; they are seen acknowledging, but not participating in, the older generation's pain, mistakes, and ultimate self-destruction. Linda and Lise in particular want more out of life, and their defiance at the end, and ability to laugh at the absurdity of the previous generation, liberates them enough to be able to try and define their own destiny. Walking out laughing underlined this, I think, and gave the audience a crumb of hope as they leave the theatre. I am not absolutely sure if the audience experienced it that way, but that was my intention with the choice.

In hindsight, an important directorial insight that informed a lot of my specific choices was that these women are all saying the same thing, but are not conscious of their collective power. This production was the moment before social awareness; their poverty, oppressive environment, lack of education and desperate anger coupled with their choice to not change in any real way, made them blind to their collective power. The many lighting specials and different levels used in the show attempted to highlight their isolation, their inability to see beyond their own shrunken horizon; the movement sequences during the choral sections, where they are all saying the same thing, slipped in and out of being in unison to being completely idiosyncratic to the character. I hope that the audience longed, while watching them, for more synchronicity, more unison. Or for them to look over into their neighbour's "special" and realize that they are all in this together. I tried to create this tension, of the audience wanting these women to look around and bond with each other, and to maintain this tension right through to the end of the play. Germaine's refusal to look Pierrette in the eye and accept her help, accept her humanity, represents the fatal flaw of these women. But this flaw is their choice. The only escape from this kind of intolerant

stubbornness, then, is to leave (like Pierrette and the younger generation), or to have the whole world come crashing down around you (Germaine and her generation.)

Regarding playing satire, this required of the actors “organic truth” (Stanislavski) and characters making choices (Brecht.) We needed to believe the characters’ struggles, which makes it tragic, and see that there are choices the characters aren’t making, which makes it social satire. In our case, it also included a heightened theatrical style, non-naturalistic, in both acting and design.

The acting had to be based on emotional stakes that are real and allow for intimacy with the audience, but also when necessary a broad physical/vocal acting style. In sync with these stylistic choices: the exaggerated size of the kitchen appliances; the enormous non-naturalistic photo-bearing windows that looked onto a ghetto; the disturbingly tall walls of the room that trapped them; the rhythms, gestures, use of suspensions in rhythm; no motion tableaux, slow motion sections, choral vocalizations and choreography; the walking on furniture and climbing pantry shelves; the layering and building of these things over time. These were all an attempt to feed the heightened style of the piece. These conventions accumulated and became more outrageous as the play developed. My intent was for these conventions to help articulate the themes of the play, and kept the audience’s horizon of expectation constantly expanding.

Ultimately, for me, one of the most significant aspects of this production and this play is putting fifteen women actors onstage, and fifteen working class, multi-generational women characters onstage. In 1968, it was revolutionary. Today, sadly, it is the same.



Figure 16: Thérèse beats her mother in law Olivine with her purse. S. Michaud, S. Hicks, N. Backerman, D. Rusu-Baru, S. Niewerth, B. Henderson. Photo credit: Javier Sotres

As earlier stated, a revealing 2006 report written by Rebecca Burton entitled “Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre - A Report on the Phase One Findings of Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women’s Initiative”, we learn that male actors are hired two to one over women actors, despite the fact that well over 50% of students studying to be actors are female. We also learn that in regards to the hiring of women directors, playwright, and Artistic Directors of well-funded regional theatres, the statistics show that women comprise less than 30% of these roles across the board (Burton 23).

This study is absolutely groundbreaking in its scientific research and analysis of our Canadian Theatre ecology, exposing its shameful lack of diversity, and inherent, institutionalized sexism. We should consider Lucy Kerbal’s Tonic Advance Programme in London which forces organizations to face up to how they decide who they hire.



In Tremblay's courageous and forward-thinking oratorio for fifteen voices, we experience the writing of a marginalized gay man who had the compassion and foresight to put onstage the voices of 15 marginalized, three-dimensional, flawed, human women.

“Incendiary interpretation of *Les Belles-soeurs*” (Warner)

“This is a hugely entertaining production. Director Diane Brown makes the script alive, funny and poignant.” (Ledingham)



Figure 17: Stamp stealing frenzy. S. Hicks, T. Grauman, S. Michaud, T. Scott, S. Struthers, C. Phillips-Grande, N. Backerman, B. Henderson. Photo credit: Javier Sotres



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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Important Dates in Québec Theatre History

1606 – *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France*, first recorded performance on Canadian soil (but not in Québec).

1694 – *Tartuffe* controversy; francophone performance severely curtailed for 200 years.

1759 – Fall of Québec: Wolfe and Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham.

1790 – *Colas et Colinette*: first Canadian operetta. At this time, Québec's eastern townships were settled largely through Loyalist immigration from the U.S.

1825 – Theatre Royal (a.k.a. Molson Theatre) built in Montreal. It was demolished in 1844, but a second Theatre Royal was erected in 1852. Both served as venues for touring stars.

1837 – Louis-Joseph Papineau leads rebellion in Lower Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie in Upper Canada. In the aftermath, the Durham Report recommends union of the two colonies, with assimilation of French majority as its ultimate goal.

1867 – Confederation of four of the remaining British colonies in North America.

1880-1917 – “The Divine Sarah” Bernhardt visits Québec 10 times; indigenous francophone professional theatre begins to appear.

1898 – St. Jean Baptiste Society builds the Monument National.

1921 – Sensational success of *Aurore, l'enfant martyre*.

1936-1959 – Maurice Duplessis era (“the dark ages”).

1937 – Père Emile Legault founds Les Compagnons de St. Laurent. Initially it produced only religious drama, then drama which was spiritual by implication (*Antigone*.) Company operated until 1952.

1938 – Gratien G  linas produces first *Fridolinons* revue.

1946. CBC Radio employment important to development of professional artists in Qu  bec.

1947 – Yvette Brind’Amour founds Th   tre du Rideau Vert.

1948 – Sensational premi  re of G  linas’ *Tit Coq*.

1948-52 - Legault’s Compagnons dominate the DDF Final Festivals.

1949 – Long strike at Asbestos foreshadows the Quiet Revolution.

1951 – Th   tre du Nouveau Monde (TNM) founded by two of Legault’s prot  g  s, Jean-Louis Roux and Jean Gascon. The company’s first big success was *Tartuffe* in 1952.

1953 – Marcel Dub  ’s *Zone* galvanizes DDF Final at Victoria.

1956 – G  linas, Gascon, Roux and TNM invited to Stratford.

1958 – G  linas founds the Com  die-Canadienne, seeking to produce a national and a popular theatre. First success was G  linas’ second play, *Bousille et les Justes*. The company operated until 1970.

1960-66 – Jean Lesage’s Liberals displace the Union Nationale; the flowering of the Quiet Revolution.

1960 – National Theatre School opens in Montreal.

1963 – FLQ founded; mailbox bombings begin.

1965 – Pierre Vallières joins FLQ. Later, in prison, he writes *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*.

1965 – Founding of CEAD, to encourage new playwriting.

1966 – Gélinas produces *Hier les enfants dansaient*.

1967 – Expo 67 in Montreal; Charles de Gaulle shouts “Vive le Québec libre”.

1968 – Michel Tremblay’s *Les Belles-soeurs*, directed by André Brassard, is the first play to use “joual” on stage (francophone street dialect of Montreal) and to put fifteen working class women talking about working class things on upper middle-class stages.

1968 – Pierre Trudeau becomes Prime Minister; René Lévesque founds the Parti Québécois.

1970 – The October Crisis: civil rights suspended, Pierre Laporte murdered.

1973 – Bill Glassco stages *Forever Yours, Marie-Lou* at Tarragon in Toronto (the first Tremblay play to be done in English) and Glassco and John Van Burek put on *Les Belles-soeurs* in English, directed by André Brassard, at the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto.

1975 – Lévesque’s Parti Québécois wins provincial election.

1976 – Summer Olympics in Montreal.

1980 – The Québec Referendum: independence is rejected.

1982 – Repatriation of Canadian constitution, with Québec left out.

1990 – Failure of Meech Lake accord.

1992 – October 26 – referendum on new Charlottetown accord.

1994 – Robert Lepage co-founds Ex Machina in Quebec City.

## **Appendix B: Director's Program Notes – *Les Belles-soeurs***

Written in 1965 during Quebec's Quiet Revolution, Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs* paints a brutally honest portrait of his childhood neighbourhood in east Montreal and the women he grew up around. The play premiered at the Théâtre du Rideau Vert in 1968 and changed the landscape of Quebec and indeed Canadian theatre forever. It has since been translated into over 30 languages, and is Tremblay's most popular work.

**“I want to put a bomb in the family cell. I hate what the family did to me, and the people of my country.” - Michel Tremblay.**

Tremblay wrote the play as an act of protest against the oppressive English elite and Catholic Church who had dominated Quebec life and culture for 300 years. He dared to put working class women talking about working class things on upper middle-class stages, using a shunned Quebecois dialect, *joual*. He unabashedly exposed the women's misery and oppression, humour and humanity, religious hypocrisy and hopelessness.

**“One woman complaining is pitiful. Five women saying they are unhappy with their lives at the same time is the beginning of a revolution.” – Michel Tremblay.**

*Les Belles-soeurs* is not only still relevant in its searing indictment of systemic sexism (Quebec women at that time were not allowed to divorce, to access safe and legal abortions, or to enjoy equal rights under the law as they were considered dependents), it is also a powerful illustration of our envy economy in action, and how status is gained and maintained within the tribe. Everything is a competition, even who is most unhappy.

In this era of Trump, where racism, misogyny, and other hate-values of rudderless capitalism are being normalized, it is disturbing to realize how timely this piece is, how well it reveals what ‘everyone out for themselves’ looks like, and at what cost to the characters personally.

I hope you enjoy our production of *Les Belles-soeurs* on the eve of it’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and on the eve of Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup>.

~ Diane Brown, director



## Appendix C: Creative Summation

The creative agenda behind my thesis production of *Les Belles-soeurs* and its summary are:

1. **To deepen my life-long commitment to Quebec's contemporary canon in English translation.** Vancouverites do not get a lot of exposure to the Quebec canon, and it is partly because the two solitudes in some ways still exist. Quebec theatre culture is so completely different than English Canadian theatre culture, historically and aesthetically. Not to make gross generalizations, but I have found that much of the text-based contemporary Quebec canon is non-linear, non plot-driven, character-driven work that relies very much on the careful use of language (its poetry and nuance,) imagery, sometimes searing social satire, and often non-naturalistic staging techniques.
2. **To further diversity in theatre, particularly through the voices of women.** It is still startling and empowering to see so many strong, multi-generational female characters onstage together, without a single man. The marginalized voices of Tremblay's characters speak across the decades and across any cultural boundaries because of this fact alone.
3. **To make apparent the import and relevance of this work to English Canadians in both content and style.** Again, putting centre stage for two hours fifteen working poor women complaining about the quality of life in Canada is still relevant. Poverty is not immune to Canadian society, nor is systemic sexism or bigotry of many kinds (NOTE: white supremacy groups are not just undergoing a renaissance in the US. As I write this, there is an ultra-right wing rally planned for Vancouver this Saturday Aug. 19th!) The normalization of hate values is in direct relationship with the polarizing politics of the day – similar but different than the polarizing politics surrounding Tremblay's play. The

idea of an ‘envy economy’, which informs our world in so many ways, is something that Tremblay illustrated to us 50 years ago; he showed us that we are not a group of rugged individuals trying to fulfill our singular potential, (a greed-based economy), but rather a group of interdependent creatures vying to out-do each other at any cost within a particular social context (an envy-based economy). The style of the piece – a harsh realism contrasted by a heightened non-naturalism – is still intoxicating and relevant contemporary staging vocabulary.

Theatre is a great humanizing influence in our society, through moments of teaching or demonstration – as in Brecht – and moments of compassion and empathy, as in Stanislavski. I consciously tried to utilize both of these great directors’ techniques to help bring to life my production of Tremblay’s masterpiece, to fulfill my creative agenda through their techniques and Tremblay’s words and characters.

Here is a list of **Brechtian techniques** used in our production of *Les Belles-soeurs* to help “make strange” and thus make the audience more aware and critical: a concise and conscious use of rhythm (abrupt rhythm changes, elongated suspensions of no motion and silence), direct address, choral speaking, choreographed numbers, chanting, climbing over furniture, nodes in the play deliberately noted by characters who would then make *choices we could see* (and choices not made that we could see.)

**Stanislavskian techniques** used to further audience buy-in and believability: owning given circumstances through utilizing Stanislavski’s magic “what if”. This technique helps actors to personalize characters in a way that does not require them to share the same experiences as the characters. I also had them always play an action on every line and be very specific about what their character wants from whom at all times and (thus revealing character through the action and

not the words), and through all these Stanislavskian techniques an organic, emotional ‘truth’ will be perceived by the audience.

I note with interest that both Stanislavski and Brecht think that the theatres’ relationship with its audience is paramount. What is expected of their audiences is quite different. The dramatic theatre is representational and asks us to empathize, sympathize, and enjoy an emotional catharsis. The epic theatre, presentational, calls on its audience to act – to think, judge, and enjoy a rational response. The actors, too, are empowered by both styles of theatre, although very different things are asked of them as well.

Regarding playing satire, this required of the actors “organic truth” (Stanislavski) and characters making choices (Brecht.) We needed to believe the characters’ struggles, which made it tragic, and see that there are choices the characters aren’t making, which made it social satire.

Overall, my best experiences in the theatre are a marriage of these two; a production that calls upon all of my capacities as a feeling, compassionate, social creature and as a thinking being capable of critical thought and responsible action. I hope I was successful at helping create both of those experiences for audiences at *Les Belles-soeurs*.