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The Company of Sirens, *Shelter from Assault*

Women, Popular Theatre, and Social Action: Interviews with Cynthia Grant and the Sistren Theatre Collective

MARIA DI CENZO and SUSAN BENNETT

“**B**REAKING THE SURFACE,” an interactive festival/conference on women, theatre, and social action, was held at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, in November 1991. Co-hosted by the University’s Department of Drama and Maenad Productions (Calgary’s first and only women’s theatre collective), the five-day event involved performances, workshops, presentations of research, and panel discussions. It attracted more than 150 delegates from across Canada, the United States, England, Wales, Jamaica, and Australia. The festival/conference was designed to offer the experience and exploration of women’s theatre concerned with bringing about social change, and the Organizers (Kathleen Foreman and Susan Bennett) brought together the all-too-often separated communities of academicians and practitioners. The interaction between these communities afforded both aesthetic and critical perspectives of the techniques, theories, and divergent practices of women artists and theatre groups concerned with social action.

While the performance component offered many different expressions of women’s voices, the workshops and panel discussions explored the processes through which women have claimed their own spaces and agendas in the creation of theatre. This has meant, in many cases, of course, that women artists have had to create or seek out new ventures and establish their own, non-traditional, theatre audiences. In getting feminist agendas into theatrical production — the staging of agitational work concerned with provoking change in the audiences’ ways of seeing and thinking — many of the artists have developed complex and highly effective

strategies for working collectively. What follows looks to the work of two such theatre groups, The Company of Sirens (based in Toronto, Canada) and Sistren Theatre Collective (from Kingston, Jamaica). The interview with Cynthia Grant, Sirens' Artistic Director, and the transcript of a discussion with Sistren members outline the processes employed by these groups to create theatre which engages clearly and pointedly with social, political, and economic issues.

I

The Company of Sirens: Feminist Theatre for Social Change

An Interview with Cynthia Grant, Co-Artistic Director

Conducted and introduced by Maria Di Genzo

Cynthia Grant is a founding member of the Toronto-based theatre group The Company of Sirens, a company formed by a number of feminist theatre artists in the mid-eighties that has since become a leading force in the popular theatre movement in Ontario. The Sirens' involvement with labour and social organizations began with *The Working People's Picture Show*, a play originally commissioned by Organized Working Women for their tenth anniversary convention in Toronto.¹

The Sirens perform their work in a variety of different contexts, most of which are outside of traditional theatre institutions. In their most recent season, they have tackled the issue of violence against women for both adult and young audiences. *Shelter from Assault* deals with the problem of wife assault, while *Whenever I Feel Afraid* examines violence against women and girls specifically for high school audiences.

Shelter from Assault, performed at "Breaking the Surface," reflects many of the important features of the Sirens' theatre practice. The show was developed on a collaborative basis and combines humorous sketches, popular songs, documented information, and moving personal accounts. The show portrays women who are victims not only of male violence but also of the indifference and incompetence of bureaucracy, and it examines these problems in their social, political, and economic contexts.

The performance style is presentational (making extensive use of direct address) and the staging is simple and portable. The performers themselves, both in and out of their roles, reflect the Sirens' concerns with representation in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orien-

tation, and language (anglophone/francophone), a diversity which is central to approaching social issues from different perspectives and making contact with audiences. And the audience is the priority in this kind of theatre work: the Sirens are committed to informing and empowering their audiences as well as entertaining them.

In the following interview, Cynthia Grant outlines the evolution of The Company of Sirens and focusses on some of the policies informing their work.

How has the work of The Company of Sirens evolved over the years?

At the time of our formation we had a commitment that was really twofold. On the one hand, many of us because of our backgrounds, as feminist activists and theatre artists, wanted to make work that would be highly accessible in community settings, whether that be a union hall or a community centre, a women's shelter or a government building. On the other hand, many of us also had a background in the avant-garde, in multidisciplinary, more imagistic theatre work. We had hoped always to develop a body of work that would reflect both those interests. At the time of forming the Sirens, this group of women had already developed *The Working People's Picture Show* and we were entirely unaware and unprepared for how popular that work would prove to become. That is, we are still performing it six years after its inception.

We have been successful at certain junctures in creating contexts where we could do performance art. In the early years of the Sirens, we did *Sirens' Soirees* and they were indeed salons in a basement theatre in downtown Toronto where women from different disciplines could come together with their work. Their work might well not be terribly refined, but in the early stages of development. We could have women doing pieces around lesbian identity (Amanda Hale and Linda Chartrand) as well as pieces about housework that would be quite crazy pieces. Women in fifties' ballgowns (Marilyn Mason and Diane Sokoloski) would be dressed as if they were going to a prom and then they would sing about the feminist community — very daring and fun work in a highly safe and intimate setting. We were able to do two pieces of work, *Sex Réalité* and *Mother Tongues*, which were around

women's identity with a twofold focus — one being women coming from different cultures and sharing their stories and the other being an emphasis on the sexual identity of the women.

Can you tell me a little about Mother Tongues? I think it's not as well known a production by the Sirens as, say, The Working People's Picture Show. WPPS is more familiar because it has toured so widely and because of the article in Canadian Theatre Review.

Well, *Mother Tongues* was a grand experiment in a small theatre setting in downtown Toronto and it was environmental with the audience sitting on cushions throughout the space. We based the idea in our minds on the earth/fire/water/air elemental metaphors so we had four corners to the space. Two of them were highly defined areas in that there were large sculptured goddess figures done by one of the visual artists working with us (Lyn Carter). One was an earth goddess whose body was metal covered in burlap and she had a chest-of-drawers torso. At the other end of the stage was a wedding cake-shaped goddess figure — you realized it was a wedding cake after it came into play because it would dance along a clothesline. Actually, the wedding cake was connected to my particular story in the show (not, of course, my *real* story) which had to do with marrying young and being part of the generation where men read *Playboy* and women read *Cosmo*, being dumped by a husband, finding myself out there in the world with a couple of kids and trying to discover how to live as a single mom in this area. There was a woman (Vivine Scarlett), who is a wonderful African dancer, who told a story related to trying ballet and coming to African dance as being her true expression. That story also included South African politics. Rita Kohli, a South Asian woman in the group, had beautiful poetic speeches about the experience of marriage for South African women, the potential for dowry death and suttee where the widow goes in after her husband to the pyre. Naturally, her story was connected to the fire imagery. It was a beautiful play really and was a highly collaborative work with a very exciting set of women who came from diverse backgrounds both in terms of their culture and their artistic background.

Shawna Dempsey was part of *Sex Realité*. In fact, her “We’re Talking Vulva” piece and her “Object/Subject of Desire” piece (the performances that Dempsey gave at “Breaking the Surface”) both had their first showing in settings that Sirens had created. So it’s great to see that Shawna has become such a prominent performance artist albeit outside our company because it makes one feel that those years of working together and playing around with the ideas is ongoing in her. In our own case, back with the Sirens, the demand for social action theatre has been utterly incredible. For the last season, we did three hundred performances.

I’d like to pick up on two of the ideas you’ve just spoken of: first, the idea of the collaborative process and, second, the multicultural approach. Perhaps we could start with the organizational values of the company. You do have different members, groups. In creating the shows, what kind of input do you get in researching your shows and how are they actually developed? What are your working methods in terms of the actual running of the company, but also in terms of creative process?

We have come to the point creatively where we realize there are so many variables that we don’t have a specific methodology that we employ each time. I’ll give you a couple of recent examples within the company to illustrate what I mean. We were commissioned by the Attorney General’s office to do a play on the legal system and the racial and gender biases within the system. In order to put that together, I brought in a number of quite new people to the company, some of whom didn’t have very well-developed theatre skills but who were very knowledgeable on the political front and who definitely had potential as performers. At the same time, we brought in some theatre people (males) who had backgrounds as leftists. And we had a resource writer (Fely Villasin) from the Philippines, who is a great activist in Toronto and, I believe, a talented playwright — that’s where she should put her energies, but she does not. I was what I called a Resource Director since in this case I did become a facilitator of sorts because the working method within that group was highly intellectual. We thrashed around and argued the politics of the issue. Improvisation work was not done very much at all but writing

happened in response to the point where people would be exploding and somebody would go away and write. After that, when the draft would come in, those of us who had more theatre skills would tend to rewrite but it was very much an equal input. Now, by and large, this could mean that the white male who was playing the Justice of the Peace would turn his greatest attention to that, and the members from different cultures would take responsibility for the statements that they would make so that Kenneth Charlette, who is a very, very talented Native performer (part of Native Earth), generated some fabulous material on Native issues which was quite inventive theatrically. So in that group the team actually talked a lot and improvised very little.

In other groups, where the backgrounds are more homogeneous and where those of us who have years of experience in the company own the knowledge more, we will tend then to set up situations of improv based on what we've talked about behind the scenes in terms of what the objectives are, what the style might be. So, creatively speaking, I find it difficult to say that there is a clear methodology that is always employed. We now have a set of different methods that we use. Another problem with the issue of collaboration is that we do have influxes of new group members and I believe that you really need a stable set of members to develop a methodology that will work each time. In the absence of that, we've been forced to adjust and constantly re-adjust as we receive new issues, new teams, and new objectives.

Let's move to address administration, funding, and representation. One of the issues which inevitably arises is that of representation and this is linked to your point earlier about multiculturalism, the need to be as inclusive as possible in providing a forum for diverse voices. You have, from the make-up of the group, obviously attempted to address this and could you describe how the policy evolved and how it influences the work you do and the audiences you perform for. Could you comment on the importance of multiculturalism particularly in our Canadian context?

The challenge to represent properly on stage — I think it's so essential at this juncture. If we are to do political theatre work — which has been our choice — we must represent. By the time we

formed the Sirens, a number of us had been involved in highly conflictual scenarios in the socialist-feminist community in Toronto around organizing International Women's Day in terms of who had the power, who had the say. As a result, we were quite sensitized to the issue of representation in a group on a stage. Furthermore, the audiences we were going to — from the beginning of Sirens — in terms of our work outside theatre venues involved unions and other organizations where the question around representation was very advanced and quite impressive. I think the work of unions on racism has been surprisingly in the forefront of the discussion, likewise on daycare and a number of other women's issues. At any point where our resolve would weaken due to whatever, we knew that we had a responsibility, both to ourselves and the company, but also to our audience. The audience would demand it. That's been very positive, I feel, and I don't feel enough of that happens in terms of traditional theatre venues, that they are hearing back from their audiences "you should represent me" as well as the white middle-class reality, which, as we know, very much dominates the theatre scene here. The theatre is lagging on the issue of representation. There is, in the English-Canadian theatre, institutionalized racism because the bulk of the money is going to the larger institutions where representation is not occurring. So I feel there needs to be a lot more movement on the part of other companies.

It's been a great joy and process of growth for all of us to share in each other's stories. It's always a political education that we are finding for all of us all the time and my own position as a white woman in the group sometimes comes under scrutiny. For instance, on the legal show with the cast members in terms of the politics of the work — they needed to be highly aware of the fact that I was white and, effectively, under that legal system I would be treated very well, much better automatically. I was certainly more aware of that after our research. It's been important and great. We have some wonderful women in the company. Some of our best company members have moved "up" in the theatre system and are working on the mainstages now so we can continue to recruit at all levels and that's a challenge.

I'd like to ask you just briefly about the issue of funding which is so central to all working theatre groups now. How does that affect in positive or negative ways your vision, particularly given the multicultural thrust in Canadian culture, and your attempt to secure funding?

Well, the first thing that needs to be known about the Canadian arts funding structure is how stratified it is, with the bulk of the money going to large institutions. Therefore Sirens' level of funding from the Arts Council is actually very low, a condition which we share with other small theatre companies whether they be a European-styled clown company, a gay theatre company or an avant-garde company — any of these companies in the three- to eight-year lifespan is funded fairly badly at the same level. So while we may be very successful in the community, we don't see significant advances in our core funding from the Arts Council. We do receive social service funding and that's been part of the reason we're doing more of the grassroots educational work. We are able to sustain a number of company members for at least half the year by focussing on popular feminist theatre work. At this point, it is a priority within Ontario with a social democratic government to encourage educational work on issues of sexism and racism. The culture folks may not view it as being really important to do this kind of education, but social service groups and other government agencies right now view it as very important. So we find our profile with them, with the Solicitor General's Ministry, the Attorney General's Ministry, the Ontario Women's Directorate, the Community and Social Service Ministry. These Ministries consider this work very important at this particular time and view it as an incredible cultural asset. Nevertheless, our level of funding is not great.

Perhaps you could give a forecast for the Company of Sirens. Where do you see your work fitting in now? Do you see any changes? Are you beginning to explore different areas?

Well, because of our rapid growth, it's almost as if we've become a big business. We have to put three vans on the road with twenty employees and that's quite a challenge. We have a very large pay-

roll. We have a great deal of responsibility to deliver this work and, to a degree, that has become a big problem because too many of us artists are losing the time to be artists because we have to administer. So I'm not sure that we won't try to cut back a bit on some of our work. To take a positive look, though, we are splitting the company this year. We're going to be forming a separate theatre-in-education company called "Theatre Action in Education" because our work in the schools has been wonderfully received and viewed as very important. Obviously, we're doing many things right.

Are there many other companies doing work in schools?

There are a number of theatre for young audiences companies but not very many of them focus on gender issues or feminist issues. That has been part of the reason for our growth into the schools because, for instance, the Ministry of Education Family Violence Prevention Initiative programme approached us with a commission to do a play that could be used in their efforts. That was based on our reputation as being adult educators through theatre. It looks very busy in the future. It is very rewarding to go out and see these significant numbers of people who do not have much theatre in their lives but who see the Sirens. They are fascinated that here is theatre, here's a message, that theatre can make the message fun, and they get involved in discussions afterwards as they try to change themselves or effect change within the system. Or they object to our message. That is sometimes even better, going out to audiences of police and doing our show on wife assault is very interesting. Some of the police are very defensive about it, about the issue and the importance that's being placed on it currently. When in *Shelter from Assault* we say "this war against women must stop" and we do a scene that represents the police not handling the situation at all well — they're bound to react a little, like "Hey, we aren't all bad." We reply, "Yeah, we know you aren't all bad but we have to talk about the problem and the history of the problem that has allowed wife assault to continue."

So what keeps you going?

I think, like many people in political theatre, we seem to bring a passion for politics and a love for the theatre. And because of that double whammy, we do have very good stamina and our goals are quite clear. We last quite a long while, particularly those of us who found the companies and invest a lot of our identities in doing that. So we're a combination of political animals and artist dreamers. And that's pretty powerful.

II

Sistren Theatre Collective: Fifteen Years of Theatre for Working-Class Women²

Transcript of a "Question-and-Answer" session

Edited and introduced by Susan Bennett

Based in Kingston (Jamaica), Sistren Theatre Collective has since 1977 produced popular theatre concerned with increasing audience awareness on women's issues and, in particular, the issues affecting working-class Caribbean women. Their first work was created for the annual Workers' Week celebrations in Jamaica. The play, entitled *Downpression Get A Blow*, dealt with the unionization of women working in the garment industry and, since then, Sistren has produced shows which have examined teenage pregnancy, poverty, rape, and other social concerns. Like the theatre of Toronto's The Company of Sirens, Sistren use "agitprop" techniques to provoke and empower their audience to social action. As their mandate makes clear, the collective gives voice to the issues affecting working-class women and functions as an agent pressuring for change: "Sistren . . . reflects a vision of Jamaican women which celebrates the creativity of black working-class women and which supports cultural and economic sovereignty for our women. We work for greater power, equality and autonomy for women."

The women of Sistren Theatre Collective are not simply performers, however. They are also renowned for their workshop programme. Pauline Crawford and Rebecca Knowles, the two collective members attending "Breaking the Surface," offered delegates a two-day session exploring approaches to social action theatre. A variety of games, songs, and other techniques (many specific to Jamaican culture) were explored for their relevancy to other cultural experiences and for their usefulness in group building and empowerment. The workshop tackled the difficulties in finding a balance between meeting individual needs and being a productive group, something the Sistren Theatre Collective has done particularly well. As well as performan-



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The Company of Sirens, *Shelter from Assault*

ces and workshops, Sistren produces books, textiles, videos, and a magazine, *Sistren*.

In addition to the workshop and the "question-and-answer" session outlined below, Crawford and Knowles also presented their video-work and a short performance at the "cabaret" of the festival/conference. Their performance was a powerful critique of North America's treatment of the Caribbean. The scene between a male teacher and a young female student where the girl learned by rote from the man's instruction turned dramatically to a graphic depiction of armed violence culminating in rape. For the largely North American audience, this dramatization of the economic oppression of Caribbean nations was both stunning and provocative.

In the "Question-and-Answer" session, Crawford and Knowles shared their experiences of working as a collective, training emergent theatre workers and seeking out new audiences and mentioned other aspects of the group's history.

Rose Scollard (Maenad Productions, Calgary): Perhaps you could start by describing the work of Sistren.

Pauline Crawford (Sistren): The Sistren Collective began in 1977. It was a period when anything grassroots was encouraged because it was a time when the Jamaican government was into democratic socialism. So a lot of effort was spent on community building. During that time, not just Sistren Theatre Collective emerged as a theatre group but about three other popular theatre groups. But the others weren't really into women's issues.

When we first started, we wanted a forum to put across women's issues in particular because women were still seen as secondary. They were the most oppressed. We felt that there was no room for us to put across our voices as women and we wanted to provide that forum because we had felt we had acting skills in terms of sharing things about our lives and so on. We felt it would be useful to start there if we wanted to make some kind of change.

Dana McDermott (University of Connecticut): How has the goal of the group changed over time?

Pauline Crawford: 1977, 1978, 1979 — we did an annual production each year. But after the first three years we realized that we were a full-time company. Until then we were working only part time. When we realized we would have to work full time, we

had to state definite aims and objectives; we had to register the company and all of that. Later, the aims and objectives shifted in a way, and by then we, the members of the collective, were more into operating the collective on our own instead of having resource persons come in and do the fundraising and certain administrative activities within the organization. Informally, certain aims and objectives — as individuals we hope to achieve certain things — shifted. That is why each year we have an annual retreat where we go over the aims and objectives of our work. Maybe this year we say, “Okay, we are aiming to reach youth,” and we might only reach certain numbers, and we have to go over why those aims and objectives weren’t achieved. We did work with youth but the number of youths we had set our aim to win over during that time didn’t materialize.

The formal aims and objectives of the collective are very much there in print — of which we have to sometimes remind ourselves!

Helen Buss (University of Calgary): This morning in the workshop I was really taken by the idea that the personal testimony (as you called it) of women participating in your workshops needs to come out and needs to be incorporated in what you do in that community. Was that always something you had planned to be part of the workshops that women would tell their personal stories or did it happen, then you took advantage of it?

Pauline Crawford: When we first started out, our testimonies were a main foundation of our work and we always said that this would be an aspect of our work. That’s not to say that in every workshop this is an a-b-c formula, but it is very much a part of our work because we just feel we have to have something personal to share. Because if I am talking about child abuse, I can somehow relate to child abuse as the facilitator and to you as individuals — otherwise the issue is like in a vacuum, just floating around without any personal connection. In a way, that’s alien to us as individuals because it’s like everything we do, be it a workshop, a poem, a video, or whatever, there are certain personal testimony elements in it.

Rebecca Knowles (Sistren): Sometimes it’s the kind of exercise that you use. It depends on what comes out of the discussion.



Pauline Crawford and Rebecca Knowles of Sistren

PHOTO BY DEBORAH LOZZI

Individuals find themselves close to the issue or thing that they believe — something happened to them and they must talk about it.

Pauline Crawford: Sometimes it depends on your target group and the atmosphere you are in. Here we are in this audience as two black women. Sometimes for all white participants there might be some distance. Okay, they are here to talk about housing situation. But sometimes in certain atmosphere without us knowing, there are certain issues that for these women might be a bit “off limits” to talk about with two women who are from the Caribbean and are in black, working-class theatre.

Katherine Franks (University of Calgary): *When you’re developing a particular production through the collective process, I was wondering if you could describe what kinds of techniques you use for resolving conflicts? Or maybe you don’t find this a problem.*

Rose Scollard: *You’ve got nineteen members in your group and you’re creating a presentation, how do you deal with different members of the group who probably don’t all agree on how you’re going to present it? What’s your process?*

Pauline Crawford: Most times the process is loose. From the outset we have a theme or sometimes no theme; we’ll just say these issues have been in the pipeline. Now in Jamaica women are struggling with these issues and we think our production should be around this. We don’t work from a formal script, we improv. We might say we are working on teenage parenthood, working on a scene to do with when parents are not there, how the children feel. Now, when Becky and myself run that improv, it might be different from when you and Rose work on that improv, so in terms of the conflict, her method of parenting might be defensive: “I have to go out to work so you as a child have to come up with some level of maturity before the time.” Becky as a parent might say: “Well, for a thirteen-year-old I just don’t agree that she should be on her own”; so in terms of content we might not agree. But the thing is in the process. We’ll say, “Okay. Becky disagrees that children should be left on their own at thirteen or whatever.” The conflict doesn’t develop beyond because there might be a point that we

have to put across both because that is telling us something or it might mean that we have to bring in somebody else — Becky saying this, Rose saying that. Sometimes when you are on the inside looking out, it's really a different picture from when you are on the outside looking in. But the improvisation sets the tone and if there are conflicts, it's rarely settled before it reaches this stage.

Katherine Franks: So you don't necessarily present all views on the stage; you come to an agreement together.

Rebecca Knowles: You can have several improvs on everybody's view and see what comes out of it. Then you choose from all these improvs. You use a team; you go through all those materials, everybody's ideas, after the improvisation to really pick the best approach, to pick out the most vital topics. Everybody gets a chance to put across their views. But, in the end, in the piece, we have to decide which one are we going to use, which is the most dynamic one, which is the most important one, which is putting across the issue more. We perform our major productions two, three, four, five times before actually having a script. If we put issues in and they don't work, then we have to go back to some of the improvs, extract and put something else in. It might change three or four times before we actually finish.

Peta Tait (University of New South Wales): I'm interested in ways that Sistren uses drama as a means of community education and also if the group has worked with young women and the kind of drama that would entail.

Pauline Crawford: Our work in the community has been one of our strongest areas. For example, if there are researchers who have certain materials that they want to get across to a community group, the first people they will think of in terms of dramatic presentations are Sistren.

I can think of one time when there was a group of farmers. They had lectures upon lectures. They had loans for cheese-making, so the loans would come as cows; and when they get the cows, there are certain levels of maintaining them so they get enough milk for the cheese. The lectures would be on how you get to know your cow and how you get milk and whatever. Now when you tell a

farmer that the cows are inseminated with semen from as far away as Brazil, that doesn't tell them anything. When the lecturer says, "Mr. James, you understand what I said?" he says, "Yes, go on, sir; go on." He won't tell you, "No, I don't understand," because that would be saying he's stupid as a farmer. When we went with the same materials, it was because the lectures were just not getting through. So we say the sperm that the cows get comes from Brazil and then they inject in the cow and so on. We put it across at their level. They say, "Wait. So you mean when my Betsy mates with Mr. Brown's bull, my Betsy will lose her enjoyment and company?" So we will get all those juicy anecdotes and it will be crystal clear: when it's artificial insemination, Betsy will be deprived of her lovemaking! So what would happen here is there's a discussion between the researchers and us. Even for us sometimes the language and theory are difficult. When they said certain big words, we ask: "Where's the dictionary?" "What do you really mean?" So, even for us we have to understand clearly and then put it in a form that the farmers will understand. So it's a three-way process and then sometimes from the information we get, we feed it through to the researchers. Later on, they put it in their thesis in whatever words scholars usually use!

Again, there was a set of parenting workshops that we did with a low-income community. We took some materials, did some short pieces around them, took them back to the same group of parents who had been lectured to, and the results were different. Because lecturers think that all the women are literate, they come and give some papers, read-outs, "Look on this blackboard." It just won't get across. So a lot of the community work that we do is really at that level. Jamaican schools use movies to earn a little income so they might show different movies just as entertainment and sometimes when we take the same movie (for example, *The Accused*) and use it in an integrated session with boys and girls, the results are different. After the movie, we will say, "Let's talk," and it's a different feeling from when the guidance counsellor and the boys and girls might talk the next day.

Rebecca Knowles: I work with young people in communities, mostly girls — teenage girls "Teens in Action" — to deal with the

problems that affect them and that group has existed about five years now. They address very heavy issues like sexual violence.

Pauline Crawford: In terms of children, young people, when it comes to dealing with issues, they are fidgety, because they are immature to deal with certain issues in a direct manner. So they will be sexually active but when you start to talk about sex, it's [mimes covering face and giggling] or denial. When we start talking about certain situations, they'll say "I know of someone," or "If I should know someone." We use a lot of exercises, games, different approaches to let them really start to talk about the issues.

Tracy Davis (Northwestern University): You mentioned earlier that people come to *Sistren* with ideas. Is that where the video about the International Monetary Fund came from? That was an extraordinarily complex set of issues that you took on in that video and an extraordinary number of dimensions came through about the problem of debt.

Pauline Crawford: ADA (the Association of Development Agencies) have had the debt crisis on their agenda for a period of time and in terms of us, *Sistren*, we had been using materials around debt crisis. They came to us and said because you are not totally new to this thing, you create a script. We devised this script and for the other materials like the clippings we worked with Joan French and other women — it was a collaboration. Joan French wasn't really an outsider, but as a feminist researcher she did a lot of the "up here" [points to head] work and then we put forward this issue.

Tracy Davis: If people bring you ideas from outside the group, are there ideas that you've rejected?

Pauline Crawford: Definitely.

Rebecca Knowles: If it's not connected to our theme or principles.

Pauline Crawford: We have the skills and the potential where we could be put on maybe three or four commercial plays each year with all the humour and soft porn and violence and whatever audiences are expecting. I mean we could have done that. We have

all those qualities that some commercial playwrights now would be looking for. But definitely not. When we go out there and portray a woman beating up the next woman because she has taken away her man, that's definitely out. That's not the message we want to put across. Since 1977, we have not moved from the line where we are. Who are going to be the role models? Sometimes we have to jolt ourselves to say well, look, yes we're not making the money for the productions and if we were to shift a little, it would bring in more. But we won't shift.

Rebecca Knowles: We have to charge for everything we do now. In the past, we used to do a lot of volunteer work for organizations, travelling internationally — just for the plane fare and that's it. We can't do it any more because funding is drying up. People say: "I'm tired of funding women, feminists." Back home you find people because they used to get our work free for so many years — back home we're charging them a small fee — saying, "Sistren are expensive. What are we going to pay them for?" It created problems now, so daily we have to have more discussions, meetings. We say that we're not going to do a fundraising concert or whatever if they're not even paying for transportation.

Pauline Crawford: It's the kind of respect that some individuals won't give to the work. Sometimes if an event is coming up, you have some women who would not think of inviting Sistren to either perform or come to an event even as just a member of the audience. But if there's a little thing to spark, to let people laugh and the fact a working-class group is there, even for some conferences too, they'll say, "Why don't we invite Sistren, they will put across the working-class perspective. They are a black group and they are women." The fact we are physically there will give some boost to the thing and so on, and we really have to think about this, that they don't use us as a scapegoat. That happens sometimes. It's subtle but you have to read between the lines.

Going back to our work with the community, sometimes in our visuals — periodicals and so on — we work with a resource person because sometimes we have all these materials and not all the time can we put them across in a theatre piece or workshop. So, for example, "No to Sexual Violence" came out of a series of work-

shops that we had with both middle-class and working-class women in rural and urban communities and in the end the materials were put together in this booklet. Then we could share it with other women's groups in Jamaica and other countries. We have "Ring Ding in a Tight Corner" too. The idea of putting it out in two different languages came when we realized that it could be useful since women from Latin America and Spanish-speaking countries more and more were looking into this area. In our news magazine which is published three times a year, we make sure that some of the articles relate to some of the work we have been doing in the communities.

Peta Tait: I was thinking about what you have done and how successful Sistren has been. The longest that a women's theatre group I have been involved with has managed to last is four years and you have been doing this for so much longer.

Pauline Crawford: In terms of Sistren Theatre Collective, we have been maintaining ourselves since 1977 but we don't want to be the only grassroots theatre in the community, in Jamaica, in the Caribbean. So we go into the community and start other groups. But we work with these groups for a couple of months and then they nosedive. They say we've been discussing the issues, but we thought we could get a job and this isn't leading anywhere. It's always: "What's in it for me? I'm leaving the children at home every evening but not getting a job." We raise the community's consciousness, but it's all ideas for economic gain.

Rebecca Knowles: To make a group work, I think you have to be living in the community — day to day, hour to hour — then the group will keep together. If you're not living in the community, people don't know enough about you to make it work.

Pauline Crawford: But it can be a weakness. They can become dependent on you. You're always there. After a while, you want those individuals to see it's not just what I can get from this group. How can you maintain a group without being a mother or a saviour? How do you give strength without living in the community?



PHOTO BY DEBORAH LOZZI

Rebecca Knowles of Sistren

Rebecca Knowles: The community has to mobilize. They have to learn to stand on their own feet. That's why I still hold the opinion that someone has to live in the community and have the great interest to keep the group together, or it's not going to work. That's the reality.

NOTES

- ¹ Details about the development and history of *The Working People's Picture Show* can be found in Amanda Hale's "Ballrooms and Boardroom Tables," *Canadian Theatre Review* 53 (Winter 1987).
- ² For further information about Sistren (including magazine subscriptions, video, and book lists), contact Sistren Theatre Collective, 20 Kensington Crescent, Kingston 5, Jamaica, West Indies.