

COMPTEs RENDUS / BOOK REVIEWS

SHERRILL GRACE

Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock.

Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008. 480 pp. Illus., index.

LOUISE H. FORSYTH

Sherrill Grace's wonderful biography, *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock*, captures magically the intense pulse of the art and life, so far, of one of the greatest playwrights we have known in Canada or anywhere in the English-speaking world. Pollock's works have been produced on all of Canada's major anglophone stages and on many of its alternative venues; they have been widely enjoyed internationally. *Making Theatre*, a big book in every way and a joy to read, provides a richly fertile setting to contemplate and savour the remarkable dimensions of Pollock's work, which includes a large number of stage plays for adult audiences, radio and television plays, and plays for young audiences. She has also made a significant mark on Canadian theatre as an actor, director, teacher, theatre administrator, theatre founder, and commentator. Pollock's career in the theatre, which covers more than four decades, flows right up to today like a vital stream through the decades as Canadian theatre was coming into being as a major cultural phenomenon. Grace's personal and engaged voice in *Making Theatre* traces the bends in this stream as she takes us simultaneously on an exciting journey through the Pollock corpus of stage plays for adult audiences and the courageously exhilarating life of the person she calls *Sharon* throughout the book and whom she describes as an intellectual and creative dynamo, as well as an enormously human woman: "formidable, funny, feisty, and full of opinions" (355).

The approach thoughtfully chosen and developed with particularly original pizzazz by Grace to tell the Pollock story is a skilful blending of multiple contexts and a weaving of a dazzling array of impeccably verified facts, accounts of personal events and issues beginning in Pollock's early years, analyses of plays, rehearsals, and performances, discussions of political and ethical stakes embedded in moments of history, reminders of exciting developments across the anglophone theatre landscape in Canada, and probing queries into the meaning of concepts and practices

such as dramaturgy, writing, theatricality, autobiography, and biography.

In addition to the almost four-hundred-page biographical text itself, *Making Theatre* includes forty-four illustrations that bring performance moments to life and allow readers to see Pollock as herself or in some of the roles she played, those with whom she worked and shared her life, and the places that have had a determining influence on her art. As well, the four appendices offer two early stories published by Pollock, detailed information on the operation in Calgary of the Garry Theatre 1992-97, a previously unpublished and fascinating interview by Kathleen Flaherty: "The Many Voices of Sharon Pollock" (1994), and a "Sharon Pollock Chronology" (1936-2008). The volume concludes with detailed lists of sources that Grace consulted for the book as a whole and for each chapter, as well as a 36-page "Comprehensive Bibliography." Both of these bring to light new paths that theatre people, scholars, and students can follow as they undertake their own explorations of Pollock's rich oeuvre and life in the theatre. The staggering wealth of reliable information and material in *Making Theatre*, often dredged up from little-known and modest sources, makes of it a model of scholarly research and biography with flair, and an invaluable reference work.

The very special quality of *Making Theatre* as both scholarly study and biography is the subjective place assumed in the text by Grace herself and her personal voice that is heard throughout the book. Her warm style and expressive voice make her an integral part of the same story-telling process that she sees as a dominant characteristic of Pollock's dramaturgical approach. Grace reflects cogently in the first person on the sexist and classist traditions of theatre and biography as genres, and she draws attention to the fact that biography has not been well-developed in Canada. In particular, there have been few biographies of women and men in the arts, even fewer in theatre. Her reflections on what biography can and should be are fascinating and original, as is her writing style. It manages to be elegant and clear, and, at the same time, intimate and engaged. She positions herself as a woman writing about a woman whose work she knows and admires. It is not her intention to turn Pollock into an heroic figure without flaws, nor to impose on her work monolithic ethical judgments. Instead, she reveals the complexities and contradictions of an intensely lived and frequently difficult life during which Pollock's innumerable selves struggled to coexist. Readers remain free to roam on their own terms in the vast fields of Pollock's theatrical universe, accompa-

nied by the generous and personal voice of the biographer. In addition to this skilful participation by Grace in the diegesis and in many moments of Pollock's career over the past decades, she shows herself to be an extraordinarily skilled scholar, for whom feminism has opened new perspectives and offered analytic tools without being a narrow straitjacket, either for herself or Pollock. Clearly, for both Grace and Pollock, a writer's and an artist's sex matters and, indeed, provides fresh aesthetic inspiration. As Pollock said in an interview with Rudakoff and Rich,

I certainly don't understand how a woman with any sense of justice can not be a feminist, but I object to those people who think that 'feminist playwright' means that there is a hidden ideology by which aesthetic choices are being governed. I don't see it as a limiting term at all. (qtd. in Grace 184)

Since the start of the seventies when Pollock's first radio and stage plays for adult audiences were performed and published, the bold originality of her playwright's vision has been amazing audiences, critics, and the many who enjoy reading fine dramatic literature. Grace follows Pollock's remarkable career, beginning with a short essay on writing biography and making theatre that highlights the ways in which both these gifted women have re-invented the genres in which they work their art. They have both remained convinced that life, relationships, stories, memories, and social engagement are the stuff of our shared humanity. An element of autobiography is unavoidable in every utterance. In heeding with such extraordinary perspicacity their own experiences and ideas, they grasp the desires, conflicts, disappointments, and passions of women and men everywhere.

Following this first short chapter, Grace takes us back to New Brunswick, where Pollock was born in 1936, to the history and character of the province, and to the origins of Pollock's family, in a chapter evocatively titled "Family Matters" (each of Grace's ambiguous chapter titles present enigmas and dilemmas that recur thematically throughout the book). While Grace provides many details in this chapter on Pollock's personal life, family history, and the socio-historical moment, she establishes here and maintains throughout the biography a perspective focussing primarily on Pollock as a theatre person. Because autobiography is a rich source for Pollock's dramaturgical and theatrical work, anecdotes and stories in her life are relevant. However, Grace never recounts them gratuitously. She provides rich appreciation for the ways in which Pollock has transcended and universalized intense personal exper-

iences and convictions through their transmutation into fiction and art. The title chosen by Grace for the book: *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock* evocatively interweaves the creative act of “making theatre” and the experiential project of living “a life” fully. It draws immediate attention to the “web of connectedness” (19) between artistic creation and the challenges of living with the guts, integrity, determination, and “passionate commitment” (22) Pollock has consistently demonstrated.

Pollock began as an actor in the 1960s, had her first radio play produced in 1970, and saw the production of her first stage plays in 1972 (*A Compulsory Option*) and 1973 (*Walsh*). It was the Theatre Calgary production of *Walsh* that brought her recognition within the theatre community and widely beyond as an important playwright: “*Walsh* marked Sharon’s real breakthrough as a playwright of stature” (134). *Walsh* provides a striking example of Pollock’s keen interest in historical events and the ethical dilemmas they continue to create. This interest has been sustained in several plays, often centring on an historical figure whose personal integrity comes into dreadful conflict with authority and prevailing socio-cultural institutions and traditions that inescapably produce injustice and suffering: “the dilemma of individual conscience facing the forces of institutional power” (103). Grace draws dramatic details from the Pollock corpus to illustrate “Sharon’s protests against social injustice, violence, the abuse of power, and the oppression of the weak” (120). She speaks in this regard of Pollock’s ability to bear witness to her time and place and to “her passionate belief that theatre could make a difference—possibly even make the world a safer, better place” (92). *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976) and *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980) provide striking evidence of the original theatrical form developed by Pollock in order to dramatize her outrage in the face of institutionalized social injustice.

Pollock preserved her artistic vision through the 1970s while acquiring all the tools of her trade as a playwright: structure, time, space, narrative framing, character construction and casting, dialogue, pacing of dramatic action, sound, set design, and adaptation of reality for theatrical purposes (social, historical, psychological, and ethical). As well, her work in many theatres and with many fellow theatre artists gave her a powerful appreciation of the demands in mounting a production. A striking aspect of her art is her departure from temporal and spatial linearity and character integrity in her unique use of the creative virtuality offered by the memory play. Single individuals split into more than one dramatic

character. Their stories, always artistically coherent while challenging received common sense, move back and forth between moments in their lives, each of which provides astonishing, yet ambiguous, illumination on events. New meanings emerge.

Blood Relations (1980), Pollock's best known play, is the first masterpiece of a consummate artist. It has been translated into many languages and has had countless productions in Canada and abroad. In it, Pollock explores "the nature of truth, reality, personal identity, and memory" (208) through the use of what Grace calls "mirror talk" in her analysis of the play, her reflection on storytelling as a vital source of self-knowledge, and her sustained discussion of the nature of biography and autobiography. These two genres both imply some form of dialogue:

[. . .] for the autobiographical story to produce meaning or be effective, the autobiographer *must* have a sympathetic, participating listener, another person who, as a mirror self, collaborates in the story-telling; this listener validates what is being told by giving him- or herself to the storyteller and sharing in, re-telling, or re-performing the narrative, by, in effect, playing biographer to the autobiographer. (219)

Of course, such storytelling based on dream, imagination, and memory makes no claims to absolute truth or final meaning. It is, instead, a richly evocative perspective on life's multiple possibilities, a virtuality that Pollock has plumbed in depth in all her plays: "I think it is a mistake to think that writers create anything from other than the raw material they have to work with, and the raw material they have to work with is their own life" ("The Many Voices of Sharon Pollock," Grace 396). Grace's extended study of the genesis of *Blood Relations*, its transformation from its original form as *My Name is Lisbeth*, and its production history brings to light Pollock's extensive experience in every aspect of theatre through the 1970s and also explores with nuance and sensitivity the links between the *ghosts* in Pollock's life and her dramatic representation of a well-known historical figure and event. The detailed analysis of the play is superbly insightful. The 1980s were the decade of the success of *Blood Relations*, with Pollock winning the first Governor General's award for drama, many productions in Canada and abroad, the widespread interest in the play and many reviews, and Martha Henry's "definitive Canadian production" (196) at the Grand Theatre in London. My own personal memories of having attended that production remain vivid, and I am grateful to Grace for reminding me of that wonderful evening

and all it meant for Pollock's career, exciting Canadian theatre, and contemporary notions of theatricality.

Pollock's probing and lucidly critical exploration of stories told, whether in personal lives, culture or history, shows her to be fascinated with the myriad ways in which experiences are recorded and with their foundational place in the realities they come to represent. Deconstruction of culturally received stories through imagination, fiction, artistry, and re-membering brings to light, often painfully, the many important facets of these experiences that have been distorted or remained untold. Such deconstruction and artistic reconstruction can be sufficiently powerful to transform the meaning of life itself. This central quality of Pollock's oeuvre which throws into question the objective reliability of what is commonly taken to be reality and historical truth leads Grace to say that "the action of her plays [...] take place on the interior stage of the mind" (175).

Grace sustains her warm, insightful, and informative approach to the study, interpretation and appreciation of the rich body of plays written, performed, and published by Pollock through the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s: *Generations*, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, *Doc*, *Getting It Straight*, *The Making of Warriors*, *Fair Liberty's Call*, *Saucy Jack*, *Death in the Family*, *Moving Pictures*, *End Dream*, *Angel's Trumpet*, *Kabloona Talk*, and *Man Out of Joint*. Pollock's experiences, obsessions, and the ghosts that have accompanied her throughout her life inform the soul of these works. They offer, at the same time, voices and characters that give witness to events of our time, our theatre, and our shared, troubling history. Grace provides compelling argument for a view that sees these plays as an amazing corpus containing many masterpieces that have led to "productions, prizes, and honorary degrees," and demonstrate a "range of styles and subjects" with "uncompromising often courageous, exploration of extremely sensitive historical and personal issues [...] in what I can only call her vision" (379). Noting that Pollock is by far best known for *Walsh*, *Blood Relations*, and *Doc*, while most of her many other plays are not mentioned nearly as often, have not had main-stage productions on Canada's large stages, and are rarely re-mounted, Grace offers enticing explanations for the relative obscurity in which they have remained, including Canadians' reticence to see the true greatness of the achievements of their own, the tenacity of narrow traditions, and still unresolved sexism in the practices of Canadian theatre.

Much of Pollock's theatrical career has taken her to the margins of institutional structures, for complex reasons which

Grace elucidates, without proposing a definitive explanation of the marginality of “Canada’s leading senior English-language playwright” (343). Pollock has worked with many of the finest directors, actors, and artistic directors in workshops, educational settings, marginal and established theatres. She has received many important commissions and awards. Yet her plays have frequently been first performed in alternative theatres, as though her work was considered too challenging, too experimental, too ideologically discomforting to be seen on main stages. The culmination, although not the end, of her determined maintenance of the integrity of her artistic mission, at the expense of mainstream success and recognition as well as financial security, occurred between 1992 and 1997 when she founded and operated with son Kirk and others the Garry Theatre in Calgary’s historic Inglewood district. Grace’s information on this initiative, the artistic successes, grunt work, and emotional stresses produced by the enterprise offer new understanding of what this fascinating project meant. She provides details on events, people, geography, audience, vision of theatre, programming, and the amazing commitment demonstrated by Pollock and son Kirk (“K.C. Campbell”). She speaks of Pollock’s “appetite for a form of volunteer art-centred work that she saw as the heart and soul of genuine theatre” (298).

The final chapter of *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock* works like a bow wrapped elegantly around the wonderful gift that this uniquely beautiful and powerful book bestows. Grace provides in this chapter a moving personal and expert homage to Sharon Pollock, artist and human being of multiple selves, and, at the same time, she reflects upon the languages and styles of biography she has self-consciously adopted. She leaves herself and her readers with two questions: “What, if anything, is distinct about the craft of biography for a playwright [...] that is not relevant to the life-story of a politician, scientist, military man, or poet?” and “What, that is specific to the theatre and to theatre history, does a playwright’s biography have to tell us about our time and place, about culture in Canada, and about being Canadian?” (372). Grace leaves the first question open for readers to ponder. It is her “simple and unequivocal” answer to the second question, “a lot,” that serves as a powerful invitation to us to continue to savour with her the work and life of Sharon Pollock, a great playwright and woman of theatre. Grace leaves us at the end with the eager anticipation, shared intensely with her thanks to this fine biography, of imagining ourselves “sitting beside [Pollock] as someone tells us to turn off our cell phones and pagers, the house lights go

down, the audience falls quiet, and the stage lights come up on another Pollock play” (380).

ALEKSANDAR SAŠA DUNDJEROVIĆ

The Theatricality of Robert Lepage.

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007, 252pp.

ERIN HURLEY

In September 2008, Montreal playwright, actor, and director Wajdi Mouawad staged his solo show, *Seuls*, at the Théâtre d’Aujourd’hui. The play centred around Harwan, a doctoral candidate at a mythical Montreal university writing his dissertation on Robert Lepage. In one scene, to remind Lepage’s agent of precisely which doctoral candidate writing on Robert Lepage he is, Harwan tells her he’s writing on “le cadre comme espace identitaire dans les solos de Robert Lepage.” This comic moment, recognized as such by the Espace Go audience, signals not only the widespread interest in Lepage, his work, and his creative process by doctoral candidates and other kinds of academics—an interest evidenced in, for instance, the recent amply illustrated *Ex Machina. Chantiers d’écriture scénique* from *L’Instant scène* (2007) and Ludovic Fouquet’s *Robert Lepage, l’horizon en images* (2006). It also points to the many different ways such a multi-generic, multimedia, multi-linguistic body of work might be approached. Already Lepage’s theatrical productions have been examined through the lenses of sociological and postcolonial critique, of semiotics, and of inter-medial performance in both French and English. Aleksandar Dundjerović, a director and senior lecturer at the University of Manchester, whose book is derived from his own doctoral dissertation, takes a hagiographic approach. He attempts to isolate what he calls the “theatricality” of Lepage’s work, a term which seems to mean “style” or “aesthetic” as tied to his creative process developed from the Repère cycles. Its key features are a “transformative *mise en scène*,” its inclusion of multiple media, and its open-ended creative process (25-6). He seems to attribute Lepage’s international success and cross-cultural communication to this open form (4). I say “seems” as Dundjerović describes the work and