

know? After the immaculate conception, after the refusal at the inn . . . came the maculate delivery . . . the manger. And all that noise . . . cattle lowing (and doing other things besides) . . . angels blaring away . . . the eerie light.

Men wrote it down.

St. Matthew: "And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus."

St. Mark (Jesus is already grown) "And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan."

St. Luke at least refers to Mary "being great with child," but then says "and so it was, that, while they were there [in Bethlehem] the days were accomplished that she should be delivered."

St. John: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

WOMEN AND THE THEATRICAL TRADITION

Gwen Pharis Ringwood

I'm glad to be here, a first opportunity to exchange thoughts with a sisterhood of writers and to see the capital of my country.

How can we explain the scarcity of women dramatists in the past? Certainly they are scarce. In discussions of the Oriental theatre, in anthologies of Greek and Roman plays, Elizabethan and French plays, I find no women dramatists mentioned. Even the informal theatre of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the *Miracle*, *Mystery* and *Guild* plays seems to have been dominated by men.

One exception is Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, a St. Benedict nun born about 935 a.d., who wrote plays in Latin glorifying virginity and chastity and following in form the bawdy comedies of Terence. She was troubled in conscience because to show her saintly characters contending with evil she must mention "things which should not be named." As she completed a play, Hrotswitha, flushed with trepidation, slipped down dark stone corridors to hand the scroll to some traveller who would deliver it to her mentor, a man high in the church. He preserved the plays but it was not until 1501 that they were discovered and printed. On either side of this young nun the centuries seem devoid of women playwrights. Novelists, poets, essayists yes. Playwrights of stature--no.

In some dozen collections of world drama, including a collection of Latin American plays, I find no woman dramatist. Even in 1962 when Masters of Modern Drama offered 45 plays from Ibsen to Osborne, one looks in vain for Lillian Hellman or Joan Littlewood.

When I began writing plays, about 1933, I knew of Lady Gregory more as a den mother to the Irish theatre than as playwright. I knew Susan Glaspell's one act tragedy, peculiarly feminine in sensibility--Trifles. Elsie Park Gowan was also writing plays in Edmonton and became one of Canada's leading writers for radio. Elsie is one of the few liberated

women I knew in the thirties. . . . She early accepted and understood the role of adult women at a time when most of us were content to remain girls for a long time. Edna St. Vincent Millay had written poetic plays in the twenties. Gertrude Stein was only a name to me then. The plays I admired, acted in, directed, were written by men. I knew of no Canadian plays.

In 1934 Lillian Hellman's The Children's Hour heralded a woman dramatist who has an important place in American theatre. In 1936 Claire Booth's, The Women, attacked the empty vicious lives of women of leisure and may provide some answers as to why we have



few women dramatists before the middle of the century. Ibsen's The Doll's House had also provided answers. In many periods the theatre was considered licentious or evil and out of bounds to good women. And women themselves accepted the role of lesser creature bound to kitchen, marriage bed and nursery or to shadowy spinsterhood living on the bounty of male relatives. Early marriage, property laws, social conventions, sketchy education, lack of contraceptives, male domination in almost every aspect of society except home-making, fear of public condemnation, kept women effectively silenced; and those who couldn't keep silent wrote novels or poetry in secret, snatched moments and often chose masculine pseudonyms. Perhaps, too, women were afraid of the explosive emotion, the blood and violence, the immediacy of drama. In fiction and poetry they could take time to explore nuances of feeling, shifting relationships, hidden games and festering rivalries and send these out to be published without such direct involvement with their acceptance or rejection. I leave this for discussion.

I know that I myself wrote plays for years without fully accepting the responsibilities I now feel must and should be accepted by a writer. I tried to write honestly but often chose material or forms that offered a self-protecting distancing. Often over these forty years I have wished for a pseudonym, guaranteeing anonym-

ity so that my activities as writer could not impinge in any way on my family, my mother, my friends. Perhaps all writers suffer fear of embarrassment or betrayal of other people. On the other hand any person who needs to measure experience through creative expression and fails to try will become dissatisfied, unhappy, neurotic in all other aspects of living.

Until recently women must find much of their dramatic material in the confines of home, family, church and sewing circle. Exposure on the stage of intimate details of family life, even acknowledgment that conflict, blood, money, love and hate exist in explosive forms in the bosom of the family, pose a risk to a woman responsible for making a serene home. Finding a place to leave her papers undisturbed, money to pay for house cleaning or child care, refusing community offices, are part of the juggling that must be done. Believing that the work is worthwhile even when no one seems to want or need it is also difficult. Keeping a secret journal--a diary of a mad housewife--helps resolve despair and sometimes points the way to a shaped piece.

"Shall I or shall I not take my little zither to the social evening?" is a line that runs through my mind over the years. And often I've seen myself distraught, dishevelled, torn between stove and typewriter, running back

and forth between my flesh and blood kin and my created characters. There's a line in the bible: "Israel is like a silly dove, flying to Egypt, crying to Assyria." Often I felt I was trying to serve too many masters.

However, things have changed for us. The liberation movements of the sixties and technology have encouraged women to risk themselves in many capacities, among them as writers for the theatre. Before that time many of us not only accepted the role of victim; we invited it. We succumbed to that greatest of all temptations--martyrdom.

Margaret Atwood's book, Survival, pointed a way to change and was very meaningful to me. In this decade a number of women playwrights--Sharon Pollock, Beverly Simons, Carol Bolt, Joanna Glass bring vision and new forms to our English Canadian stage.

Why was I drawn to writing plays?

From childhood I had written verse and fiction--then I fell in love with the theatre. I had a chance to do some acting and directing so it seemed natural to try to fashion a play. I've always thirsted to know what goes on inside of people--writing plays is a way of exploring people outside yourself who are yet part of yourself. I still write some fiction but return often to drama. The theatre embraces dance and song, shifting color and sound, explores relationships, shows

people in conflict, touches raw and unknown areas of thought and feeling. Plays can amuse, taunt, teach, electrify and heighten one's sense of the joy and terror of existence. At a play an audience and the actors are bound together through the vision of playwright and director in a shared ritual experience that makes everyone aware of being part of the whole circle. This communal aspect of theatre with dependence on the creative imagination of designers, actors, directors as well as that of playwright is one of the fascinations. Somehow writing plays isn't quite so lonely as writing in other forms.

The last question here is What special Contribution can Women make to the Theatre? We can give it our honesty, our conviction, our compassion but we have no corner on these. I'm sure the problems that concern us--wasted lives, war, delinquency and victimization of children, damage to the earth or the air or the oceans, what forces cripple the ability to care for other human beings, the masks of cruelty--these concern male as well as female writers. But up to now we haven't pulled our weight in expressing our anger or our hopes and purposes on the stage. As a sisterhood we can keep in touch with one another, remembering that when enough of us want change, change will come. A way we might keep in touch from now on is through a journal of poetry, fiction, drama, criticism published quarterly in the

three languages represented here. Initially such a publication might be devoted to women writers, past and present. Eventually I hope it would include a sampling of all good writers in our hemisphere. And tomorrow the world! We can insist that we are citizens of the earth first, before other loyalties. And we can believe with Kazantzaklos that the flame of spirit burns in every person and that the purpose of life is to keep that flame alive to illuminate the dark passages of our journey.

Emma, in Carol Bolt's Red Emma, has a fine speech:

Emma: Woman's development, her freedom, her independence must come from and through herself. First by asserting herself as a personality and not a sex commodity. Second by refusing the right to anyone over her body, by refusing to bear children unless she wants them, by refusing to be a servant to God, the state, society, husband, the family. By making her life simpler, but deeper and richer. That is by trying to learn the meaning and substance of life in all its complexities, by freeing herself from the fear of public opinion and public condemnation. Only that will set woman free, will make her a force hitherto unknown in the world, a force of real love, for peace, for harmony--a force of divine

fire, of life-giving, a creator of free men and women.

POETRY AND AUDIENCE

Elizabeth Brewster

In some ways I find it easier to answer questions about poetry in poems rather than in prose. A few years ago I wrote a poem which answers some of the questions people most often ask after poetry readings. It's called "Poem for an Audience of One," and it goes like this:

POEM FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

Why do you write?
someone has asked me.
Is it for fame or fortune?
Do you wish to communicate
to a larger audience?
Have you an important message?

I would like to say,
though I don't,
that I write for none of these
reasons.

I am writing now
to pass the time
while I am waiting
for you to telephone.

Of course, the poem is partly a joke but it's also partly true. "Passing the time" has often been a reason for my writing and many of my poems have been written in part for an audience