



SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

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Sharon Pollock

First Woman of Canadian Theatre

Edited by
DONNA COATES



Sharon Pollock

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Introduction

Sharon Pollock: First Woman of Canadian Theatre is an appropriate title for this new collection of essays on the life and work of the foremost woman in Canadian theatre. As playwright, actor, director, theatre administrator, critic, teacher, and mentor, Sharon Pollock has played an integral role in the shaping of Canada's national theatre tradition. Not surprisingly, the number of awards and prizes she has won for her enormous and lengthy contribution to Canadian theatre is truly staggering. Pollock was the first recipient of the Governor General's Award for Drama in 1981 for *Blood Relations*, a play about Lizzie Borden, the acquitted American axe-murderer. In 1986, Pollock won that award a second time for *Doc*, a play loosely based on her family background in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where she was born and raised. Three years earlier, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, another historical murder case set in the Crowsnest Pass, Alberta, had been nominated for another Governor General's Award. Pollock has also received a number of provincial and national awards both for acting and playwriting, beginning in 1966, the year she moved to Calgary, when she won the Dominion Drama Festival Best Actress Award for *The Knack*. In 1971, she received the Alberta Culture Playwriting Competition for *A Compulsory Option* (which she wrote while pregnant with her

sixth child), and in 1981, she was granted the Golden Sheaf Award (Television) for *The Person's Case*. *Doc* won the Chalmers Canadian Play Award in 1984, and in 2009, *Kabloona Talk*, a courtroom drama about two Inuit charged with murdering two Oblate priests, commissioned by Stuck in a Snowbank Theatre, earned the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama at the Alberta Literary Awards.

Pollock has also received provincial, local, and national awards for her support of theatre. In 1983, she won the Alberta Achievement Award; in 1999, the Harry and Martha Cohen Award for contributions to theatre in Calgary; and in 2008, the Gascon-Thomas Award from the National Theatre School of Canada. She has also achieved considerable international recognition: in 1987, she received the Canada-Australia Literary Prize, and in 1995, the Japan Foundation Award. Her plays continue to be performed in major theatres throughout Canada, in the United States, and Europe; she has conducted playwriting and theatre workshops nationally and internationally, and she continues to collaborate with national and international groups in the development of new scripts. Pollock also holds five honorary doctorates – from the University of New Brunswick (1987), Queen's University (1989), the University of Calgary (2003), the University of Alberta (2005), and Mount Royal University (2010). In 2012, she was made an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Pollock has also held an amazing array of positions in local, provincial, and national theatre scenes. She was a member of the Prairie Players, MAC 14 Theatre Society (Calgary); chairperson of the Advisory Arts Panel for the Canada Council; head of the Playwrights Colony at the Banff Centre of Fine Arts; associate artistic director of the Manitoba Theatre Centre; associate director of the Stratford Festival Theatre; artist-in-residence at the National Arts Centre, Ottawa; playwright-in-residence at the National Arts Centre, Alberta Theatre Projects, Theatre Calgary, and Theatre Junction in Calgary. She was also writer-in-residence at the Regina Public Library; head of the Playwriting Lab at Sage Writing Experience, Saskatchewan; associate director and artistic director of Theatre Calgary and Theatre

New Brunswick, as well as founding member and artistic director of the Performance Kitchen and the Garry Theatre, Calgary. She has also been president of Alberta Playwrights Network (APN) and director of Playwrights Lab (APN).

In 2008, when Sherrill Grace's *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock* appeared, Pollock became the first woman in Canadian theatre history to have had a volume produced on her life and work. Pollock is also one of the few Canadian women playwrights to have had several collections of her plays published. Diane Bessai's *Blood Relations and Other Plays* ("Blood Relations," "One Tiger to a Hill," "Generations," "Whiskey Six Cadenza") appeared in 1981, and Cynthia Zimmerman has recently assembled twenty-two of Pollock's works into a three-volume set titled *Sharon Pollock: Collected Works* (2005, 2006, 2008). As Zimmerman writes in her preface to Volume 1, both she and the publisher agreed that "this was a timely and important way to honour both Sharon Pollock's significant contribution to Canadian theatre and the range of her work" (iii). The collections include some of her "best-known works for the stage, but also some of her lesser known ones, several of her radio plays and scripts for young audiences, and a couple of plays that have not yet been published" (iii).

Although most people at Pollock's age – she is now in her late seventies – would be winding down their careers, retirement does not seem to be a word in her vocabulary, as she continues to produce politically provocative plays. In 2008, she travelled to Kosovo to meet with young Kosovar artists; that meeting led to an ongoing project of collaboration and creative exchange with playwright Jeton Neziraj, former artistic director of the Kosovo National Theatre and current executive director of Qendra Multimedia, Pristina. (Neziraj has produced a brief essay for this collection, which pays tribute to Pollock and describes their work in progress.) In 2014, the Turner Valley, Alberta, historical society commissioned Pollock to write a play she titled *Centennial* that would celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of oil in Alberta. Pollock is also currently working on a script about the American journalist, writer, correspondent, and

activist Agnes Smedley, best known for her supportive reporting of the Chinese Revolution. Remarkably, Pollock has also added several new positions to her extensive theatrical repertoire. Since 2006, she has served as dramaturge and artistic consultant for the Atlantic Ballet Theatre of Canada based in Moncton, New Brunswick, and from 2006 to 2008, she gathered a large following for her weekly reviews of Calgary theatre productions, titled “Pollock on Plays,” for CBC Radio’s *The Homestretch*.

Throughout her theatrical career, Pollock has continued to direct, most recently the third monologue (“Instruments of Yearning”) in Judith Thompson’s *Palace of the End*, for Downstage Theatre in 2009. Other directorial credits include productions at numerous theatres across the country such as the Manitoba Theatre Centre, the National Arts Centre, Neptune Theatre (Halifax), Theatre New Brunswick, Theatre Calgary, Alberta Theatre Projects, Theatre Junction, and Magnus Theatre (Thunder Bay). She has also continued to act. Among her favourite roles are Dr. Livingstone in *Agnes of God*; Nurse Ratchett in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*; Sister George in *The Killing of Sister George*; Eleanor in *The Lion in Winter*; Eme in her own play, *Getting It Straight*; Lysistrata in *Lysistrata*, and Miss Lizzie in *Blood Relations*. In 2004, Pollock appeared on stage at the Timms Centre for the Arts at the University of Alberta in 2004, where she performed the role of Nell Shipman in her own *Moving Pictures*, about the career of the Canadian-born silent film star and independent filmmaker, which had premiered at Calgary’s Theatre Junction in 1999. In 2008, she played the role of Margaret in Downstage Theatre’s production of Judith Thompson’s *Habitat*, and in 2011, with Verb Theatre, she played the role of Marg in the one-woman show *Marg Szkaluba: Pissy’s Wife*, by Alberta playwright Ron Chambers, which required her to sing several country-and-western songs.

Pollock has frequently acknowledged that it was her acting career that inspired her to write plays, in part because she was frustrated with the dearth of Canadian voices and stories on Canadian stages. According to Grace, none of the works Pollock acted in at that time

were from Canada; they were all from “elsewhere (England or the United States, London or New York), and the actors were expected to sound like Brits or Americans or like some odd mid-Atlantic alien” (Grace 26–27). As she wrote in an essay, ““The only voice and accent one never used . . . was the Canadian voice and accent, the Canadian voice as it was heard when it fell from the lips of white Canadians . . . People found nothing odd about its absence in our theatres for virtually no plays were set in Canada” (Zepetnek and Yui-nam 116.). Although Pollock was not the first playwright to lament the lack of Canadian voices and stories on Canadian stages, she was nonetheless one of the first to take up the challenge to produce Canadian scripts. During an interview with Margot Dunn in 1976, Pollock stressed that she felt obliged to tell “Canadian-oriented” stories about the country she inhabited:

I couldn't live in the States. I couldn't work for the States either. I really believe that the artist has a job, a responsibility not just to her/himself but to the society s/he comes from. I represent the kinds of questions some Canadians are asking and my responsibility is here. (6)

Typically, many of those “Canadian-oriented” stories, such as *Walsh* (1973), *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976), and *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), shine a light on the dark side of the nation's history. According to Grace, the writing of *Walsh* began Pollock's abiding concern with “the interrelated problems of racism, oppression, and the treatment of First Nations people in Canadian history and contemporary society” (101). These early plays, which earned Pollock a reputation as a playwright of conscience, continue to be staged and critically assessed. (Two of the essays in this collection examine these three plays either in whole or in part.) But arguably, no matter whether her works are considered “domestic,” “feminist,” “psychological,” or “mysteries,” most continue to explore the kinds of injustices which arise out of hypocrisy, bigotry, patriarchy, and racism. Her most recent work, *Man*

Out of Joint, produced by Calgary's Downstage Theatre in Calgary in 2007 (also discussed in two essays in this collection), is no exception.

In 2012, Pollock became the first playwright in Canada to have a conference held to celebrate her life and work. Although the event was organized by mainly academics and graduate students from the University of Calgary who wished to honour Pollock as a local, national, and internationally respected artist, uppermost was their desire to acknowledge Pollock's fervent support of her local community: her tireless work with students and teachers at high schools, colleges, and universities has become the stuff of local legend. By all accounts, the conference was a rousing success. Local theatre practitioners and academics came together with their counterparts from across Canada, as well as from Kosovo, Serbia, and India, to present papers on academic and/or theatre-practitioner panels, view archival displays, listen to readings of Pollock's work, and take in several productions of her plays. Although Pollock informed a CBC Radio interviewer that she felt slightly uneasy about the conference ("I should be dead," she quipped), the organizers were grateful she was not, because she took on a great many "roles" herself, including reprising her performance as Marg in *Marg Szkaluba: Pissy's Wife*. (As Grace writes in her essay, included in this collection, Pollock found performing a role of "eighty-to-ninety minutes in length . . . quite a challenge for a seventy-five-year-old memory"). To no one's surprise, her performance was flawless.

Pollock is also one of the few playwrights in Canada to have had several collections of critical examinations produced on her work, upon which this collection builds. Editor Anne F. Nothof's *Sharon Pollock: Essays on Her Works*, appeared in 2000; editors Sherrill Grace and Michelle La Flamme's *Sharon Pollock: Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* was published in 2008. In testament to the sustained attention paid to Pollock's work, six of the nine critical essays included in *Sharon Pollock: First Woman of Canadian Theatre*, are by scholars who have never before written on the playwright. But the collection is also enriched by three essays from among the best-known scholars on Pollock's work to date (Sherrill Grace, Jerry Wasserman, and Cynthia

Zimmerman), each of whom welcomed the opportunity to produce new critical assessments.

Jerry Wasserman's "*Walsh and the (De)Construction of Canadian Myth*" provides an excellent opening to this new collection of essays. Wasserman's essay, written in an engaging personal style, explores the relationship between Sioux Chief Sitting Bull and James Walsh of the North West Mounted Police. As "almost a draft-dodger" from the United States during the Vietnam War, Wasserman had considered the movement of political refugees across the border reminiscent of the Sioux's attempt to obtain political asylum in Canada during the period after the Battle of the Little Bighorn (1877–1881). Hence he confesses that when he first taught *Walsh*, he tended to regard the Canadian treatment of the Sioux as "morally superior" to the Americans', but he soon realized that Pollock's vision, which both "shattered and shored up" the national mythology, was the more accurate. Wasserman concludes that Walsh, whom Pollock depicts as a "basically good man" is, like many of her dominant male characters, hampered by a "combination of internal weakness and institutional loyalty or social conformity."

Shelley Scott's "Sharon Pollock and the Scene of the Crime" focuses on a curiously neglected area of Pollock's work. Scott asserts that while numerous critics have paid considerable attention to Pollock's mystery plays, they have generally viewed them as vehicles for the exploration of larger thematic concerns. Scott analyzes *Blood Relations*, which remains the most frequently produced of Pollock's plays; *Constance*, which has received scant critical attention; and the later works *End Dream* and *Saucy Jack*, in order to demonstrate that Pollock adheres much more closely to the conventions of the genre than critics have acknowledged in the past.

Like Scott, whose essay offers a cogent reconsideration of previous critical assessments of Pollock's mystery plays, Jason Wiens challenges traditional readings of one of Pollock's early political prairie plays in his essay. In "Ownership and Stewardship in Sharon Pollock's *Generations*," Wiens offers a refreshing consideration of this work by

drawing attention to the extent to which Pollock has often chronicled the events of her day, but with perhaps unacknowledged foresight. While Wiens's essay underscores that *Generations* operates, as do so many of Pollock's plays, on several levels of conflict – here the domestic, the local, and the national – it stresses that although Pollock tended to displace the third, which consisted of disputes between the local Aboriginals and their reserve's irrigation water and the distribution of energy resources on a national level in favour of the domestic, it was the timeliness of the play, which premiered just prior to the energy-revenue sharing scheme that became known as the National Energy Policy, that concentrated reviewers' and audiences' minds on the current economic climate, as well as on the perennial problem of Western alienation.

In "Different Directions: Sharon Pollock's *Doc*," Cynthia Zimmerman examines another of Pollock's important early works in order to express her frustration with audiences and critics who have often placed their sympathies with either of the parents in the play – that is, with Everett Chalmers, the famous doctor, or with Bob, his neglected alcoholic wife. Zimmerman believes that the story of Catherine, the daughter caught between two warring parents, has been sidelined and hence requires more examination. To that end, she selects two productions – one staged in 1984, the other in 2010 – to demonstrate how directorial choices influenced interpretations of Catherine's role in the play.

In "'The art a seein' the multiple realities': Fragmented Scenography in Sharon Pollock's Plays," Wes D. Pearce identifies another neglected aspect of Pollock's work. He asserts that critics' tendencies to focus on the "political and/or historical underpinnings of her plays and, to an extent, the biographical/autobiographic conventions that haunt some of them," have led them to ignore Pollock's use of scenography (or the visual world of the play), which plays a crucial role in how she "creates, writes, and dramatizes." Like Scott, Pearce examines several texts – *Walsh*, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, *Generations*, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, and *Doc* – to demonstrate how Pollock's use of scenography has developed over time. He insists that while her techniques may be

viewed as commonplace today, they were not when she began experimenting with them more than forty years ago.

The next two essays in the collection return to Pollock's interest in history; both examine *Fair Liberty's Call*, which explores the migration of the United Empire Loyalists to the Maritimes after the American War of Independence, and which critics have also tended to overlook. In "Listening is Telling: Eddie Roberts's Poetics of Repair in Sharon Pollock's *Fair Liberty's Call*," Carmen Derkson once again turns to an examination of Pollock's ongoing concern with the marginalization of Aboriginal people. Derkson argues that Pollock's stage directions make use of a "performative strategy" that emphasizes sound and its relationship to listening practices in order to foreground indigenous presence. Similarly, Kathy K. Y. Chung's "Loss and Mourning in *Fair Liberty's Call*" combines a perceptive reading of stage directions with an abundance of secondary sources on rites of mourning and loss in arguing that while the play highlights the "historic brutality and injustices" that took place during Canada's past, it also emphasizes that the well-being of a community and nation depends on the recognition and support of all its members' losses and suffering, including those of its indigenous peoples.

The final two essays, which offer textual analysis, are the first to comment on *Man Out of Joint* (2007); both reveal that while Pollock has played a major role in informing Canadians about shocking events in Canadian history, she is also keenly attuned to current injustices. In "Questions of Collective Responsibility in Sharon Pollock's *Man Out of Joint*," Tanya Schaap finds that the play, which chronicles the abuse of detainees at Guantanamo Bay as well as the controversies surrounding 9/11 conspiracy theories, functions stylistically and thematically as a "trauma narrative." (To my knowledge, Schaap is the first to apply trauma theory to Pollock's work.) But Schaap's essay also reiterates familiar concerns in Pollock's work, such as "distrust of power" and "accountability" (Nothof, "Introduction," 9), and thus further emphasizes that Pollock does not want audiences to leave the theatre without recognizing their own culpability if they fail to pay attention to those who suffer, or fail to comprehend that it is their

social indifference that makes possible the abuse of power. Donna Coates's "Equal-Opportunity Torturers in Judith Thompson's *Palace of the End* and Sharon Pollock's *Man Out of Joint*" concentrates on the representation of "torture chicks" in these two works. It argues that Thompson's focus on the ignorance and moral deficiencies of her character Soldier (loosely based on the "real-life" US Army Specialist Lynndie England) makes it difficult to address the serious ethical and political questions that emerge from women's involvement in systems and structures of dominance, whereas Pollock recognizes that women's exclusion from power has not necessarily made them immune to its seductive qualities, nor has it led them to use power differently from men. Coates's essay concludes by drawing upon the works of a number of feminist critics who insist, as does Pollock, that any admission of women to existing hierarchies in the military must be accompanied by a powerful critique of the institution itself. Both Schaap's and Coates's essays point to Pollock's tendency to use complicated structures which consist of interlocking narratives that track how multiple systems of oppression come into existence and how they are connected.

The remaining entries move the collection in a different direction – that is, to the recognition of Pollock's contribution to theatre production, to the making of theatre – hence providing a worthy balance to the essays on textual semiotics. In "Sharon Pollock and the Garry Theatre (1992–97)," Toronto theatre critic Martin Morrow looks back at the years he spent reviewing theatre productions for the *Calgary Herald*, and specifically those at the Garry Theatre, which Pollock ran with her son Kirk, a.k.a. K. C. Campbell. He concludes it was "remarkable" that the pair managed to keep the company afloat without public funding for five years but honestly confesses that (for sound reasons) his own lack of reviews during the last year of the company's venture may have contributed to its demise. The next essay, "Sharon Pollock in Kosovo," is one that I, as editor, invited Kosovar playwright and executive director of Qendra Multimedia, Pristina, Jeton Neziraj to write. In particular, I asked him to describe how his collaboration with Pollock came about. He writes that it was Pollock's generous response

to those struggling to keep theatre alive in war-torn Kosovo that began their relationship. In his essay, Neziraj also explains why he and his theatre company decided to produce *Blood Relations* in Pristina in 2010 (a production Pollock attended) and outlines the subject matter of their work-in-progress, a play tentatively titled “The Hotel.”

In “Biography and *the Archive*,” Sherrill Grace explores some of the challenges biographers face, including their attempts to achieve the impossible task of getting their subject’s story “right.” Grace also considers the role biography plays in the life-story of a nation such as Canada and firmly rejects the notion that only the lives of “politicians, generals and military heroes, hockey players and business tycoons” matter, or that only “nation building through railways or Vimy Ridge” should be considered identity-forming events. Rather, she insists that biographies of creative people such as Pollock and the writer/dramatist Timothy Findley, the subject of her current research, are essential because they demonstrate “what and who was left out, misrepresented or silenced.” The good news, she writes, is that biographies of artists are finally beginning to appear in our local bookstores. Grace concludes her essay by filling in the details of Pollock’s life since 2008, affirming that not a moment is dull or wasted in her subject’s life.

Grace’s essay is followed by “Sharon’s Tongue,” a new play that again substantiates the kind of impact Pollock has had on the local theatre community. Immediately after receiving the invitation to the Pollock conference, playwright and actor Lindsay Burns, actors Laura Parken and Grant Linneberg, and former artistic director of Lunchbox Theatre Pamela Halstead, began reading *everything* Pollock has written, and then met once a week over a period of many months (the kind of commitment equivalent to a two-term university graduate course) to discuss the thematic concerns they identified in the playwright’s work. Then, drawing almost exclusively on Pollock’s own words, they produced a play which, with its insight into the wide range and diversity of ideas and concerns that have captured the playwright’s imagination, will undoubtedly prove to be an invaluable resource for future teachers and students of Pollock’s work. The collection concludes with

a sampling of Pollock's CBC radio reviews, which indicate that she approached this new aspect of her theatrical career with the same professional style those who know her have come to expect. The radio format consisted of a conversation between Pollock and the CBC host based on the review Pollock produced and handed over just prior to the interview, but the audience never got the chance to exactly hear what she had written; many of the reviews were posted online, however, as were some of the interviews. The weekly reviews were always skilfully researched, fair, and delivered with frankness and humour.

That so many of the essays in this collection refer to previously disregarded areas, even on works that have been critically examined many times in the past, speaks to the complexity of Pollock's plays and suggests that, even with the addition of this new collection to the existing body of criticism on her opus, there remains much work to be done. The inclusion of Pollock's reviews should serve to inspire future research on her contribution to the making of theatre as critic.

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