

controversées, pour aborder les scènes contemporaines intermédiales et performatives.

KYM BIRD

Redressing the Past: The Politics of Early English-Canadian Women's Drama, 1880-1920

Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2004. xii + 269 pp.

SHELLEY SCOTT

Nightwood Theatre: A Woman's Work is Always Done.

Edmonton: AU Press, 2010. 344 pp.

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Despite differences in time periods, Kym Bird's *Redressing the Past: The Politics of Early English-Canadian Women's Drama, 1880-1920* and Shelley Scott's *Nightwood Theatre: A Woman's Work is Always Done* share certain commonalities: both originated as PhD dissertations, both examine contributions of women to Canadian theatre, and both interweave political, gender, and aesthetic concerns. Moreover, both books situate themselves as feminist projects of recovery: Bird's work is described as "a preliminary attempt to fill the historical gap" (4); while Scott's stated desire is to recognize and "preserve" contributions, thereby arresting further loss (224). Both texts achieve their recuperative goals and, by adding to our body of knowledge, effectively engender a more complete and diverse picture of Canada's theatrical past.

Redressing the Past focuses on "a small but significant body of texts" written by Canadian women between 1880 and 1920 in response to the "woman movement," the first wave of sustained feminist political activity (4). Included in the analysis are the closet dramas of Sarah Anne Curzon, the mock parliaments of the suffragists, the plays of Kate Simpson Hayes, and the comedies of Clara Rothwell Anderson—a sampler of the dominant genres chosen by women at the time. Bird identifies common traits in the work, such as didactic purpose, the construction of new roles for women, and an often contradictory ideological tension between the liberal (or equality) and maternal (or domestic) feminist strains of the day. Bird posits "a continuous dialectical relation" between "the struggle for political and social advancement in terms of both liberal and domestic feminism, and/or a

reactionary position supporting the status quo and an ideology of separate spheres” (13). Bird aptly illustrates this duality with each subject and, given her chronological arrangement of material, further demonstrates the overarching trajectory of the Canadian feminist movement in this period.

Drawing on a materialist feminist approach, Bird analyzes conditions and texts, expertly exploring the “relationship between biography, politics, and genre” to uncover influences and intersections that contributed to the formulation of the work at hand (4). The first chapter critiques Curzon’s *Laura Secord* and *The Sweet Girl Graduate* in relation to Canadian nationalism, political activism, and generic configuration, revealing a liberal feminist philosophy with some contradictory maternal feminist underpinnings. Chapter Two imaginatively re-constructs a mock parliament—a collectively-devised satirical parody of role reversal in which disenfranchised men appeal to a government of women for the right to vote. Bird identifies a political discrepancy in the form, given “a reverence for the democratic process” on the one hand, and a concurrent condemnation of the system due to gender bias on the other (91). Chapter Three focuses on Kate Simpson Hayes, whose personal life and early dramatic work (no longer extant) suggest a liberal feminist politic, while her later plays (*Slumberland Shadows* and *The Anvil*) demonstrate a full conversion to domestic feminism and the doctrine of Social Purity. The fourth chapter examines the feminist comedies of Clara Rothwell Anderson, a minister’s wife who achieved church support and literary acclaim reinforcing maternal and Social Gospel precepts while simultaneously expanding women’s roles and the delimitations of drama. With the above case studies, Bird adroitly examines the tensions and contradictions of the woman movement, bringing to light heretofore neglected plays and playwrights, and thus confirms the existence of an “early feminist dramatic tradition in Canada” (15).

Redressing the Past concludes with a discussion of the Canadian dramatist Lucile Vessot Galley and her play *Famous Women*, which also “enacts women’s contradictory relationship to the politics of the woman movement” (198). Bird notes there are many women yet to be recovered, and she makes an additional contribution to the field with her appendix, “A Bibliography of Canadian Drama in English by Women, 1880-1920.” The first of its kind, the bibliography is an invaluable resource, like the book itself. The cover photo is intriguing and “period-ish,” but it seems an incongruent choice, as it features Suzie Richter (associated

with the Toronto lesbian bands Atomic Pussy, Claudia's Cage, and The Nancy Sinatras). Overall, with its impressive historical research, astute literary analysis, and insightful socio-political critique, *Redressing the Past* is a consequential text that truly lives up to its titular claim.

Moving ahead in time and feminist formulations, Shelley Scott's *Nightwood Theatre* presents a history of Canada's "pre-eminent women's theatre," founded in Toronto in 1979 and still going strong today. Given its long life, Nightwood is positioned as "a microcosm, or a case study, of developments in feminist theatre and the production of women's work" (23). Scott's purpose is to explore "how feminist theory has changed since Nightwood's founding," and in turn, "how Nightwood as a women's theatre has changed to reflect developments in feminist philosophy" (11). Through a materialist feminist lens, Scott analyzes how Nightwood has presented itself to the public (via newsletters, media, the web, and so forth), how its (feminist) identity has been constructed and maintained, and consequently, how the public (audiences, supporters, and reviewers) has responded in kind. Scott argues that over the last few decades, "the definition of feminism has continually changed and that, as a women's theatre company, Nightwood has had to respond and adapt to changing attitudes" (11); Scott characterizes this dynamic as "a dialectic of accident and intention" (12).

Three frames of reference are utilized to contextualize and critique the company: 1) contemporary conceptions of feminist theory, by which Scott means different strains of feminist philosophy applied to theatrical practice; 2) other feminist theatres (American, British, and Canadian); and 3) collective creation (related to Canadian history, theatrical process, feminist objectives, and Nightwood's artistic and administrative procedures). Scott approaches her subject matter in a chronological fashion, dividing the company's history into four phases. The first chapter covers the years 1979 to 1988, when the theatre was run by its original co-founders, and it addresses subjects such as aesthetics, collective creation (e.g. *This is For You, Anna*), and company (re)structuring. The second chapter highlights the years 1989 to 1993 with Kate Lushington at the helm: Nightwood moved away from collective creation (as with *Good Night Desdemona* [*Good Morning Juliet*]), it adopted a more conventional organizational structure, and it assumed an anti-racist mandate. Chapter Three examines the years 1994 to 2000, at which time Diane Roberts, Alisa Palmer, and Leslie Lester assumed leadership and furthered

Nightwood's anti-racist goals (producing such shows as *Harlem Duet*). This chapter also covers 2001 to 2009, the current artistic directorship of Kelly Thornton, and it examines a number of award-winning shows (e.g. *China Doll* and *Cast Iron*). The fourth chapter drops the chronology and assesses the various types of feminisms (liberal, cultural, materialist, postmodern, Third Wave) located in Nightwood's practices, leading Scott to conclude that the company is "a series of constantly shifting feminist theatres" (223). The text also includes an appendix with a chronology of the company's shows and events dating from its inception to 2009. There are a few exclusions (specifically in the festival listings), but otherwise the production history is a prodigious document detailing the many contributions and members of the company over time. All in all, *Nightwood Theatre* offers strong scholarly research and a refreshingly accessible style, providing readers with a captivating, comprehensive (though by no means exhaustive), and long-awaited study of an influential and "enduring Canadian phenomenon" (224). With this achievement, Scott has produced one of the first texts on contemporary Canadian feminist theatre in English, and by situating the theories and practices in a national (and international) context, the subject is accorded its proper place, positioned in relation to and as part of a larger theatrical discourse.

With impressive original research, sound academic analyses, and engaging writing styles, Scott and Bird succeed in their missions to reclaim women's/feminist plays and theatrical deeds. Taken together, their texts span the modern feminist movement, salvaging potentially lost histories, and attesting to a legacy of feminist theatre practice in Canada. With these (and other) book-length studies rectifying absences and diversifying the field, historical continuity and societal inclusion become real possibilities for women. Canadian (theatre) history can now be altered accordingly—to *redress the past* and ensure that *a woman's work is always done*.