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North-South Theatre Exchanges: Sistren's tours of Canada in the 1980s and early 1990s[1]

This article explores the relationship between Canadian development agency funding and popular theatre during the 1980s and early 1990s, the period when Canada was particularly focused on promoting itself internationally as a benevolent nation. Sistren Theatre Collective of Jamaica is used as a case study to demonstrate that popular theatre was seen as an important way for engaging with communities and for disseminating development education in both Canada and the global South. Sistren was funded by a number of Canadian development agencies and toured Canada three times during the 1980s and early 1990s. Its work was seen as a model of grassroots outreach because it was using Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed—among other theatre techniques—and Jamaica's oral tradition to devise feminist theatre. In the same period, Canadian popular theatre workers/companies were also funded by Canadian development agencies to produce theatre with community groups. With development agency funding, Canadian popular theatre workers/companies formed the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance, which held festivals of popular theatre every two years. The festivals brought together popular theatre groups from Canada and the global South to exchange skills. Sistren attended the festival held in 1987 in Sydney, Nova Scotia, which was criticised for its focus on the needs of development educators rather than popular theatre workers. This article will argue that the increasing involvement of development agencies in popular theatre during the 1980s turned what started as a genuine attempt to exchange theatre skills between groups from the global North and South into an opportunity to parade funding recipients through development networks.

Dans cet article, Karina Smith explore le rapport entre le financement accordé par les agences canadiennes de développement et la nature du théâtre populaire pendant les années 1980 et le début des années 1990, à l'époque où le Canada cherchait tout particulièrement à promouvoir à l'étranger l'image d'une nation bienveillante. L'étude du collectif jamaïcain Sistren Theatre Collective démontre comment le théâtre populaire a été un moyen important d'interagir avec diverses communautés et de promouvoir leur développement tant au Canada que dans les pays du Sud. Le collectif Sistren a été créé par un regroupement d'agences de développement canadiennes et a fait trois tournées canadiennes pendant les années 1980 et au début des années 1990. Il a été cité en exemple pour son travail de sensibilisation à l'échelle locale, s'inspirant, entre autres, du modèle du Théâtre de l'opprimé d'Augusto Boal et de la tradition orale jamaïcaine pour faire du théâtre féministe. À la même époque, les compagnies canadiennes de

théâtre populaire et leurs artistes obtenaient des fonds d'agences de développement canadiennes en vue de faire du théâtre avec des groupes communautaires. C'est ainsi qu'a été formée la Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance qui, tous les deux ans, organisait une série de festivals de théâtre populaire réunissant des troupes du Canada et du Sud et proposait un échange de savoirs. Sistren a participé au festival de 1987, auquel on a reproché de s'intéresser davantage aux besoins des agents d'éducation au développement qu'à ceux des artistes de théâtre populaire. Smith fait valoir que la participation accrue des agences de développement au théâtre populaire des années 1980 a transformé une tentative sincère d'échanger des savoirs entre le Nord et le Sud en vitrine faisant étalage de leurs bénéficiaires à travers les réseaux de développement.

Sistren, a Jamaican popular theatre company comprised mainly of working-class women, emerged in 1977 under Michael Manley's "democratic socialist" government. Although the group initially received support from the Jamaican government, Sistren also began receiving small grants from North American development agencies in the late 1970s, such as the Inter-American Foundation (IAF) and Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO). Its work was of interest to Canadian Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) because the group was borne out of leftist politics and ideals. Ian Smillie, writing about CUSO's funding of Caribbean-based projects, points out that, "*Sistren*, a group of unemployed ghetto women, was assisted in the formation of what would become an internationally acclaimed theatre company" (46). When Sistren's future was left in doubt following the election of the conservative Jamaica Labour Party in 1980, which proceeded to dismantle the Manley government's policies, Sistren turned to Canadian development agencies for greater financial support. Throughout the 1980s, Sistren's success and reputation increased to the point that by the end of the decade it was considered the foremost women's popular theatre company in the Caribbean region. This was due to the level of Canadian aid assistance provided, as Canadian NGOs such as Inter Pares were donating up to $500,000 (Cdn) in three-year instalments by 1992 (Saibil 11). Sistren survived on this funding and was able to tour extensively within the Caribbean region where they formed their most supportive alliances and did their most important grassroots outreach.

The work for which Sistren became renowned in the Caribbean region was of major interest to Canadian popular theatre workers, whose methodologies had been influenced by adult educator, Ross

Kidd, who, in turn, had profoundly influenced Sistren's approaches to popular education. By the early 1990s, Sistren had toured Canada three times, while individual group members had made numerous solo trips to conduct workshops, participate in conferences, and undertake training, usually at the behest of Canadian development agencies. During each tour, Canadian popular theatre workers and development educators attended Sistren's performances and, to some extent, exchanged skills with group members; it is unclear, however, what Sistren gained from these visits, other than contacts and financial support.

By using Sistren Theatre Collective of Jamaica as its case study, this article will argue that between the 1970s and 1990s, Canadian development agencies involved in the Canadian popular theatre movement, specifically the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance (CPTA), turned a genuine possibility for exchange between theatre companies in the global North and South into an opportunity to "showcase" their funding beneficiaries through development networks. I will also argue that Canadian popular theatre workers, influenced by Canadian development agencies, wanted to learn about Sistren's use of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) in Jamaican communities and its approach to collective creation so that they could apply these skills in their own community outreach activities. Eleanor Crowder, formerly a popular theatre worker in Ottawa, claims that "[t]he initial interest for us in Theatre of the Oppressed came out of CUSO and Oxfam and Inter Pares—people who encountered TO in Central America at the Jesuit Centre and were already seeing it work overseas and trying to find ways to link with it here in Canada" (qtd. in Schutzman 198). While Canadian popular theatre workers were eager to learn about Sistren's theatrical methodologies, very few travelled to Jamaica to experience and observe the context in which the group was working.[2]

In this article, I use Canadian popular theatre worker Ian Filewod's and former Sistren Artistic Director Honor Ford-Smith's critiques of development agency funding and its impact on popular theatre, in both the Jamaican and Canadian contexts respectively, as the point of departure for analyzing the relationship between Sistren and Canadian development agencies, such as Inter Pares, on the one hand, and Sistren and the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance, on the other. In so doing, I will refer to the interaction between Canadian popular theatre workers and Canadian development agencies and examine how this relationship affected the exchange of skills between Canadian popular theatre workers and popular theatre groups from the global South. My approach to analysing these relationships is to

draw on archival research—letters, reports, funding applications—in conjunction with published articles and reviews of Sistren's Canadian tours to gain insight into how the group's public image was constructed by the perceptions of the group's work in Canada's popular theatre and development education circles. By taking this approach, I can reflect on how Sistren fit into the Canadian government's foreign policy during the 1980s, which emphasized the values of compassion and altruism toward the global South. Until now, there has not been an analysis of Sistren's work in relation to the needs of the various stakeholders involved in Canadian popular theatre and development education.

I will start by looking at the reasons Sistren was toured to Canada in the 1980s and identifying the connections made between Canadian popular theatre and Canadian development agencies, particularly the formation of the CPTA. This leads to a discussion of Sistren's first tour of Canada in 1981. From there, I will analyze the way Sistren was funded by Canadian development agencies and the work the group was doing in Jamaica. I will then focus on Sistren's second tour of Canada in 1987 to participate in the CPTA Standin' the Gaff festival in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The article ends with an analysis of Sistren's final tour of Canada in 1993 at the behest of development agencies.

Canadian National Identity and Foreign Aid

From the 1970s onwards, particularly under the Pierre Trudeau government, Canadian foreign policy makers and civic leaders deemed it of utmost importance for Canada to be viewed internationally as "compassionate" (Howard-Hassmann 33; Barratt 119) and for Canadians to be exposed to the benefits of foreign aid. Ilan Kapoor makes the point that "aid giving is strongly allied with the production of the nation, where the construction of a positive, single national identity is paramount, and hence where the nation's aid as 'gift' trumps its grift" (78). In 1993 former Director of Inter Pares, Diane Saibil, claims in a letter to Réal Lande, former Director of Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) Public Participation Program, that Sistren is needed in Canada "predicated on our assessment of Canadian public opinion and the lack of understanding of development issues which we encounter daily in our lives" (2). Although Saibil's letter was written in the early 1990s, it demonstrates that groups such as Sistren were brought to Canada as successful examples of Canadian foreign policy. While Sistren did achieve a great deal of success, the group also experienced significant problems putting its theatre and workshop program into action

because of economic and political pressures in the Caribbean region and the unequal levels of educational achievement among group members. Canadian development agencies and Canadian popular theatre workers created a mythology around Sistren, which disguised the local reality of the group's work in Jamaica. Conversely, Sistren ended up suffering from the "star syndrome," to quote Sally Yudelman, because their work was lauded in popular theatre and development circles (118) and, therefore, the group faced high expectations about what it would and could provide when it toured Canada in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the 1980s, Sistren relied on funding from a consortium of Canadian development agencies, known by the acronym CanCon,[3] with financial assistance also provided by War on Want and Christian Aid, both based in the UK. During this decade, Sistren also developed a very good relationship with Canadian NGO Inter Pares, especially under Jean Christie's directorship, because it was the first to take a genuine interest in the group's work and it was also responsible for putting CanCon in place. Inter Pares was formed in the late 1970s with the specific mandate to form genuine partnerships and "create with 'sister organisations in the "third world" a sense of common purpose and a cannon agenda, on matters of mutual concern'" (Christie 2). Sistren's former Artistic Director Honor Ford-Smith writes: "Most of our allies have tried to deal fairly with us—especially Inter Pares [. . .]. The ones with left leaning folks in them and they didn't call the shots in terms of setting the agenda. Not at all" ("Re: Sistren"). Yet, Ford-Smith also points out that even the most supportive donors could not completely understand the Jamaican context in which Sistren was working and the problems the group was experiencing—"its [*sic*] just too big a gap of difference" ("Re: Sistren"). In the Canadian context, the "gap of difference" referred to by Ford-Smith was rarely addressed, let alone traversed, as Sistren was obliged, and under considerable pressure, to provide workshops and training for development educators in the North, largely so they could maintain the funding provided. In addition, Sistren members constructed themselves as popular theatre experts who were available to "train" development educators in Canada, when, in reality, they were still developing their own skills (Sistren *Periodic Report* 1987-1988 ii); this led, on the one hand, to unrealistic expectations of the group and, on the other, to the elevation of Sistren to the heights of popular theatre stardom. Unfortunately, the popular theatre workshops and festivals that occurred within Canada were not necessarily two-way exchanges; groups such as Sistren ended up either on display or regarded as popular theatre gurus rather than

genuinely exchanging skills and experiences within either popular theatre/activist or development circles. Further, Canadian popular theatre practitioners also missed out on exchanging skills because they were required to facilitate workshops for development educators and community organisers.

Canadian Popular Theatre and Development Agency Funding

Popular theatre companies in Canada also relied on Canadian development funding in the 1980s because, as Alan Filewod maintains, popular theatre had been "ignored by critics, and under-funded by government arts councils" (*Canada-Third* 1). The Canadian government provided reasonably generous amounts of funding to NGOs, such as CUSO, whose work with grassroots organisations in the global South was deemed important to the Canadian aid agenda (Pratt 19). The funding filtered through to theatre companies working on social justice issues via partnerships among NGOs, community groups and popular theatre companies.

In 1978, Ross Kidd, a former CUSO co-operant then based in Africa, returned to Canada to share his Theatre for Development techniques with Canadian theatre practitioners who were using popular political theatre methodologies. This exchange had a profound impact on the approaches taken by Canadian popular theatre companies in their work with community groups, resulting in the formation of the CPTA in 1981. Further, Kidd's work in Africa with popular theatre practitioners, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri, fostered exchanges between Canadian popular theatre workers and popular theatre groups from the global South; these exchanges were funded by CUSO before it became the main funder of the CPTA, which demonstrates the NGO's particular interest in the advantages of popular theatre techniques in community work. In their book *Popular Theatre in Political Culture: Britain and Canada in Focus*, Jan Selman and Tim Prentki suggest that the Canadian popular theatre alliance was heavily influenced by the work of popular theatre companies from the global South because of their use of "highly participatory" models of theatre in community outreach, which often drew on Paulo Friere and Augusto Boal's educational and theatrical philosophies (10). Popular theatre practitioners in the North were seeking to learn about, adapt, and apply these techniques in their work, due to the exchanges with theatre companies from the global South at the first CPTA festival in Thunder Bay; and also because Canadian popular theatre was designed as theatre for social change within the Canadian context and was reliant on development funding.

In his book chapter "Naming the Movement: Recapitalising Popular Theatre," Filewod points out that:

> The grant-conditioned climate in which popular theatre work developed in Canada was in fact a benign form of state sponsorship which lasted so long as it served the interests (inarticulate, inadequate and ad hoc as they might be) of state and quasi-state policy. In those terms, popular theatre work was part of the larger hegemonic workings of the liberal social contract. (16)

Although Filewod is referring to the way that Canadian popular theatre was funded by the State, his argument can be extended to the way that development assistance and its concomitant funding of popular theatre groups from the global South was part of the "hegemonic workings of the liberal social contract." The discourse of development in the Canadian context, what Barbara Heron argues is "one of the most significant narratives of the res publica, a kind of national calling that coalesces in both aid/development commitments and peacekeeping activities" (5), permeated political discourses and funding channels for social justice activities, thus shaping the Canadian popular theatre movement's activities. Within Canada this alliance led to many joint projects between NGOs and popular theatre companies, such as Great Canadian Theatre Company's productions of *Sandinista!* and *Side Effects*, as well as the funding of popular theatre festivals throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, which were hosted by the CPTA. In this period, popular theatre groups from the global South, such as the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) and Sistren performed their plays for general theatre audiences and ran workshops for popular theatre practitioners, development agency representatives, and community groups. In fact, workshop tours were one of the requirements of the funding provided; and Alan Filewod suggests that the Canadian popular theatre alliance heavily depended on it (*Committing Theatre* 8).

Ross Kidd and Jean Christie (formerly a CUSO consultant and later Director of Inter Pares) were instrumental in promoting popular theatre in Canada. Christie, in particular, introduced Canadian popular theatre workers to the work of popular theatre companies, such as Sistren, which were active in the Caribbean; Kidd facilitated the tours of the African companies (*Project Proposal* 4). In 1980, they worked with a team of popular theatre workers and development educators to organise the first CPTA festival in Thunder Bay, Ontario, which combined a popular theatre workshop with a festival

of popular theatre. Funded by CUSO, Kidd brought popular theatre workers from seven African and Caribbean nations to exchange theatre skills with Canadian popular theatre workers (Filewod and Watt 64).

All of the invited theatre companies were making theatre using collective creation but their approaches differed depending on the context. Filewod suggests that the Canadian approach to collective creation had "been about the personal experiences of the actors as they research the material; lacking a common analysis, the actor-creators theatricalise their own subjective responses" (*Canada-Third* 3-4). This approach differed from Sistren's, which drew on the community's stories (including Sistren members' personal testimonies) as the starting point for creating improvisations around identified themes; from there scenes were written that eventually became full-length scripts. In the diary he kept during the popular theatre workshop, Filewod notes that there were many cultural and political differences between the so-called "Third World" popular theatre workers and the Canadians (who were, at this time, predominantly white and male): the African and West Indian participants were committed to "revolutionary politics", did not share all of the same political views as the Canadians, and when they were asked to work on a project tapping into a local issue by Canadian popular theatre workers, the "Third World" groups felt they had "little to offer" (*Canada-Third* 10-11). It appears from Filewod's remarks that the Canadian popular theatre workers assumed that the "Third World" popular theatre techniques could be easily translated into the Canadian context. Although the workshop resulted in an "exchange of skills" (or, rather, an exchange of ideas), between the participating groups, it also set the stage for some of the differences that would emerge during Sistren's visits.

Sistren Tour of *Domestick*, 1981

Sistren's first tour of Canada in 1981 was organised specifically for the group to demonstrate its approach to creating popular theatre and, in so doing, attract financial support from Canadian development agencies. The tour was organised by the International Council for Adult Education and funded by CUSO and Inter Pares with assistance from Oxfam Canada, the Anglican Church, the United Church of Canada, and the Catholic Church. The funding these NGOs provided, which amounted to approximately $17,000, was matched by a grant from CIDA (Sistren Coordinating Committee). Sistren performed its workshop production *Domestick* for public audiences and held workshops with groups of domestic workers in Ottawa and

Toronto. The play begins in 1938, the year of the labour uprisings in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, and ends in the 1970s, the era when the Manley government passed minimum wage and maternity leave legislation, thus attempting to improve the lives of domestic workers (*Domestick*). Prepared over 18 months prior to the tour, *Domestick* was designed to spark discussion with audiences. It drew on interviews with domestic workers in Jamaica and put their stories into the historical context of Jamaica's labour history since slavery. Further, some of the members of Sistren had worked as domestics themselves and thus brought first-hand experience to the theatrical representation of domestic work they were performing (Sistren with Ford-Smith).

The success of Sistren's first tour can be attributed to the careful matching of the group's work in the Caribbean context with an issue particularly affecting West Indian immigrant women in Canada. In the Caribbean, for instance, Sistren ran workshops on domestic work with groups of women in Jamaica, Grenada, and St. Vincent where domestic workers were largely un-unionized and their rates of pay very low. In Canada, Sistren's tour followed on the heels of the success of lobby groups in 1981 to win landed status for Canada-based domestic workers. The struggles of Canada-based domestic workers was already known to Sistren as Joan French, a Jamaican feminist activist, had spoken at the public forum on domestic workers in Toronto in 1979, which led to the formation of INTERCEDE: International Coalition to End Domestics' Exploitation (Ramirez 91).

With the help of Kidd and Christie, among others, Sistren exchanged experiences, stories, and theatre work with West Indian diasporic communities in Ottawa and Toronto, including the Jamaican-Canadian Association and the United African Sisterhood Association, as well as advocate organizations for migrant women workers, such as Immigrant Women's Services and OCISO; development workers and community organizers also attended the workshops (Sistren Co-ordinating Committee). In these exchanges, Sistren discovered some major differences between the experiences of Canada-based and Jamaican domestic workers: while the Canada-based domestic workers were against unionisation because they felt it "sold out the workers," the Jamaican domestics said their biggest problem was childcare (Allison 11). Sistren's performances and workshops in Canada succeeded, according to Inter Pares's bulletin, because the group "showed Canadians a new approach to community analysis [. . .]. They performed a major stage play to packed halls in Toronto and Ottawa, dancing and drumming, and dignifying the

guts and soul out of ghetto women's lives and culture in Jamaica" (2). The "new approach" referred to by Inter Pares was, presumably, Sistren's use of personal testimonies as the basis for analysis of issues affecting communities and, by extension, for devising theatre performances.

In the Jamaican context, however, *Domestick* did not attract the same kind of praise. Unlike Sistren's other plays, it only enjoyed a limited season at Kingston's Barn Theatre and was never re-staged, possibly because of its departure from more familiar structures and themes. The play is designed as a workshop production and is much more serious and educational in its tone than Sistren's other plays. Sistren member Pauline Crawford, in an interview with Keith Noel, says that "to grassroots people Domestick was more technical to understand, because it have in more symbols and in terms of the style- you have to think then... it was more politicised" (62). The performance of *Domestick* at the Barn Theatre, before mostly middle class audiences, brought the lives of domestic workers to the attention of the employing class. Noel makes the point that the play is important for inviting audiences to "enter into a type of experience that has been subterranean and ignored... now, through this play, [the middle-class] can view this relationship from the perspective of the person who suffers under it" (55). In the Canadian context, the play intervened in a political moment in which groups of West Indian domestic workers sought solidarity from non-government organisations such as Sistren in their struggle for landed status. Sistren was able to provide the kind of analysis and dialogue that Canada-based domestic workers needed in the early 1980s.

Sistren's popular theatre methodology was deemed useful in the Canadian context because Canadian NGOs and popular theatre practitioners viewed the group's work as a model for outreach with communities. Chris Brookes of the Mummers' Troupe, Newfoundland stated in 1983: "The use of theatre for social animation has never been as widely developed in this country [Canada] as it has been in the Third World" (1). Rhonda Payne, in a round table discussion published in *Playing Boal*, suggests that:

> [w]ork in development education spawned a growth of interest in popular theatre as an educational tool with groups. Boal's techniques offer a system that people can use. The CPTA (Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance) loose as it was and meeting only once every two years, appreciated this systemic approach. The first Theatre of the Oppressed workshop at a CPTA festival was in 1983. And every festival since has had a Boal workshop.

> Theatre of the Oppressed fed a need to develop skills in animation and addressed what people were doing in communities. (qtd. in Schutzman 199)

Sistren members were creating popular theatre to bring about social change for themselves and other working-class women in Jamaica by using a range of popular theatre methodologies, including Boal's TO. Over the years, Sistren members, under Ford-Smith's guidance, devised an innovative approach to creating popular theatre which combined the personal testimonies of the members of the group and Jamaica's oral traditions—games, songs, rituals, Jamaican language and so forth—with techniques drawn from Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Enrique Buenaventura's Theory of the Committed Theatre, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miri's popular theatre work in Kenya and the Theatre for Development approaches of Canadian adult educator, Ross Kidd. However, it was Sistren's explicitly feminist approach to popular theatre and its experimentation with collective creation that defined the group's work. In an interview published in *Sistren* magazine in 1988, Ford-Smith pinpoints "feminism, socialism, experimental and political theatre and education" as the "theory behind the work" ("On Completing" 5). While feminist theatre groups that emerged in the 1970s, particularly in the US and the UK, promoted collaborative approaches to devising plays around women's issues, and Sistren was certainly influenced by these groups, the company's broader aim was the transformation of "the larger social project" (Antrobus 11-12). This involved devising socio-drama skits and full-scale plays that addressed the inequalities experienced by Jamaican working-class women in neo-colonial Jamaica (Ford-Smith, "Sistren: Exploring").

Sistren's work fit well into Canada's aid agenda in the 1980s and early 1990s because of its focus on women in development, a priority area at the time (Morrison 19; Canadian International Development Agency 5). In fact, the Canadian International Development Agency became a "leader internationally in women in development and gender analysis" (Morrison 19) by initiating an "Agency-wide focus on women in development" between 1983 and 1989 under Margaret Cately-Carlson's presidency (221). Sistren provided important cross and inter-cultural ties with some of the community groups with which Canadian NGOs were working, such as the Ottawa-Carleton Immigrant Services Organisation (OCISO) and the Jamaican-Canadian Association. The NGOs, with the support of CIDA, placed importance on educating Canadians about the government's overseas aid program to encourage greater support for humanitarian

development projects both within Canada and overseas (224). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Sistren was invited (or hired) to give workshops in Canada on a wide range of topics including domestic workers rights, women and structural adjustment, domestic violence, and militarism. The workshop themes were generally issues that Canadian NGOs were promoting in their work.

Between 1981 and 1987, Sistren's work attracted increased amounts of funding from the Canadian consortium, in part because the group was responding to the effect of US hegemony in the Caribbean region, specifically its impact on women. The Canadian NGOs were committed to social justice in countries, such as Nicaragua, which had been devastated by US foreign policy support of the Contras. This extended to solidarity with Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica and Grenada, which had undergone political destabilisation because they had socialist-oriented governments. Sistren's theatre work during this period became increasingly militant in its criticism of neo-colonialism in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. It produced five new stage plays and ran workshops with women's groups throughout the region. In addition, it put energy into building its textiles business, it established a research branch, and it started a magazine. Ford-Smith, in her annual report to Inter Pares in 1986, writes of Sistren's success:

> How successful is success when it happens in a situation where nothing has changed for the majority of Jamaican women, where women are still in the most low paid occupations, still speak without an autonomous organization through which they can speak, where sexual harassment is accepted as a normal part of daily experience, where the work that women do in the home is still unrecognized, where the recolonization of the region is based on the use of female labour in free trade zones and tourism and where daily television colonizes our minds with serials which projects (sic) images of women as white glamour girls, carefree and cunning housewives [. . .]. Is Sistren really just a small business in danger of turning into all it criticises in the world around it? (4)

Despite Ford-Smith's anxiety about Sistren's status in Jamaica and the wider world, the group became famous in development and popular theatre circles internationally and was invited to tour the United Kingdom and Europe. By 1985, Sistren was trying to reduce the amount of touring it was doing as it was concerned about the impact on its local constituency (Murphy and Christie 3). Although the

majority of its funding was coming from Canada, Sistren did not do a second tour of North America until 1987 when it was invited to participate in the Standin' the Gaff CPTA festival in Sydney, Nova Scotia. This was partly because Jean Christie recognised the importance of Sistren's sustained work in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean and, therefore, did not arrange for the group to visit Canada. As Brian Murphy and Jean Christie point out in a report to Inter Pares on its Jamaican aid recipients: "If anything, Sistren's greatest problem will be setting priorites, and keeping *their own* agenda—they are very much in demand, and quite concerned about dissipating both their energies and their critical focus on women and popular methodologies in social development" (3). After Christie left Inter Pares in the early 1990s, Sistren was brought to Canada more often to "train" development educators in popular theatre techniques because of changes in the way Inter Pares was managed.

Standin' the Gaff CPTA Festival, 1987

The relationship between popular theatre practitioners and development agencies raises a number of issues that are pertinent to broader debates on the neo-colonial underpinnings of foreign aid assistance. Ian Filewod, a former popular theatre worker and, until his death in 1993, a program officer with the Canadian Council on International Cooperation (CCIC), wrote an article published in *Canadian Theatre Review*—and re-published more recently in Julie Salverson's edited collection, *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* (2010)—, which was particularly critical of the relationship between popular theatre and development agencies as it affected the exchange of techniques, skills, and information at the Standin' the Gaff CPTA festival held in Sydney, Nova Scotia in 1987. Filewod claims that "at times" development agency "interests" seemed to dominate the festival, taking precedence over promoting an exchange between popular theatre companies (36). He uses the example of PETA's involvement in the Standin' the Gaff festival: Canadian popular theatre workers did not get the opportunity to exchange skills with PETA (despite PETA's interest in exchanging skills with them) because they were too busy organising workshops for development educators (38). Filewod's criticisms of Standin' the Gaff illustrate Kapoor's point that although non-government organisations can be "less bound by national loyalties and more ethical" (93), they are "not necessarily immune" from the conditions inherent in aid assistance (49). The Standin' the Gaff festival was deliberately scheduled to take advantage of the CCIC Annual General Meeting, which was scheduled at the same time and in the same place. Thus, priority was given to demonstrating the

importance of theatre for social action in development work (Schneider). Filewod writes, "The situation is in danger of being exploitative. Because NGOs see theatre as something people can do without developed analysis and skills, they tend to see popular theatre workers as mere volunteers in the general development network, not as an important focus in building international partnerships" (38).

Filewod's remarks echo those of Sistren's former Artistic Director Honor Ford-Smith, who also argued in the 1980s that development agencies saw popular theatre as a "tool" rather than an artistic practice and therefore viewed Sistren as an aid recipient rather than a theatre company ("A Cultural Worker's Dilemma" 31). According to Eugene Van Erven, in his book *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives*, "the reality is that when it attracts funding at all, community theatre is usually only validated according to social development instead of aesthetic criteria, both in the north and the south" (254). The main difference between Filewod and Ford-Smith, however, is that the former was not critical of development assistance *per se* and the way it has been used to construct Canada as a benevolent global citizen. Rather, Filewod was committed to developing more equitable relationships between Canadian popular theatre practitioners and development agencies to explore the potentialities of the funding relationship.

Due to its international fame, Sistren was invited to perform its play *Muffet Inna All a Wi* at Standin' the Gaff festival. The company was billed as one of the "star" attractions of the festival alongside well-known popular theatre companies from India, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and the UK as well as Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal (Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance). Sistren's play *Muffet Inna All a Wi* is a reggae-musical that re-tells the nursery rhyme Little Miss Muffet to highlight the exploitation of Jamaican women in late global capitalism. Tim Prentki and Jan Selman recall that Sistren's performance at Standin' the Gaff was powerful because Sistren members, as both actors and community members, "challenged the rhetoric of the more 'professionalised' north" (Prentki and Selman 81). Prentki and Selman's remarks reflect the success of professional theatre workers, such as Ford-Smith, in training the working-class members of Sistren in theatre arts and, in turn, being taught Jamaican working-class creative cultural practices. In the Jamaican context, Sistren challenged the assumption of middle and upper-class Jamaicans that working-class women lack creativity, thus demonstrating through their use of Jamaica's oral tradition that African-derived culture is inherently theatrical (Ford-Smith "Sistren: Exploring" 4). However, performing *Muffet* outside of Jamaica

caused problems for Sistren's Canadian audiences who failed to understand the group's use of patwah (Hale 11). Similar language barriers occurred when Sistren toured the UK and Europe: the West Indian audience members enjoyed the performances but the Europeans were not able to completely engage with the play's humour and layers of complexity (Sistren, *Theatre in Education* 14).

Despite these barriers, Amanda Hale of Toronto's The Company of Sirens points out that "the packed audience at the University College of Cape Breton got the message that 'Muffet is in all of us'" (11). Hale's review also includes remarks on Sistren member Pauline Grover's participation in a Standin' the Gaff panel on "Creating and Performing Women's Issues." She writes: "Her lack of theorizing, analysing and generalizing reflected the same refreshing, down to earth quality in Sistren's work and approach. Instead of imposing a theoretical feminist analysis, they politicize groups of Jamaican women by working with them" (11). While Hale's comments shed light on Sistren's importance to Canadian popular theatre practitioners, they anticipate the degree to which the group's work would be fetishized in the North: Sistren's hands-on approach with community groups, their "down to earth quality," would be deemed of immense value to development educators, in particular. In terms of Sistren's participation in the Standin' the Gaff festival, Sistren members found the opportunity to meet and exchange skills with other "grassroots" theatre companies, such as Nicaragua's Teocoyani (also funded by Inter Pares during the 1980s), rather than with Canadian popular theatre groups, to be the highlight of the festival (Sistren *Periodic* 13). According to Judith Weiss, Teocoyani's theatrical style was closest to that of Sistren's; in fact, Sistren "provided much helpful information in their [Teocoyani's] workshops" at Standin' the Gaff (77).

Following the Standin' the Gaff festival, Sistren toured to eight cities across Canada: Sydney, Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Regina, and Calgary. The company ran workshops with community groups ranging from domestic workers to development educators, in addition to performing *Muffet*. According to Sistren's periodic report to Inter Pares, the workshop tour was well organised and at least one community group—a black women's group in Halifax—started using drama-in-education methods after their visit (4). With particular reference to Sistren's workshop tour, Ian Filewod writes:

> Working outside a specific program context [. . .] the Sistren workshop in Ottawa and Toronto seemed to lack direction—as if

> no one, including company members, knew why they were here. Of course, Sistren was in Canada for Standin' the Gaff festival, and the workshop was a logical extension of that visit. But loose assumptions about the intrinsic value of their visit led to a meaningless workshop tour through development education networks, throwing Sistren in with a potpourri of interest groups. (38)

It should be noted that Sistren's first workshop in Sydney on the theme of militarization and the economy was for delegates at the CCIC AGM. Instead of tapping into a Canadian issue that had resonances for women's groups in Jamaica, Sistren seemed to be "showcased" as a "successful" example of Women in Development funded by Canadian NGOs. In his article, Filewod compares the 1987 tour with the group's previous tour in 1981, organised by Inter Pares among others, which he suggests was much more sophisticated than that of many development agencies which "tend to see theatre as one more technique to put into their education grab bag" (39). This was mainly because Sistren's first tour was designed to address an issue that was pertinent to both Jamaican and Canadian community groups: the labour conditions for domestic workers. Filewod writes, "By giving an image of domestic workers to the public while reinforcing the integrity and dignity of the workers themselves, Sistren could play a strategic role in a Canadian program while developing their own interests" (37).

The Company of Siren's Lina Chartrand, in her review of Sistren's workshop tour for *Broadside*, suggests that while Sistren's "methods were not unlike traditional theatre workshop techniques, Sistren's feminist and educational emphasis made the experience a valuable and empowering cultural exchange and increased our perception of theatre as an accessible and exciting form of communication" (11). In Chartrand's review, Sistren's work is not evaluated for its innovativeness but, rather, for its ability to engage its constituency. This is one of the main reasons why Sistren's work was of such interest to Canadian popular theatre workers: the majority of the women in the company were grassroots themselves and were from the communities the group served; they had not become involved in popular theatre via drama school or professional theatre circles. Jan Selman makes the pertinent remark that "[c]ommunity outreach is not a skill one learns at theatre school, but it is a vital one for a popular theatre director" (45).

Sistren's evaluation of the 1987 workshop tour was also much more positive than Filewod's, perhaps because it was part of a report to Inter Pares, one of its most supportive funders. According to

Sistren, "[l]arge numbers of West Indians attended and many of these women participated in the workshops offered by the Sistren team" (Sistren, *Periodic Report* 13-14). In fact, Sistren prioritised its work with Canada-based West Indian women's groups because their concerns were closely aligned with those of the Caribbean women's movement, in which Sistren played a prominent role; such groups were among some of Sistren's most important transnational alliances (Ford-Smith, "Letter"). While some of the workshops Sistren was invited to conduct may have been "meaningless", because they were organised to meet the needs of development educators and NGO agendas, the links between Sistren and West Indian communities in Canada were integral to the group's outreach work. Sistren's tour of Canada echoed the group's tour of the UK in 1984 when it was invited to perform and do workshops in "major West Indian communities at the invitation of the West Indian Women's Association" (Saibil).

Sistren's Influence on Canadian Feminist Theatre

In terms of Canada's theatre scene, Sistren influenced the development of Canadian feminist theatre in the late 1970s and 1980s. As Shelley Scott notes, Sistren was among a number of feminist popular theatre groups on the international scene whose theatrical methodology affected companies such as Nightwood and The Company of Sirens (Scott). In its early stages, Nightwood Theatre, for example, shared a commitment to collective theatrical and organisational methodologies, which placed women's issues at the centre of the work. This commitment endured with The Company of Sirens, established by former Nightwood co-founder Cynthia Grant, through an increased emphasis on developing community-oriented theatre outside of traditional theatre venues (Bennett and Di Cenzo 74). Sistren's importance to these companies is evidenced by the interest shown by Cynthia Grant and others at the Breaking the Surface festival at the University of Calgary in 1991. In particular, Sistren's focus on gender, race, and class in both its approach to working collectively and in its performances influenced Grant's work with The Company of Sirens. In an interview with Maria Di Cenzo and Susan Bennett, Grant suggests that representation was very important because of the company's work with unions and community organisations:

> [W]e were quite sensitized to the issue of representation in a group on a stage [. . .]. 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. (Bennett and Di Cenzo 79)

While Sistren's plays and outreach work do not explicitly deal with racism—race relations are very different in majority black countries, such as Jamaica—they are extremely important models of how to represent class and gender issues on stage. Further, they speak to the experiences of African-Caribbean communities in Canada through their exploration of gender inequality in societies stratified along colour/class lines.

Sistren has also had a profound influence on Victoria, BC's Puente Theatre, established by Lina de Guevara in the late 1980s. De Guevara was already an established theatre practitioner in Chile prior to emigrating to Canada when Pinochet came to power. In the late 1970s, De Guevara attended the Festival of the Americas theatre festival in New York where she heard Honor Ford-Smith speak about Sistren's theatrical methodology. De Guevara was inspired to form a theatre company with other South American women so that collectively they could share their stories of immigration to Canada with Canadians (Interview). The play, *I wasn't Born Here: Stories of Latin American Immigrant Women*, was performed in Victoria and afterwards at the CPTA festival in Guelph, Ontario in 1989. The main similarity between Sistren's work and Puente's lies in the use of the actor's personal testimonies as the basis for theatrical creation. As Tim Prentki and Jan Selman write, "the piece represented a high level of theatrical attainment from a group of previously non-actor immigrants from Latin America" (82). Nevertheless, Ingrid Mündel argues that *I wasn't Born Here* perhaps reinforces rather than contests "dominant assumptions about ethnicity in Canada" (108) through its focus on overcoming barriers rather than questioning institutionalised racism within the Canadian context. Sistren's plays, on the other hand, critique the policies of the Jamaica government and their impact on Jamaican women.

Sistren's Decline

Although Sistren's reputation for innovative feminist popular theatre continued to grow in the global North, the difficulties the group was experiencing in Jamaica—in terms of conflict within the collective based on colour and class differences, an enormous workload, and a precarious economic situation—increased (Ford-Smith, *Ring Ding*). By the time Sistren visited Canada in 1987 to

participate in Standin' the Gaff, many of the problems were escalating. These problems were made known in Sistren's Periodic reports to CanCon and in Honor Ford-Smith's book, *Ring Ding in a Tight Corner*, published in 1989. In 1992, Cheryl Ryman wrote an evaluation report on Sistren for the Association of Development Agencies, in which she claimed that Sistren's overseas trips were so numerous that the needs of Jamaican communities were not prioritized; and that the attraction of increased salaries and the excitement of foreign travel diverted Sistren members' attention away from the group's aims and objectives:

> The neglect and the continued (since 1984) abandonment of Sistren's community group building activities in the light of their overseas activities, has left a negative impact on the local grassroots perception—"Sistren? Chuh! Dem travel too much."‹ (25-26)

By 1990, Sistren was gradually slipping into decline in Jamaica, largely due to leadership issues. The previous year, Honor Ford-Smith, the driving force behind Sistren's theatre work, had resigned to take up graduate studies at the University of Toronto. The gap left by her absence was never filled due to internal friction within the company and a lack of skills and/or confidence among group members to take on the role (Ryman 74). However, the excitement surrounding Sistren's work continued in Canadian development circles despite the mismatch between international reputation and local reality.

Sistren did not attend another CPTA festival after Standin' the Gaff, although it did tour Canada again in 1993. However, by that point the CPTA had lost cohesion and sources of funding for popular theatre within Canada had started to dry up. Alan Filewod identifies the end of apartheid in South Africa as the turning point, "after which the Canadian government backed away from its widely recognized stance of moral and economic imminence in the field of international aid, and exposed more clearly its deeper commitment to transnational corporatism" ("Naming" 11). Nevertheless, Sistren continued to receive funding from Canadian development agencies for its work in Jamaica as a Women In Development NGO. Three members received funding to tour Canada to run workshops with community groups on issues that were relevant to NGO activities within Canada; this tour was not set up for Sistren to exchange skills with popular theatre practitioners, although they did meet with members of the Nova Scotia Popular Theatre Alliance and Theatre in

the Rough. While organizing for Sistren to participate in development workshops was CanCon's top priority, it failed to provide Sistren members with the opportunity to enhance their skills through exchanges with popular theatre workers. To return to Ian Filewod's remarks about the Standin' the Gaff tour in 1987, Sistren's work was again seen as of "intrinsic value" in the Canadian context because of the group's renown in Northern development circles.

The 1993 tour was designed for three Sistren members to conduct workshops with community groups in Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, and St John's. The tour was organized to tap into CanCon's development program in Canada, which was focusing on economic restructuring and violence against women. In a grant application to CIDA, Inter Pares, on behalf of the CanCon member organizations, argued that Sistren's tour would assist Canadian NGOs with their work in Canada through the sharing of popular theatre methodologies with development workers; assisting NGO supported community groups to better understand "partnership and interdependency" (Inter Pares, "Sistren Visit"); and to provide "outreach to Toronto's large Caribbean community as well as outreach with groups that attended events during a previous Sistren tour" (Saibil 3). In the plan proposed by development agencies for the World Interaction workshop on Economic Restructuring and its Impact on Women, to be run by Sistren, the following is mentioned: "Have Sistren facilitate drawing out knowledge from the group about the situation of economic restructuring in Canada and help see the links between Jamaica and Canada" (World Interaction 2). Canadian development agencies assumed Sistren members would have knowledge of the Canadian context despite coming from the Caribbean region, failing to acknowledge the significant cultural and political differences between Canada and Jamaica.

Sistren conducted three major workshops in Ottawa on the topics of Managing Change, Sexual Violence, and Economic Restructuring. The workshops drew on standard drama games and techniques, such as guided imagery and sculptures. In the workshop on sexual violence, for example, the participants were asked to identify the do's and don'ts of a safe learning environment after which they were taken through an exercise in which they were asked to imagine 'rape', match a colour to their mood, then physicalize the mood through creating individual sculptures. After what may well have been a traumatic experience for some participants, Sistren ran an analysis session in which the women were asked to assemble a resource kit on sexual violence in groups using newspaper clippings and other documents and then present it to the group as whole

(Sistren, *Workshop Design*). While the Ottawa Organising Committee reported that popular theatre techniques "became more accessible," it criticized Sistren's workshops for their lack of content and analysis of local issues. However, it was suggested that in future "local resource people deal with local content with Sistren contributing their expertise in workshop design and techniques" (Ottawa Organising Committee).

According to CanCon's report on Sistren's 1993 visit, "a frequent critique of the tour was that they [Sistren] were weak on local content and on analysis, and that they did not go far enough in moving from identifying problems to identifying solutions and actions" (1); another criticism was that Sistren members did not show enough enthusiasm and at times looked like they didn't want to be there (Young). Although CanCon obviously saw Sistren's presence in Canada as an important aspect of legitimating their financial contribution to the group's work in Jamaica, the three Sistren members did not have expertise in local issues (and why would they?), which was evident in the evaluations of their workshops. Honor Ford-Smith, who was paid in her capacity as a Sistren member and the group's former Artistic Director to travel to Jamaica to prepare Sistren to conduct the workshops, made the following comments in a report to Inter Pares *following* the training and *before* the tour:

> It needs to be made very clear that Sistren work best in workshop with people who appreciate and understand that they are women from the working class who do drama and popular education, and that, as the teaching group is now constituted, their formal education is (*sic*) ranges from elementary to secondary level […]. Often there is the expectation that they [Sistren] will provide sophisticated analyses of theoretical problems and sometimes highly trained middle class persons who have read about the "Sistren legend" come expecting gurus of liberation who can transform themselves into experts of community development, consciousness raising and feminism. (Ford-Smith, *Approaches* 7)

Despite Ford-Smith's cautionary words, the negative evaluations of Sistren's workshop tour in 1993 resulted in closer scrutiny of the group's work in Jamaica and jeopardized Sistren's relationship with CanCon. Further, it demonstrated the extent to which the group's work had been mythologised in the Canadian context as Sistren was on the brink of collapse in Jamaica, had stopped

producing major productions, had reduced much of its workshop program, and was experiencing internal conflict; in short, the group was no longer at the cutting edge. In the CanCon evaluation, the following comment was made:

> The myth that has built up around Sistren over the years, and which is based on a bygone era when grassroots members of the collective received ongoing training and various kinds of technical, creative and personal support from middle-class colleagues, has generated an unhealthy dynamic within the collective. Popular expectations of them are totally unrealistic, yet the Sistren women continue to attempt to project an image which is consistent with the myth" (Canadian Consortium 2).

It is worth noting that the development agencies received little criticism for their agendas, for their use of the Sistren members, or for what Sistren felt were the problems with the tour. Within three years of Sistren's tour, the CanCon members gradually withdrew their financial support of the group's activities in Jamaica. Inter Pares, Sistren's major ally throughout the 1980s, discontinued its funding in 1996 yet insisted on continuing the relationship in other ways, such as keeping up regular correspondence and providing updates about the NGO's activities.

Conclusion

The emphasis in the 1980s on constructing Canada as a "compassionate" nation, concerned with giving aid assistance to the so-called "Third World" and promoting community outreach at home, influenced development and popular theatre workers alike because of their commitment to leftist politics. These workers assumed that by bringing groups such as Sistren to Canada, they would be able to tap in to grassroots activist techniques, such as Boal's TO, which would be effective in their own outreach work with communities.

Sistren's tours of Canada in the 1980s and early 1990s opened up the possibility for genuine exchange but in the end, primarily met the needs of Canadian development agencies and popular theatre workers. Both groups viewed Sistren and its theatre and outreach work in Jamaica as a model of community outreach because it was devised and performed by grassroots women for grassroots audiences. As a result, the group's work was often fetishized in Canada despite the problems the group was experiencing in Jamaica. Sistren bought into the fetishization of its work

by constructing group members as popular theatre experts who could do workshops in Canada with Canadian community groups on Canadian issues. This was an attempt on the part of Sistren to secure its financial support from Canadian development agencies. While Sistren started out working on Canadian issues that resonated with Caribbean women's groups, such as domestic workers, it ended up becoming the mouthpiece for Canadian NGOs on issues that were removed from group members' lived experiences. As funding for Canadian popular theatre dried up with changes in the Canadian government's aid agenda, so too did support for Sistren's work when it was discovered that the company could not deliver, in either Canada or Jamaica, what Canadian development agencies expected.

Notes

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2 Some Canadian popular theatre workers travelled to Nicaragua and exchanged skills with Nicaraguan popular theatre groups, such as Teocoyani, but only because the struggle in Central America was, at the time, a priority issue for the Canadian government and researchers had access to funding. Arthur Milner, former Artistic Director of Great Canadian Theatre Company, travelled to the Caribbean to attend a meeting of the Eastern Caribbean Popular Theatre Organisation with Canadian NGO funding. Further, Milner and other members of the Great Canadian Theatre Company were funded to travel to Nicaragua by Inter Pares (Milner).

3 CanCon, established at the request of Canadian NGO Inter Pares, comprised the following development agencies: Oxfam-Canada, the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church, the Catholic Commission for Development and Peace (CCDP) and Match International. All of these agencies entered into financial agreements with Sistren following the group's first tour of Canada in 1981.

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