

Women's Theatre Festivals as Counterpublics: Groundswell, FemFest, and The Riveter Series

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On 3-4 May 2013, Calgary's Urban Curvz theatre company held a cabaret called *Girls Gone Wilde* as part of a handful of events dubbed The Riveter Series. On their website, artistic director Vanessa Sabourin and artistic producer Jacqueline Russell explained that:

A study conducted in 2006 on *The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre* estimated that while 59% of Canada's theatre-going audience is female, only 27% of the plays produced in Canada are written by female playwrights. Inspired by Femfest (produced by Sarasvati Theatre in Winnipeg) and The Groundswell Festival (produced by Nightwood Theatre in Toronto), this event will feature sizzling staged readings to light up the Calgary stage across two nights. In a country where more and more brilliant female writers are born and made, *Girls Gone Wilde* will bring these commanding and arresting voices to the forefront of Canadian culture! (Urban Curvz Theatre)

The study they refer to is "Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre," spearheaded by Nightwood's artistic director Kelly Thornton in partnership with the Playwright's Guild of Canada Women's Caucus and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT). As a former chair of the Women's Caucus and as artistic director of Sarasvati, Hope McIntyre was also one of the driving forces behind the "Women's Initiative." The connections between the three companies continue: Urban Curvz's Jacqueline Russell has performed at FemFest with her play *Raunch*;¹ she and Sabourin met Nightwood's producer Denyse Karn at a Magentic North event and sought advice from her; and both Nightwood and Urban Curvz have produced Jennifer Tremblay's Governor-General's Award-winning play *The List*.² The most direct connection between FemFest and Groundswell in 2012-2013 was Judith Thompson: she read an excerpt from her new play *Who Killed Snow White?* at FemFest and a workshop production was presented at Groundswell. Despite this ambitious and fruitful cross-pollination, we remain a long way from a circuit of women's festivals across the country.

In this essay, I will look at these three events to inquire about the work they are presenting, and to argue for the continued relevancy of women's festivals as venues for new play development. I will show that each festival is taking a different approach to the goal of celebrating women's voices: that FemFest nurtures the playwright, Groundswell emphasizes the play, and Urban Curvz encourages emerging female artists to self-produce. The festivals are similar in format: all three featured a master class, readings of plays in progress, and a cabaret event. Both FemFest and Groundswell also presented plays from other parts of the country as well as at least one locally-created production; Urban Curvz aimed for this goal too, initially programming a local production of *The Disembodied Lady* by Leda Davies, but it was cancelled at the last minute due to lack of funding. All three companies demonstrated work

by different generations of women, while representing three different levels of longevity and stability themselves.

Part of my project in defending women's companies as generators of new work is also to counter the still-common perception that women's theatre is for feminists only, that it is separatist in focus, and speaks only to the "converted." The misconception remains that women can and do participate fully in Canadian theatre, rendering women's companies obsolete. In her critique of Jürgen Habermas's ideal vision of a public sphere, Nancy Fraser points out that, "declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so" (115). In the context of Canadian theatre, as in Fraser's example of American feminist activism, "women of various classes and ethnicities constructed access routes to public political life, even despite their exclusion from the official public sphere" (115). Furthermore, Fraser asserts that there have always been "a plurality of competing publics" and that "from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (116). This is an important point because the goal for feminist art is not just inclusion, but inclusion on its own terms and in its own voice—and if this is not currently possible, then activity within the separate, counterpublic sphere is preferable. Fraser argues that this is always the case anyway, refuting Habermas's assumption "that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics" (117). Rather, Fraser "contend[s] that in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public" (122). Without the counterpublic sphere, "members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies" (123). Fraser insists that, rather than separatist, subaltern counterpublics are "parallel discursive arenas" (123) that can eventually "expand discursive space" (124) and reduce "the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres" (123). Far from being separatist enclaves, "to interact discursively as a member of a public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one's discourse to ever widening arenas" (124).

Winnipeg's FemFest marked its tenth anniversary, 15-22 September 2012. While Sarasvati has a mandate to produce "transformative," socially engaged theatre and to support emerging artists, McIntyre started FemFest specifically to provide an opportunity for female artists. As a national event, FemFest 2012 presented three touring productions, two from Vancouver and one from Montreal,³ as well as two locally produced shows: *Empty* by Hope McIntyre and *Immigration Stories*, developed by McIntyre with the Immigrant Women's Association of Manitoba. FemFest also featured opening and closing cabarets, workshops led by the visiting artists, a "Bake-Off" competition, and readings of plays in development, in their entirety or as excerpts, interspersed throughout the week. Two playwrights from Toronto were featured: Marcia Johnson participated in the "Bake-off" and gave a noon-hour play reading, while Judith Thompson led a masterclass, and gave a lecture and a reading from some of her works, including *Who Killed Snow White?* In the past, FemFest has been held in a studio space at Prairie Theatre Exchange, but in recent years it has been based at the Asper Centre for Theatre and Film on the University of Winnipeg campus, where McIntyre also teaches.

At FemFest the playwright is at centre stage. McIntyre sees FemFest as being an edgy

celebration of women's voices, but primarily as a tool for the development and encouragement of local women artists, to let them know that theatre can be an option for them. In programming, she aims for a balance of tone and as much breadth and diversity as possible, always aiming to start dialogue and to bring in a wider community (Interview). As a first-time attendee in 2012, I was struck by how well the shows were attended, by the wide diversity in the casts and audiences, and by the respect McIntyre commands in her community. I would argue that the key to FemFest's success is McIntyre herself as the sole artistic director of Sarasvati and of FemFest; looking over the programs and publicity materials from the past ten years, I noted the remarkable degree of consistency in the "message" of the festival. "Staging Identity" was a good choice for the theme in 2012 because after ten years with the same leader, FemFest does indeed have a strong sense of identity. Less clear is the relationship between the works in progress read at FemFest and any future for them beyond the festival; while McIntyre has used FemFest as a testing ground for her own plays, she admits that most shows read at FemFest go no further. Since Sarasvati only produces one mainstage show a year, FemFest scripts need to be sent elsewhere for a full production, and McIntyre acknowledges that this rarely happens. Instead, FemFest concentrates on empowerment for the individual woman artist, a less measurable outcome, but one consistent with a mandate of community development and involvement.⁴

Groundswell, which was held 15-24 March 2013, is one of the oldest women's festivals in the country, originating in 1986. From the beginning, Groundswell has been a festival where new works in progress by women are given staged readings or workshop productions, but in the past it has been more widely inclusive and more about artist development—in other words, more like FemFest.⁵ There were two Groundswells held in 2011 and the change between them is illustrative of Nightwood's new direction: in the first version, 17-26 February, three plays were read that came out of the Groundswell Playwrights Unit and four out of Write from the Hip, Nightwood's in-house program for young emerging playwrights. In the second iteration, 30 November-10 December, redubbed "The New Groundswell Festival: A National Festival of Contemporary Women's Theatre," there were only three plays produced. According to Nightwood's season brochure:

[W]e are launching the NEW Groundswell Festival [. . .] with two Toronto productions as well as presenting Zuppa Theatre from Halifax. [. . .] New this year, Nightwood has re-envisioned and expanded Groundswell to be A National Festival of Contemporary Women's Theatre. Over 11 days, we will feature 3 workshop productions as well as an industry series consisting of master classes, workshops, readings, provocative audience engagement panels and open forums. Join us for this exciting new beginning!

What is most interesting here is that two of the plays from the 2011 Groundswells—Rose Cullis's *The Happy Woman* and Jordi Mand's *Between the Sheets*—received full mainstage productions by Nightwood in 2012. Mand's play is an ideal example of the new approach to both Write From the Hip and Groundswell. When it was first created, the Write From the Hip directive was to write a fifteen-minute play. Novice playwrights would apply and the focus was on their development. Thornton's assessment, however, was that the format did not necessarily solicit women who were committed to theatre, and that besides being "feel

good mentorship,” the program was not producing plays. In the first seven or eight years, the only person “who came out of that and moved up was Lisa Codrington⁶ with *Cast Iron*” (Interview). The program is now run by Erica Kopyto, the company’s full-time dramaturge and literary manager, the number of participants has dropped to two, and the assignment is a full-length play to be given a professional workshop production at the end of the year. Whereas previous Write from the Hip plays were cast with actors from an Emerging Actors Program (young recent acting school graduates), Nightwood is now committed to using professional actors of the right age for the characters.

So coming from the Write from the Hip program, *Between the Sheets* was directed by Thornton for Groundswell with, as it turned out, the same cast that would appear in the actual production. The play went through a series of workshops, and then ran as part of the 2012 season. As Thornton explained, some workshops were as short as one to three days, “but to hear it read and get the actors’ feedback is invaluable,” especially with a veteran actor like Susan Coyne who is herself a playwright. The playwright comes to understand “how it lives and breathes and moves around the stage, the rhythm—which you can’t get from a music stand reading.” Throughout the process, Erica Kopyto “carried the dramaturgical relationship.” As Thornton explains, the real thing is to “test drive” and “develop the work to a place where it can be on the mainstage so they can have a longer life once they get there”—that is, so the show can go on to a second production somewhere else.

As Thornton explained, all of these changes have stemmed from asking: “What’s the centre of your activities? Play development and production. Mentorship is part of what we do—but through Hip and through masterclasses. There is only so much one company can do. You can’t serve everyone.” The 2013 version of The New Groundswell was an evolution of the new template. There was a local show, the workshop production of *Who Killed Snow White?* There were two shows from outside Toronto, one from Halifax, and the other from Montreal.⁷ There was also a series of readings by guest playwrights Mary Vingoe⁸ and Carmen Aguirre, as well as readings of plays by other local playwrights and the two women currently in the Write from the Hip program. There was a masterclass with Aguirre; a conversation between her and the CBC’s Anna Maria Tremonti; a conversation between Vingoe and Thornton; and finally, an emerging artists’ roundtable. Nightwood’s annual fundraiser, FemCab, was also held as part of Groundswell. Most events were held upstairs at the Berkeley Street Theatre, and a few at the Nightwood Studio.

Urban Curvz is the newcomer to the scene. While the company was founded in 2005, it is already in its third leadership era, with Sabourin and Russell taking charge in 2011. The Riveter Series mandate was to “provide support for female artists engaged in creating brave new work. The series strives to offer emerging female theatre practitioners opportunities to showcase their work and to supply [. . .] mentorship and development” (Urban). The Series included a directing masterclass in February, and the *Girls Gone Wilde* cabaret and a reading of the play *Exia* by Meg Braem in May. *The Disembodied Lady* survived only as an excerpt at *Girls Gone Wilde*, along with scenes, a short play, songs, and a movement piece, all performed at Calgary’s Lunchbox Theatre and presented in partnership with the Alberta Playwrights Network.

By inclination and necessity, Sabourin and Russell see their role as encouraging emerging female artists to self-produce. Both women come from a background of starting things on their own, Sabourin with an independent female-focused company in Edmonton called The

Maggie Tree, and Russell by creating the first *Girls Gone Wilde* cabaret on her own initiative in 2011, outside of and before her involvement with Urban Curvz. She had been to FemFest in the fall of 2010 and wanted to create something similar in Calgary. Throughout its short history, Urban Curvz has produced one or two plays per year, tried out a series of new works called *Heroines*, and held an annual fundraising event called *Curvilicious*. With the instability of leadership, however, momentum has slowed rather than accelerated. Without shows to program in their annual spots at the Pumphouse Theatre, they lost that venue and will have to scramble for new venues for future shows. Without operating systems in place, they need to re-establish their audience again for every show. Being a women's company helps them target, but Sabourin expressed frustration that work by women is perceived to be for women audiences only: "I'm trying to get people to come see great theatre which happens to be done by women." Interestingly, FemFest's motto is "Plays by Women for Everyone," while Nightwood's motto is "Theatre for Everyone. Made by women."

Sabourin states, "you're trying to serve a community that is under-served, but you're also trying to serve them well." What they can do with such a limited budget is provide a positive initiating experience for women that will encourage them to go on and self-produce outside of Urban Curvz. Sabourin believes it is empowering for women to produce their own work, or in her own words: "when you get together with a group of girls to put on a show it's kind of a rocking thing." Part of the idea behind staging *Girls Gone Wilde* as a late night cabaret was to encourage a kind of energy, a sense that any kind of adventurous work might be done. While the call for submissions elicited 23 submissions from across the country, they ended up going with a small selection of local scripts, written by women who were more familiar with Urban Curvz and their "message."

In his recent *Theatre Research in Canada* article, "Symbolic Capital and Relationships of Flow: Canada, Europe, and the International Performing Arts Circuit," Alex Lazaridis Ferguson coins the term "touchstone experience" as "something inherently valuable to an individual—worth repeating and fighting for" (103). In the case of a women's theatre festival, this "touchstone experience" would be one that combines aesthetic pleasure with social and political affirmation, tying in with the idea that feminist theatre preaches to the converted, and suggesting the converted are specifically looking for affirmation of their worldview. David Van Belle defines a festival as an activity, an overall event that can be considered as a whole and not just as the performances that take place at it (8). By attending, as performers or as audience, the people at the festival become a community and "inevitably affect each other through the cross-pollination of ideas and aesthetics" (10). Lara Shalson agrees, arguing that, rather than an insulating ghetto, "community-based performance provides the necessary conditions for marginalized groups to produce work ultimately capable of challenging dominant performance paradigms and critical perspectives" (224). Being converted is in fact a process that needs to be sustained: "the supposedly converted must continually reassert their beliefs in order to sustain them. Performing and witnessing community-based performance is one way to accomplish this" (226). In an ideal world there would be a circuit of feminist theatre festivals, with plays and artists travelling across the country and introducing women's work to other artists: a situation where the work was nurtured and developed in a counterpublic context, but enjoyed by "everyone," an audience all three of these companies aspire to reach.

Notes

- 1 Created with co-performer Alice Nelson and director Jamie Dunsdon.
- 2 In translation by Shelley Tepperman.
- 3 *Women in Fish*, written by Marie Clement with Rosemary Georgeson and Eileen Lorenz and produced by urban ink, and *Sonofabitch Stew: The Drunken Life of Calamity Jane*, produced by Shameless Hussy productions, both from Vancouver; and *My Pregnant Brother* by Johanna Nutter from Montreal.
- 4 For further discussion of FemFest in 2012 please see Scott, "Talking."
- 5 During some periods, a specially designated committee has programmed the festival; at other times by the Artistic Advisory or the Play Group; and at still others by a festival director. For further discussion of the history of Groundswell, please see Scott, *Nightwood*.
- 6 In another connection, Lisa Codrington's play *The Aftermath* was developed at Groundswell in 2011 and produced at FemFest in 2013.
- 7 Odelah Creations from Montreal created an ensemble performance piece called *Adam's Rib (La Memoire du Corps)* and Jennifer Overton's *God's Middle Name* was remounted from Halifax.
- 8 Vingoe is one of the founders of Nightwood.

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