

JOY COGHILL

NOTES FROM AN ACTOR-PLAYWRIGHT: SONG OF THIS PLACE...
A PLAY BASED ON THE LIFE OF EMILY CARR¹

Song of This Place est une pièce sur Emily Carr écrite par Joy Coghill, comédienne chevronnée et pionnière. Dans cet article, Coghill évoque les luttes qu'elle a dû mener pour saisir l'esprit de Carr, cette femme formidable qui a su surmonter d'incroyables obstacles pour devenir l'une des artistes les mieux connues du Canada. Qu'y a-t-il de cette femme, se demande Coghill, qui a su inspirer tant d'autres artistes? Dans Song of This Place, Coghill confronte l'icône en racontant l'histoire d'une comédienne qui souhaite interpréter le rôle d'Emily Carr; Carr s'y oppose. De cette lutte, explique Coghill, est née «une nouvelle forme de théâtre extraordinairement exigeante et très satisfaisante.»



When any Canadian actress reaches her 56th year, she develops a driving passion to play Emily Carr. The impulse has much to do with the fact that Emily did her best work after fifty-six. This extraordinary fact is the first of many mysteries, for Carr overcame insuperable obstacles to become Canada's leading woman artist.² Prominent actresses often request or commission a distinguished writer to create a Carr play for them. I was no exception. Rather arrogantly, I went to the "crème de la crème." I am grateful that P.K. Page and Alice Munro were kind but said "No. You must do it yourself," and that John Murrell (whose stunning Sarah Bernhardt play, *Memoir*, I had just played) offered me the chance to try my hand at the Banff Playwright's Colony.

There, in the spring of 1984, I suffered agonies trying to capture my play. Through the wall I could hear Paul Gross typing away at 200 words a minute, while I pushed my pencil across my pad of lined yellow paper. However, it was at Banff that the Métis novelist, playwright, and poet Maria Campbell advised, "Listen to the voice of the Grandmother." And it was there that I told Emily that most Canadians do not go to art galleries and that to be an artist today was just as much a struggle now as it was in her time. "Silly buggers," said Emily at two in the morning.

When I heard Emily say "silly buggers" I knew that the wrestling had begun. For me the wrestling is always there, whether the character once existed or not. It is the wrestling which is neces-

sary to get that “being” off the page, to get the character out of your head and into your breathing so that you can get on with living her. BUT THIS TIME THERE WAS NO SCRIPT. I had to write it ... find it and write it!

I knew that this character, this Emily Carr (like her family, I called her Millie), would resist every step of the way. You have no idea how many unfinished scripts there are about Carr.³ Where is the one that Sharon Pollock was to write for Joan Ornstein? Where is the one that John Murrell was going to write for me? I believe there are very few Canadian playwrights who don't have an unfinished Emily Carr script in their “to do” file. When my struggle with Emily began, the few scripts that existed and had been produced were informative and often thrilling arrangements of her writing and her history—usually accompanied by slides of her work. These would include Herman Voaden's *Emily Carr: A Staged Biography with Pictures* (premiered 1960), which starred Amelia Hall. There was, of course, the charming and successful musical *The Wonder of It All* (premiered 1980) by Don Harron and Norman and Elaine Campbell. However, there was nothing in these early works to disturb the images that Emily projected of herself in her writing. There was none of the “below the surface” quality that Emily demanded of herself as an artist. If I were to do my work as Emily did hers, I would have to illuminate her life by going “below the surface,” by finding her “essence,” her “song.” This proved to be very difficult for me.

As if writing a play about Emily Carr wasn't enough, I decided I wanted to capture the “creative process.” I wanted to dramatize the creative processes of acting and of theatre, and to match both against the creativity of women artists like Emily. I wanted to convince Emily, if you like, that I, as an actress, was worthy of taking on her life.

I believe that acting is not what you do or what I do but what happens between us... the “space between” of Martin Buber's “I/THOU.”⁴ The richer that space between, the better the acting. It follows that the experience of theatre is what happens in the “space between” the actors and the audience. It is this last that makes the theatre different from any other creative expression and also makes it a healing social experience in community and communion.

Searching for a way to dramatize the “space between” Millie and myself, I remembered the most magical theatre I had ever seen—Felix Mirbt and his puppet plays of *Woyzeck* (1974) and *The Dream Play* (1977). Since each puppet-life is made up of two

artists—the manipulator and the voice—it follows that the use of puppets will make the “space between” rich indeed. If we were able to create that kind of magic for *Song of This Place* then even Millie might be pleased.



Figure 1: Joy Coghill, from cover of the Playwrights Canada Press publication of *Song Of This Place*.

The story became that of an aging actress, Frieda, who has created a vehicle in which she can star despite the fact that she is confined to a wheelchair. It is a puppet play. She has surrounded herself with young talent— a musician/composer and actors who are also puppeteers. Frieda’s piece is based on the life of Emily Carr. Frieda voices all the characters, all of which are from Carr’s life. She has chosen these characters with care. They represent the people that were closest to and were loved by Millie Carr.

There is Harold, a mentally handicapped man, whom Millie visited in an asylum and who was allowed to come on holidays with her. Figure 2 shows Harold learning his song from Bill Henderson,



Figure 2: HAROLD Learns His Song. Bill Henderson and HAROLD, manipulated by Debra Thorne. Mask by Frank Rader.

Photo by May Henderson.

the composer. Then there is Sophie, an aboriginal woman, the mother of twenty babies—none lived. This is the Sophie of the famous Carr portrait; this is the woman whom Millie declared was more a sister to her than her own family. But Alice, her real sister, could not be left out.

This scene of the tea party is the one that everyone remembers years later. Figure 3 shows Alice and her friend, Biddy. You can



Figure 3: The Tea Party. ALICE, manipulated by Robert More & Sarah Orenstein and BIDDY, manipulated by Debra Thorne & Allan Zinyk. Masks by Frank Rader. Photo by May Henderson.

see the two manipulators per puppet. The astonishing thing was that one was conscious of nothing but the little characters at their tea party gossiping.

I deeply sympathized with Alice:

ALICE. Millie was always difficult even when we were children. Nobody knows the trial she has been to me, no one. Victoria is such a small place. I had to smooth so many people.

BIDDIE. You had your reputation to protect, your school.

ALICE. Yes. Mind you, Millie was an excellent art teacher and the children adored her.

BIDDIE. Oh, I know.

ALICE. Later she refused to teach save for the occasional exceptional child. Oh that child! Millie would arrive for tea. The sack dresses were bad enough, but then, she would smoke...a dreadful thing...and if one so much as raised an eyebrow she would tell such awful stories and...swear! [Soon the child] and Millie were seen everywhere, laughing, singing out loud, pushing a baby carriage full of mud up Government Street, with the dogs and that awful monkey...like...like a circus parade!

Finally, Frieda's play attracts the "shade" of Millie Carr herself and the "wrestling" that I mentioned at the beginning is suddenly the stuff of the play itself. Millie does everything in her power to



destroy Frieda's concept, her characters, and her confidence but, at the same time, reveals something of herself. Here is a fragment:

MILLIE. Have you ever lived
in the woods alone?

FRIEDA. Yes...no, not
completely alone.

MILLIE. Have you ever seen
any of the Totems up
north?

FRIEDA. Yes I have.

**Figure 4: The CHILD with
her manipulator, Niki**

Brown. Photo by May Henderson



Figure 5: The Meeting. Joy Coghill as FRIEDA and Joan Orenstein as MILLIE. Photo by May Henderson

MILLIE. You like animals?

FRIEDA. (*slight hesitation*) Yes.

MILLIE. Do you have any?

FRIEDA. A dog. It belongs to my daughter.

MILLIE. You don't have one yourself?

FRIEDA. No.

MILLIE. That's not the same thing. One dog is not the same as a whole life full of creatures.

FRIEDA. I don't see what that's got to do...

MILLIE. So you have a dog and a daughter. Then you must have a husband.

FRIEDA. No.

MILLIE. No?

FRIEDA. No. I've had two. But no, I don't have one now.

MILLIE. Two? Two husbands? Well it's none of my business, but...

FRIEDA. That's right. It's none of your business.

MILLIE. Well, I like that! Your life is a private affair, but you want to try mine on in public. You want to try it on and parade around in it. You want to live off my soul by trying on my life!

FRIEDA. To be honest...in the beginning all I wanted was a part to play. And your name was good box-office.

MILLIE. Box-office?

FRIEDA. Yes. The public would certainly pay to see the lonely misunderstood little lady, the feisty odd-ball who

swore and smoked and flipped chairs to the ceiling. But that was long ago...

MILLIE. I was right. Second-hand...that's what your theatre is...second-hand living! I'm sorry but it's no good. There are certain things that cannot be shown...personal things that you could never understand. There are soul things that cannot be expressed! And to be an artist, my dear actress person, means discipline and work, work and discipline...detail, detail, detail! not airy-fairy second-hand living.

FRIEDA. Thank you very much for the lecture Miss Carr. I presume you realize how insulting it is to suggest that I know nothing of discipline and detail.

MILLIE. It's more than that. There are certain people that can never, never know what it was like to be me.

FRIEDA. Fine, fine. I spend a great piece of my life writing a play about you and you think you can just turn up and stop it. That's what you want to do isn't it? Stop me the way you stopped all the rest. Well, you aren't going to stop this play...not now.

MILLIE. It's my life!

FRIEDA. Oh, no. This is based on your life, that's all. Your life is just the inspiration for this one. You know what that means? You just inspire. You don't start making strange noises and actually appear.

MILLIE. If they want to know about me, let them look at my work.

FRIEDA. (*at the same time*) "Look at my work!" Why do you keep saying that? They don't Millie Carr! There's a whole generation out there that have never heard of you let alone looked at your work. (*MILLIE waves the catalogue.*)

And I'm not talking about millionaires. I'm talking about the ordinary Canadians who go to my theatre. Oh! I'm going mad. You've finally driven me mad. You hate actors and the theatre. That's it, isn't it? You think we are all weirdos. Well, forgive me, but for the classical weirdo of Canada's west coast, you certainly surprise me. JUST GO AWAY! Go back to wherever you came from. I'll just have to find the missing thing—the "voice" in myself. Go back to being famous. Famous and dead.

MILLIE. (*But MILLIE is off again.*) FAME! You call what I had fame. You're as bad as all the rest. Sophie says, "You're famous now Miss Millie. You're my famous friend." Alice

says, "Why aren't you happy dear? They say you're famous now." The vicar says, "Well here is our famous Miss Carr." Famous? In Victoria? Do you know what that means? It means tea at the Empress Hotel with the tabby cats from that arty-farty-craft society. It means a man, a painter, telling me that women can't paint. That faculty is the exclusive property of men. Only, he says, I am the exception! Isn't that kind? I am the exception! Different that's me. As a painter different! As a person different! Odd! Strange! A stranger in my family. A stranger in my town. "Millie, dear, why don't you do something with your life?"—"What do you mean, Miss Carr?"... "Well! Did you hear what she said? Fascinating." Pushing into my house. Into my privacy. To see the oddity with her dogs and her birds and, my God, a monkey! Famous in Victoria?? I'll tell you what it means...it means unutterable, inexplicable, complete loneliness!

FRIEDA. But I understand that. That is the loneliness of trying to express the ...essence. The loneliness of the artist.

MILLIE. No! mine. MINE! You don't understand. No one ever understood. I never had anyone of my own. Everyone treated me like a freak. So why are you interested?

When Millie is persuaded that Frieda is not a fool, has some courage, and, indeed, seems to understand something of the agony and ecstasy of being an artist, she decides to take her deeper into the forest of her life.

To return to my desire to capture the actor's creative journey, in Act One we trace an actor's path through research and study: the wrestling to understand the period, the relationships, the experiences, the beliefs. Which of these are strange and which the same as one's own? This is the pre-rehearsal period.

In Act Two, Millie dominates. She takes Frieda into her life layer by layer. The puppets from Act One, Harold and Sophie, are full size characters now and Frieda's young company, both as actors and as manipulators, is entirely in the service of Millie's world. Millie's child self, the incorrigible "Small," pushes the action. Frieda is forced through the terrible experiences of poverty, isolation, loss of confidence, and the breakdowns and electric shock treatments that were Millie's history. And always there is the agony of being possessed of the artist's passion in a society that doesn't care.

Finally it is Millie's Small who challenges Frieda to reveal her child self left far behind in her artificial life. "Tell her, tell her. She



Figure 6: The Doctors sing lullaby “Just Go to Pieces.” DOCTOR # 1, manipulated by Sarah Orenstein; DOCTOR # 2, manipulated by Robert More; Joy Coghill (in Wheelchair); Joan Orenstein (standing); PATIENT #3, manipulated by Allan Zinyk; Patient # 4, manipulated by Debra Thorne. Masks by Frank Rader. Photo by May Henderson.

can never, never be an artist. She has no Small. You have to have a Small don't you Millie?" As if by magic Frieda's child self appears. She is shy, bespectacled, and brings a memory that Frieda has forgotten:

FRIEDA'S SMALL. Before my Dad got sick and died, he took me to a place way out on the prairie. The lights of the towns were little strings on the edge of the flatness. We lay on our backs on the snow. The sky was so full of stars it stretched your mind. "Do you hear that?" my Dad said. And I could. There is a singing happening between those stars and the earth beneath us. "That is the only song that matters," he said, "You must say 'yes' to that song, Frieda, the rest is sleep."



Figure 7: Frieda and her Small. BIRD, manipulated by Robert More; FREIDA's SMALL, manipulated by Allan Zinyk; Joy Coghill as FRIEDA; SOPHIE, manipulated by Sarah Orenstein. Masks by Frank Rader. Photo by May Henderson

In the actor's journey all the above action happens during the pressures of the rehearsal period. This is the time when the actor must master the *what* and *why* of the text and the action. One must constantly "behave as if," "listen as if" one really is the character. The consequent intensification of experiences, the knowledge of the reality of the character's suffering (in this case Millie Carr) can begin to overwhelm the actor. It can be a difficult, sometimes desperate time. But, finally, there is a moment of "transfer," a "taking over" as the actor prepares to face the audience. Scripted, this moment would sound like: "Stop. Now it is mine...for right or wrong...deeply, now it must be mine!"

At that moment in this play, Frieda takes on the huge presence of Millie's father, a personification of Victorian paternalism itself. She confronts him, overcomes him in a way that Millie could not in her life. Now Frieda is free to "be"—to "play" Millie Carr. And Millie is able to say "You are one of us." These are exactly the words that Lawren Harris said to Millie in her fifty-sixth year—the words that set her free to become the great artist we know today.

Postscript:

The examination of this piece leaves me strangely troubled. The destruction of the artist's belief in her work, which Millie practises on Frieda and which Frieda survives in this case, is something we in the arts world do all the time. We do it in the name of higher standards. We call it "criticism." The idea is that an artist "fired" like a pot will result in a better artist. I wonder. If Lawren Harris hadn't written to Emily Carr, encouraging and sustaining her, would we have had her work? I doubt it.

Here is one of Harris's letters found in Carr's personal papers. He called her artist self T'Other Emily:

Dear T'Other Emily,

Don't look back, look ahead. Say, I Emily Carr command quiet here. I am the master of my dwelling and here there will be new growth, a new life, then new conviction can rise without disturbance, then the heart melts and only when the heart melts can the spirit rise.

As ever with blessings, Lawren
(Provincial Archives of British Columbia) ❁

NOTES

¹ My knowledge of Emily Carr and the decisions that influenced the play were based almost entirely on Carr's writing, her correspondence, and the letters of others to her and about her, both published and unpublished (e.g., National Archives and papers in the B.C. Archives). Of course, I absorbed all biographies written by 1986 and they must have influenced my thinking. I relied on Doris Shadbolt (*The Art of Emily Carr*. Toronto: Clarke, 1979) to pass or veto my first draft and we discussed, in particular, the critical relationship between Emily and her father, Richard Carr.

The play's development from workshop (the core group worked for three weeks in May 1986, supported by a Canada Council Explorations grant), to rehearsal (27 July to the end of August 1987), to a mini-tour in Haida Gwaii (September 1987, four performances), to three weeks of performance in Vancouver (Vancouver East Cultural Centre, 14 Sept. - 3 Oct. 1987), was influenced by all the participants, especially Joan Ornstein and Robert More.

Song of This Place was produced again at the Frederic Wood Theatre (19-28 February 2004) in conjunction with "Putting a Life Onstage," a Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies Exploratory Workshop under the direction of Professor Sherrill Grace and held at the University of British Columbia.

² Emily Carr, widely considered Canada's most famous woman

painter, was born in Victoria, British Columbia in 1871 and died there in 1945. She was an extraordinarily gifted artist renowned not only for her magnificent paintings but also for her imaginative, colourful, and revealing prose. She began writing late in life when ill health and poverty reduced her artistic expeditions and activities. Her first book, *Klee Wyck* (1941), was an instant success and won a Governor General's award. Other publications include *The Book of Small* (1942) and *The House of All Sorts* (1944). Posthumous publications include *Growing Pains* (1946), *The Heart of the Peacock and Pause* (1953), and, finally, her journals entitled *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (1966). The title *Song of This Place* is drawn from this last publication. It was chosen because it describes the central theme of the play and my own struggle to capture the inner spirit of Carr and her world: "I worked well this morning and again before dark and felt things (first ideas) then drowned them nearly dead in paint. I don't know the song of this place" (*Hundreds and Thousands* 56).

- ³ There are many fictionalized versions of Emily Carr's life, including two recent novels: see Hollingsworth and Vreland. For stage versions see Nothof and Kroller.
- ⁴ Author's gloss. See Buber.

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