

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

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“The art a seein’ the multiple realities’’: Fragmented Scenography in Sharon Pollock’s Plays

Wes D. Pearce

Typically an early draft of a play is shared with a designer before the director or dramaturge.

—POLLOCK, “DESIGNERS”

I must have a clear sense of the scenic design on which the play takes place, and that design must be a metaphor both for the content and the structure of the work.

—POLLOCK, “AFTERWORD,” 123

To date, much of the critical discourse surrounding Sharon Pollock’s oeuvre has traced the development of dramaturgical structures and literary devices within her plays. Somewhat surprisingly, given the

extremely theatrical and visually driven nature of her plays, scholars have tended to focus on the political, feminist, and/or historical underpinnings of her plays and, to an extent, the biographical/auto-biographic connections that haunt some of them. As the above epigraphs make clear, however, scenography (or the visual world of the play) plays a crucial role in how Pollock creates, writes, and dramatizes. As evidenced in an interview with Cynthia Zimmerman, Pollock, the playwright, is well aware of the role and power that scenography has within her plays:

Words are . . . only one of the tools you have. Meaning is conveyed . . . by the intersection of all those other elements: the lighting (like where the focus is and how the focus shifts), the placement of people and things, what critical space is there, the design, the colour of everything . . . all of those elements of production . . . (“Anatomising” 9)

Unfortunately, how scenography functions within each play, its essential role in both the formulation/creation process and the production of Pollock’s work, has generally been overlooked. This essay argues that as well as employing new dramaturgical strategies, Pollock was simultaneously developing a fragmented or radical scenography. This evolution of the visual world, paralleling similar developments in the written texts, moves her plays from straightforward documentary drama to, as Diane Bessai argues, a complex and satisfying “integration of investigational and psychological realities” (“Pollock’s Women” 47). As mentioned, this fragmented scenography is very much tied to complex dramaturgical devices: flashbacks (or in the case of *Walsh* a flash-forward), the conflating of past, present, and future, simultaneous events being presented on stage, and non-linear storytelling, all became hallmarks of Pollock’s work.

When *Walsh* premiered in 1973,¹ Canadian scenography (and to a large extent Canadian theatre) was dominated by two opposing visual styles. The most popular was domestic realism, the aesthetic

first associated with the plays of Henrik Ibsen and represented by the hyperrealism in the work of Canadian playwrights such as David French's *Leaving Home* and David Freeman's *Creeps*. It is the aesthetic that would become the representative production style for a number of regional theatres and still dominates contemporary theatre. In stark contrast to this "traditional" aesthetic was the imaginative, bare-bones, and highly theatrical style employed by a number of emerging "alternative" theatre companies, including Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille² and Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre. This visually gripping style, often the result of having to make "something out of nothing," gained national attention with the Canadian tour of James Reany's *The Donnellys*³ and, like domestic realism, continues to influence Canadian scenography (and theatre) to the present.⁴

Throughout her career, Pollock has developed an aesthetic that refutes both of these scenographic traditions. In an interview with Anne F. Nothof, Pollock suggested that "theatre is at its most powerful when it is least literal" ("Interview" 179), and this statement has often been interpreted as recognition that Pollock favoured a minimalist approach to theatre. Yet in an interview with Robert Wallace, she described the troubles she encountered when trying to stage the naturalistic *Generations* and cautioned, "I don't want to mime it all because then we get into the NDWT⁵ style which I don't like, or the Passe Muraille technique: now you're the tractor; I don't want that . . . (120). I would suggest that Pollock's response to this quandary is her development and use of fragmented scenography, a visual bridge between these two existing scenographic styles.

Fragmented scenography allows for naturalistic action to be placed into visual worlds that are expressionistic, surreal, or otherwise completely theatrical. Pollock is drawn to plays filled with "theatrically shuffling past, present, future, external locations, internal landscapes, inner thoughts and uttered words" ("Reflections" 16). Not only does this fragmented scenography emphasize the dramatic elements that she so prizes, but it also supports the feminist dramaturgies at work in her plays. Pollock suggests that feminist dramaturgies and feminist

scenographies reject “naturalistic plays that take place in box sets with a unified time span” (“Afterword” 123) and embrace “theatrical environments that . . . [disrupt] linearity of form and of time and space” (Nothof, “Staging” 139).

This essay extends the literary readings of Bessai, Grace, and Nothof by arguing that Pollock’s use of fragmented scenography has developed and matured following a parallel trajectory. *Walsh*, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, *Generations*, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, and *Doc* represent significant markers in the development of this radical theatrical vision, each play challenging the perceived notion of *how theatre does*. I will discuss each of the five plays in terms of how fragmented scenography functions within the text, typically as understood through stage directions, and occasionally through specific text in the script. Pollock is explicit that the structure of a play must be the one that helps her best tell that particular story. Not surprisingly, her use of visuals and the visual world that she creates for the play is subject to similar scrutiny.

Walsh is Pollock’s factually inspired play that examines the relationship between Major James Walsh (Superintendent of the North West Mounted Police) and Chief Sitting Bull. At the heart of *Walsh* is a theme to which Pollock will return frequently. In an interview with Rita Much, Pollock states: “I write the same play over and over again. It’s about an individual who is directed or compelled to follow a course of action of which he or she begins to examine the morality. Circumstances force a decision . . . and it usually doesn’t end very well” (210). Walsh is just the first of many Pollock protagonists who, according to Nothof, “[struggle] with [their] own sense of justice . . . [but in the end opt] for ‘self-preservation’” (“Borders” 86).

Ric Knowles argues that the Brechtian prologue, “through which Pollock forestalls empathy and identification with the potentially charismatic Walsh by showing him in his later years as a broken and bitter man” (138), not only provides a theatrical *frame* for the rest of the play, but also clearly situates the theatrical eye of the play:

The scene is from WALSH's point of view, and the freezes are momentary arrests in the action and are broken by the character's speech or action following. The impression given is similar to that experience when one is drunk or under great mental stress. CLARENCE stands outside of the prologue scene, never taking his eyes off of WALSH. He has on his red tunic and he exists only in WALSH's mind. He is not part of the prologue scene and his scream is heard only by WALSH.

There is no break in staging between the prologue and Act One.

The sound of wind is heard – a mournful sound. In a very dim light, the characters suddenly appear on the periphery of the playing area. WALSH is not among them. They freeze there for a moment, and then, quickly and silently, like ghosts, take their positions onstage . . . (33).

By setting the prologue simultaneously inside the mind of Walsh and in a saloon in Whitehorse, Pollock introduces a new way of seeing and experiencing the action that is about to unfold. *Walsh* is one of the first “mainstream” Canadian plays to explicitly visualize what Delores Ringer calls “the feminist stage . . . [a space] contain[ing] internal and external experience and internal and external images in one space” (301). The prologue expands Ringer’s definition of the feminist stage while offering up a glimpse of Pollock’s fragmented scenography. This use of “shifting perspectives” is a common visual device in almost all of her plays and one she uses to great effect throughout this play:

WALSH looks at SITTING BULL, then off at the muffled sounds of people approaching. The light begins to flicker, as if people were passing in front of it. WALSH turns slowly, looking outside of the light. The sound of people moaning is heard. A blue light picks out CLARENCE as he makes his way toward WALSH. (60)

As the aforementioned examples demonstrate, Pollock's fragmented scenography re-positions, provokes, and challenges the stage picture and its relationship with the audience.

In a gesture that erases the foundations of theatrical realism, Pollock not only presents select aspects of the stage action/picture (instead of the entire picture) but simultaneously presents the stage action/picture from different points of view. In creating a world that is represented through fractured scenography and multiple points of view, Pollock establishes a visual link between *Walsh* and the expressionistic visions and scenography found in George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.⁶ These scenographic explorations and experiments come to more satisfying fruition in later works such as *Whiskey Six Cadenza* and *Doc*, but the use of imaginative and theatricalised scenic moments to propel the narrative forward is something not found in Pollock's earlier plays such as *A Compulsory Option* or *And Out Goes You?*

Pollock, taking what she has learned from her experience with *Walsh*, re-imagines, re-revisions, and re-presents what theatre can do in the 1976 premiere of *The Komagata Maru Incident*. Pollock's "landmark play" is the compelling retelling of the ignoble 1914 incident in which the Japanese ship *Komagata Maru*, with 376 East Indian immigrants/British citizens aboard, was refused the right to land in Vancouver. After two months of legal wrangling, the ship, with almost all of the passengers still on board, was forced to return to India. Set in a brothel, the play, as Grace comments, "stages history as a carnival or circus" ("Imagining" 134) and all the action is controlled, with necessary exposition provided by T.S., "a greasy barker and magician, with gloves, hat and cane" (20). Like the prologue for *Walsh*, the play seems to be set both in the real world and also inside the mind of someone (perhaps Hopkinson), but the possibilities of this fragmented presentation are used for greater effect. Unlike *Walsh*, the play deconstructs both the narrative and the scenography, splitting the visuals of the play into distinct but connected fragmented images:

It is important that the scenes flow together without black-outs and without regard to time and setting. The brothel is the main playing area. Surrounding it is an arc or runway used by T.S. and HOPKINSON for most of their scenes. Although T.S. cannot intrude upon the WOMAN'S space, he is free to move anywhere else on the set to observe or speak. As the play progresses, T.S.'s scenes move from the arc into the brothel area.

The characters never leave the stage . . . The WOMAN is on a level above and behind the area used by the other characters. An open grill-like frame in front of her gives both the impression of a cage, and of the superstructure of a ship. (100)

Pollock suggested this theatricality in *Walsh*, but in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, both the theatricality and the fragmented scenography are more obvious and more effective than in the previous play.

The opening stage directions reinforce not only the *impressionism* of the writing, but also the *theatricality* of the play. This theatricality is witnessed in a number of innovative ways: the meta-theatrical nature of T.S., the way in which time and space operate within this world, and a heightened visual dramaturgy. This fragmenting of text and space allows the story to be told in a radical manner. Instead of setting each scene in a particular location and moving the narrative forward from scene to scene, as was the case in *Walsh*, Pollock tells the story by using multiple locations and multiple narratives simultaneously:

WOMAN: Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Shut your eyes,
go to sleep.

It is very hot and WOMAN turns from the child, wipes her forehead and looks out with a sigh, then turns back to the child.

Still not asleep?

HOPKINSON: (*pinning broach on*) There.
Everything's forgotten. Alright?

EVY: Alright.

By meshing Brechtian staging techniques with cinematic practice, Pollock exploits the stage picture, and by creating two stage pictures, allows each to comment on the other. In fragmenting the traditional stage picture and in creating a new theatrical vision – “a theatrical impression of an historical event seen through the *optic* of the stage and the mind of the playwright (“Introduction” 98) – Pollock liberated herself from the dramaturgical tyranny of “the well-made play.”

After writing *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock commented, “I started to explore structure, and it was exhilarating, and I decided that I never wanted to write a naturalistic play again” (Council of Education Ministers 139). Denis Salter suggests that *The Komagata Maru Incident* highlights Pollock’s “commitment to experiment with different techniques of dramatic engagement” (13), insofar as the play both challenges and plays with accepted notions and shapes of dramatic form. Pollock’s biographer Grace argues that with this play, Pollock rejects the very form that naturalism demands while insisting that the “theatrical envelope” must be appropriate for the play:

As a dramatist, [the] challenge was shifting from finding the facts out of which to make a story to creating the appropriate way (the structure or “theatrical envelope”) to present these facts in the process of being perceived, interpreted, remembered and recombined into a story. (150)

While Salter and Grace are specifically writing about dramatic structure and literary devices, I would argue that Pollock is also manipulating and exploiting the visual world of the play and its scenography in order to support *and* serve the play’s subject. Pollock recognizes that a unique visual world must respond to and reflect the play’s structure

and, as Zimmerman argues, “she gives great care to realising [the] visual component” (“Anatomising” 10).

According to Salter, *Generations*⁷ is a play full of detailed components and visual minutia: “every aspect of the naturalistic style contributed effortlessly to the pervasive lifelike impression. . . . Even something as ordinary as making the morning coffee manage[s] to convey something small but important about the characters” (23). Set on a homestead in contemporary southern Alberta, *Generations* involves the interactions of three generations of the Nurlin family. With this play, Pollock turns from the historic to the domestic and while the play’s “major political-social concern: the survival of the family farm” (Zimmerman, “Warriors,” 78) provides the back story, the chief conflict of the play centres around Young Eddy’s return to the farm. In contrast to almost all of her other plays *Generations*, in both look and style, is quite naturalistic and, as such, it might seem odd to include it in an essay focused on radical scenography. The description of the setting that Pollock provides rivals that of any champion of realism or television drama:

DSL is the kitchen of the Nurlin’s “New Place” which is what they call the house built in the fifties when Alfred and Margaret were married. It has all the usual accoutrements of a kitchen. The back door of the kitchen . . . opens on a back veranda or porch which runs the width of the house. There is a pump in the yard . . . Off SL lies Nurlin’s back section which is lying fallow. Extreme SR, in reality, some distance from the “New Place,” a portion of the “Old Place” can be seen. This is the original homestead; it is extremely weathered, grey tumbled, but still standing (280).

Yet in contrast to this seemingly naturalistic (and functioning) contemporary farmhouse, Pollock fragments the notion of naturalism when she insists that “there should be some sense of the omniscient presence and mythic proportion of THE LAND in the design . . . The prairie

extends as far as the eye can see" (280). Zimmerman's contention that the land becomes "a powerful character that the Nurlins respond to differently" ("Warriors" 78) is more fully explored by Corinna Chong, who suggests the "invoked landscape subsumes the characters trapped within it, so that the land effectively becomes a character in its own right" and in doing so, the "rules" of naturalism are upset. Pollock seems uneasy with the results, and in an interview with Robert Wallace, she discusses the frustration with writing the play and the dissatisfaction when the play was staged:

I had a lot of problems with *Generations*. We went through that whole thing where you paint rooms, you build the set, you take it down. If I had had my druthers, if I could have found a way to do it, the play would not have happened in the house. There would be no kitchen because once you're in the kitchen, you've got to do all the stinking things you've got to do in the kitchen, like cook the food. . . . You can't put the Prairies on the stage so you have to find another way of doing the outside scenes . . . Someday there'll be a director who'll come up with an idea of how to do it in that kitchen and not feel bound by Naturalism. (120)

The inevitable outcome of staging these two oppositional visions seems to be aesthetic conflict. Nothof and Salter, however, have both suggested that the play is not nearly as naturalistic as it seems. In the newest edition of *Blood Relations and Other Plays*, Nothof challenges Bessai's traditional reading of the play as a "conventionally naturalistic work" (Bessai, "Introduction," 9), and Nothof does so by examining the plays "expressionistic elements." Nothof argues that in *Generations*, Pollock's use of place and space is unexpectedly complex, "suggesting variant perspectives or psychological dimensions . . . Lives are conditioned by spaces. Place is not only 'regional,' even though specific. It is multi-dimensional" (vi). Salter also disrupts the familiar reading of the play, noting that "the stage directions [call] for a setting with a double

perspective (24). The visual world of the play, as indicated in the stage directions, is not simply a kitchen within a traditional box set; rather, it should be read as a fragmented collage of naturalistic, symbolic and mythic elements set against each other. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the play, the fragmented scenography is subtler and gentler than in any of Pollock's other works, but it has not been abandoned. Salter even suggests that Pollock layers time and space into the setting insofar as the Old Place is "an enduring connection between the old and new worlds, [and] has a kind of mythic dimension, summarizing the family's history in a single vivid image which is more poetic than real" (24).

Craig Walker argues that like *Doc*, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*⁸ is "a memory play" (168) in which ghosts of the past seemingly paralyze those in the present. *Whiskey Six Cadenza* recounts the story of Johnny Farley, who returns to his hometown of Blairmore, Alberta, after an unsuccessful attempt to find work in "Tronna." In an interview with Nothof, Pollock has stated that *Whiskey Six Cadenza* is probably her favourite play, but despite garnering some of the best reviews of her career, has never had a professional production after the premiere ("Interview" 168). While situating the play in the Crowsnest Pass during 1919–20, *Whiskey Six Cadenza* avoids the "history play" label because Pollock re-employs a number of scenographic techniques that she has worked with before in order to intertwine seamlessly the (more or less) naturalistic action(s) of the stage world with a visual world that is illusionary, fragmented and cinematic. Perhaps more so than any of her other plays, the scenography and the structure of *Whiskey Six Cadenza* supports Nothof's claim that Pollock's dramaturgies "suggest the illusion of reality and the reality of dreams" ("Introduction" vi):

The front of the stage is filled by a gossamer depiction of the Crowsnest Pass . . . All is seen as if through a soft rain . . . Light builds behind the image, exposing it as no more than a grey, dusty, cobwebby affair, much as a spider might spin in the entrance of an abandoned mine-shaft . . . Images and figures

often appear fractured, refracted, fragmented . . . The landscape extends into the infinite, giving an impression of viewing eternity through a glass, a telescope, a microscope, a kaleidoscope. (39)

Pollock's use of fragmented scenography in *Whiskey Six Cadenza* reflects elements from many of her earlier plays by presenting multiple locations and multiple story lines simultaneously, scenic elements offering multi-perspectival, highly theatrical visuals that subvert naturalism, and the use of seemingly unrelated visual elements to comment on the story's action. The play reveals a significant maturity in Pollock's understanding and use of visual dramaturgy insofar as the fragmented images are inescapable – the play simply cannot function without fully embracing the visual world she has created. It is, however, a visual world that is not always easy to achieve, and while *Whiskey Six Cadenza* seems built on the visual, the scenographic elements are more seamlessly integrated in *Doc*.

Walker maintains in *Whiskey Six Cadenza* that Pollock structures the narrative and locates the play “within the expressionistic frame of Johnny's memory” (176); this is not just a memory play but rather a play placed inside memory. Like *Walsh*, the play opens with a dream-like prologue, a musical sequence placed outside the constraints of time, space or narrative logic, and like the circular structure of *Walsh*, an image to which the play will (eventually) return:

The figures, now complete, now fractured, refracted images of Mr. BIG and LEAH, WILL and DOLLY, CEC and MRS. FARLEY, GOMPERS and MAMA GEORGE dance; OLD SUMP dances alone. Occasionally they change partners. BILL THE BRIT watches, dancing with no one. JOHNNY is absent. (39)

The collage of figures, “now complete, now fractured, refracted . . .”, is a device that Pollock uses frequently within the written text. At times, as with the brass band, the use of abstracted visuals, “*fragmented images of*

trumpets, trombones, light glancing off brass instruments” (49), represent an aspect of the authentic story insofar as the stage directions indicate the band is real and not a figment of the narrator’s imagination (this seems to be true, even if the band is only seen in shadow). Similarly, the images can be used to help stage the unstageable, as “refracted image of glint on motorcycle and gun fades in and out” (113). At other times, Pollock employs the images to extend moments of the narrative, as is the case at the end of the first act:

MRS. FARLEY: (*yells after him*) And what will you do with his whore?!

JOHNNY runs across the stage out of sight. We are left with fractured images of his fleeing. They glint as light fades.
(87)

Pollock’s use of the ruptured images/scenography is most effective when the images are inscribed with multiple readings, simultaneously foregrounding memory while commenting upon the onstage action:

WILL and DOLLY exit from the Alberta Hotel. Will is whistling. They stop. WILL kisses DOLLY. They make their way off, WILL whistling.

JOHNNY sits watching MAMA GEORGE and LEAH restore a bit of order. MAMA GEORGE tidies. LEAH looks as if she might leave.

The reflected and softly blurred image of DOLLY and WILL kissing. WILL’S whistling heard faintly from offstage. The image fades. Whistling continues, growing fainter for slightly longer.

JOHNNY: Do you gotta go right now?

LEAH: Why?

JOHNNY: I thought maybe we, you and me, we could
... sit and talk.

LEAH: What do you want to talk about?

JOHNNY *shrugs* ... (76)

At the moment when Will and Dolly leave the hotel, having finally resolved the conflicts of their relationship, they are genuinely content, possibly even in love. The image reinforces this perfect second in time, while simultaneously gently critiquing the budding (and possibly dangerous) relationship between Johnny and Leah and foreshadowing the tragedy that soon follows.

Pollock's use of fragmented scenography and her use of reflected and fractured images are essential elements of how she tells stories. In *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, they are foregrounded and made explicit and, Salter suggests, the fleeting images become inextricably connected to structure:

So-called normal reality is but a pretense here; characters move easily in and out of focus as though they, like Blairmore itself, feel compelled to resist permanent definition; and with all the fluency of film, multiple perspectives are superimposed, fade from view and then magically re-appear in strange new forms. (28)

In *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, Pollock's scenography makes manifest Mr. Big's claim of mastering "the art a seein' the multiple realities a the universe" (89), but this scenography also visualizes and makes manifest the multiplicity of "vantage points" which has always been critical to the way that Pollock tells the story (Zimmerman, "Anatomising," 8).

Telling the story is central to *Doc*.⁹ Katie reminds her older self, "Everything's down in here. I write it all down. And when I grow up, I'll have it all here" (174). Yet neither the story nor the structure of the play is linear or expected. Like Johnny in *Whiskey Six Cadenza*,

Catherine makes the difficult journey “home” for a visit with Ev (her father), but unlike Johnny’s singular and linear memory, which frames that play, the “truth [emerges] from the fragmented recollections of two equally haunted minds” (Walker 177). As Pollock suggests in her introduction, the kaleidoscopic views of *Whiskey Six Cadenza* return in new forms:

Much of the play consists of the sometimes shared, sometimes singular memories of the past, as relived by Ev and Catherine, interacting with figures from the past. Structurally, shifts in time do not occur in a linear, chronological fashion, but in the unconscious and intuitive patterning of the past by Ev and Catherine. (126)

With the ghosts of the past awakened, Katie (Catherine as a child), her dead mother (Bob), and “Uncle” Oscar (Ev’s best friend and surrogate husband and father to Bob and Katie), Catherine and Ev re-enact the family history.

The Playwright’s Notes for the play indicate how complex and “radical” Pollock’s use of scenography has become:

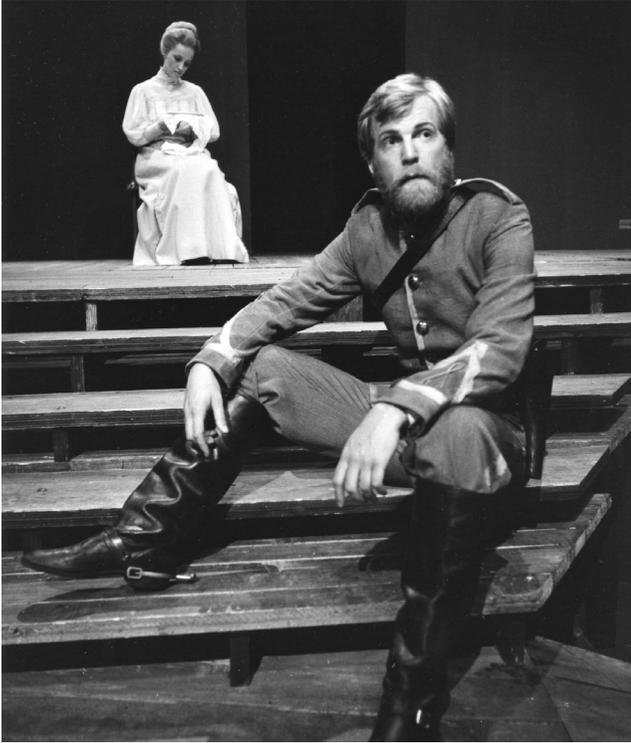
The “now” of the play takes place in the house in which Catherine grew up and in which Ev now lives alone. The play is most effective when the set design is not a literal one, and when props and furniture are kept to a minimum. I think of the setting as one which has the potential to explode time and space. (126)

For the purposes of this study, however, *Doc* is best understood as the play that fuses the individual scenographic elements that have been discussed into one, enabling multiple points of view, multiple truths, multiple times, and multiple memories to exist simultaneously, ensuring that multiplicities of stories are remembered.

If Malcolm Page’s comment is to be believed and Pollock did want the Sioux warriors to ride horses in *Walsh* (19), then *Doc*,

“realistic only in its observed detail and lifelike conversations” (Salter 30), demonstrates a remarkable evolution in her use of scenography. *Doc* emerges as another seminal work because it merges everything Pollock has learned about working in the theatre, everything that she has learned about seeing her plays in production, and everything that she has learned about being a playwright. In *Doc*, the montage that Robert Nunn refers to as “not quite working” in her earlier plays, is seamless, as past and present mesh to become one, and the action of the play becomes a unified collage of time and spaces. Pollock creates a world in which Catherine exists simultaneously in the present and the past, a technique that she will develop even further in *Moving Pictures* and which echoes earlier fragmentations in *The Komagata Maru Incident* and *Generations*. Bessai suggests that Pollock’s re-presentation of memory has also matured: “The memory images that alternately fade and resurge throughout the play are more often heated accusatory moments than the fully articulated dramatized recollections of earlier plays” (“Pollock’s Women,” 63). The fractured images that are so prominent in *Whiskey Six Cadenza* are less literal and more ethereal in *Doc*; not only do characters “speak across time,” but images and props, such as the music box and the letter, travel across time. Further developing the framing device in *Generations*, the “naturalistic demands of the play” are enclosed within a larger metaphoric world and according to Salter, the “house itself becomes a symbol” (31). Nothof seems to suggest that *Doc* marks the beginning of a recognizable Pollock style because many of her subsequent plays employ a similar structure and exploit scenographic devices in a similar manner (“Staging”).

The innovative manner in which Pollock manipulated and exploited scenographic potentials had a profound impact on Canadian theatre, creating an individual scenography that responds to, and visualizes, the stories she is telling. Yet it is this necessary flexibility and deconstruction of form, structure and theatrical visions that have, at times, crossed and upset critics and audiences. Looking back on this collection of plays, it is easy and perhaps clichéd to argue that many of the literary and visual dramaturgical devices employed by Pollock



*John Wood's
production of Walsh.
Photo by Robert
Ragsdale, courtesy of
the Stratford Festival
Archives.*

were ahead of their time: the use of flashbacks (or flash forwards), the conflating of past, present, and future, events being presented simultaneously on stage, and non-linear storytelling, are all dramatic devices that today's budding playwrights take for granted, but that forty years ago critics refused to accept. Eventually, Canadian theatre, Canadian aesthetics, and Canadian audiences caught up to the visual worlds that Pollock so provocatively created throughout her career, so much so that the visual worlds and scenographies of her earliest plays still seem contemporary today.

The intimate venue of Stratford's Patterson Theatre encouraged John Wood to re-imagine the scenographic space of Pollock's *Walsh* in a way that transformed the play from an epic pageant to an intimate experience. Shown here is Donna Farron as Mary Walsh and Michael Ball as Walsh.



Larry Lillo's premiere production of The Komagata Maru Incident. Photographer unknown. Image provided courtesy of University of Calgary Special Collections [Msc 54.13.21.4]



Photographer unknown. Image provided courtesy of University of Calgary Special Collections [Msc 54.13.21.5]



Rick McNair's production of *Blood Relations*.
Photographer Unknown.
Image provided courtesy of University of Calgary Special Collections [Msc 54.13.21.8]

In Larry Lillo's premiere production of *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Hopkinson (Richard Fowler), Evy (Heather Beslin), Georg (Leroy Schultz), and Sophie (Nicola Cavendish) inhabit a world that is both realistic and theatrical. Jack Simon's environment is fluid, which allows for the dreamlike play to unfold before the audience. Woman (Diana Belshaw) is both trapped in space and yet is placed in a visual place of power.

Rick McNair's production of *Blood Relations* (1981) featured Sharon Pollock as Miss Lizzie and a realistic world of the Borden's Victorian house that nonetheless allowed for the dreamlike, imaginative and complex world of Pollock's script to unfold in a seemingly flawless manner.

NOTES

- 1 *Walsh* opened on 7 November 1973 in Calgary's Arts Centre Theatre (later Theatre Calgary).
- 2 Under the leadership of Paul Thompson and using the collective creation methodology, Theatre Passe Muraille had two revolutionary productions: *Doukhobors* (1971) and the hit production *The Farm Show* (1972).
- 3 The trilogy is comprised of *Sticks and Stones* (1973), *The St. Nicholas Hotel* (1974), and *Handcuffs* (1975). All three premiered at the Tarragon Theatre, were directed by Keith Turnbull, and had sets designed by Rosalyn Mina. NDWT toured the three plays in 1975.
- 4 One such example is Theatre Newfoundland & Labrador's ongoing tour of Robert Chafe's *Tempting Providence* (2002), a tour de force production featuring four actors, four chairs, a table, and two sheets.
- 5 Founded in 1975 by Keith Turnbull and James Rainey, NDWT was known for its minimalist aesthetic and actor-driven theatre. The company folded in 1982.
- 6 Ryga's seminal work opened at the Vancouver Playhouse on 23 November 1967, and the production opened the studio theatre of the National Arts Centre in 1969. The NAC production was subsequently broadcast by the CBC (also 1969).
The story is told in songs, montages and disconnected scenes – in a stream-of-consciousness style which collapses past and present, as Rita Joe recalls her youth on the reserve during her arraignment in court on charges of prostitution. Events and characters are presented from her point of view. Ryga effects this collapsing of time through the set design – a circular ramp that encloses the present, with a cyclorama to evoke the past. Lighting effects isolate characters and cast shadows of prison bars across Rita Joe as she sleeps, creating a mood of fear and claustrophobia. This "expressionist" style and form projects the state of mind of the protagonist, externalizing feelings through action and image. (Charlebois and Nothof)
Grace further argues that "If I were to remount it today . . . I would stage it as Major Walsh's expressionistic nightmare" ("Imagining Canada," 137).
- 7 Commissioned by Alberta Theatre Projects, *Generations* opened on 28 October 1980, at the Canmore Opera House. It had a previous incarnation as the CBC Radio drama *Generation*, which aired on CBC in December 1978.
- 8 Commissioned by Theatre Calgary, it opened on 10 February 1983, under the title *Whiskey Six* and was subsequently nominated for the Governor General's Award for English Language Drama upon its publication in 1987.
- 9 *Doc* premiered at Theatre Calgary in April 1984 and won the Governor General's Award for English Language Drama (1986) upon its publication.

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