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(Im)possible Worlds: The Plays of Sharon Pollock

by

Denis Salter

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"I BELIEVE THAT EVERY PLAY has a politic", Sharon Pollock declared in a 1982 interview. "I believe that *Three's Company* has a politic. The fact that most people don't recognize it makes it a far more dangerous politic than any politic I could put on the stage".¹ By politic she is referring, I gather, to a play's ideological patterns, the definitions which it gives, both explicitly and implicitly, to the sociopolitical assumptions characteristic of a group, culture or individual. As a "committed playwright" (to cite Malcolm Page's apt designation), she is using the theatre to expose deception, to probe the origins of behaviour, to weigh the truth of a character or situation, and to determine people's responsibilities for their actions. She is using the theatre, in other words, as an instrument of moral inquiry, to project (though seldom to achieve) a better world with a better set of values by which to live. Some of her earlier plays, including *Walsh* (1973), *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976) and *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980), lean towards simplistic ideas and holier-than-thou didacticism; but her subsequent works - *Generations* (1980), *Blood Relations* (1980), *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983) and *Doc* (1984) - treat her subjects and her audiences much more respectfully: "The theatre is not a classroom, the playwright is not a teacher", Pollock has explained, "but a good play should provoke intelligent discussion about an issue or theme pertinent to our lives".²

Her concern that audiences might not recognize, let alone understand, a play's ideological conclusions is a recurring theme in several interviews. It seems to have influenced her decision to work as a cultural activist (with groups such as the Playwrights Union) and as the Artistic Director of several theatre companies including Theatre Calgary (where, characteristically, she resigned over a point of principle) and more recently Theatre New Brunswick. It has also influenced, I will argue here, her commitment to experiment with different techniques of dramatic engagement. Audiences cannot respond passively to a Sharon Pollock play. They must respond actively, coming to terms not only with the play's politic but with how the playwright (not unlike a politician) is trying to direct their emotional, intellectual and moral attitudes. Typically, audiences find themselves located inside the points of tension which Pollock, always a tough-minded idealist, insists that we should think about. In what I consider her most significant plays (*Blood Relations*, *Whiskey Six Cadenza* and *Doc*), she relies on modified presentational techniques, among other

things, to draw her audiences directly into the dramatic action, so that they become, together with the characters, the main subjects of the playwright's ethical investigation.

(1)

WALSH (1973) BEGAN LIFE AS A CONVENTIONAL history play. Sceptical of the myth of the peaceful settlement of the Canadian West, Pollock started reading standard historical accounts and soon grew angry over what "the historians hadn't told me".³ She undertook her own research, concentrating her attention on Major Walsh of the Northwest Mounted Police who had attempted to prevent Sitting Bull and the Sioux from being sent back from Canada to the United States, ostensibly to stand trial for the death of General Custer and his men at the battle of Little Big Horn. As Pollock pursued her subject, she confronted a tissue of lies in the newspaper accounts and diary entries of government commissioners. Keen to make use of virtually everything she had uncovered, she overburdened early versions of the play with historical information which is delivered with impersonal authority by voice-overs at the start of every scene (*Walsh*, 1973). During revisions, Pollock became less interested in historical documentation and more preoccupied with Walsh's moral dilemma: "For me, Walsh is a man who knows that there is a nobility to his struggle, but he abdicates responsibility as an individual".⁴ The fourth (and evidently final) version of the play has dispensed entirely with the voice-overs. History exists much more effectively through character-interaction, dramatically motivated direct address, and the essential details of time and place. The emphasis is on a psychologically-determined social analysis of why, how and to what ends Walsh was forced - against his better judgement - to sacrifice his own high principles (*Walsh*, 1983).

The voice-overs might have worked in Piscator or Brecht's kinds of political theatre. But for Pollock, who was developing a different kind of political theatre, they simply got in the way, and failed to provide the kind of historical and psychological context which is essential if we are to understand not just the political forces (British, American and Canadian) which Walsh is up against, but also the fullest dimensions of his character. The final version begins with a traditional induction-scene, set in the Klondike in 1898 long after Walsh has betrayed both Sitting Bull and himself. Placing the entire play into a retrospective frame of reference, this induction-scene allows Pollock to pose, and to some degree answer, her central question: "how did the man change from 1873 to 1898?".⁵ As a direct project of Walsh's degenerated state of mind, the scene relies on psycho-dramatic techniques of role-playing to underscore the various contradictions and paradoxes in Walsh's behaviour. Walsh plays himself. But all the other characters (with the notable exceptions of Harry the wagon master and Clarence the young recruit) are played by actors who assume a different set of roles in the main play. This doubling establishes a number of ironic contrasts which comment indirectly on the perilous uncertainty of life and on the possibility of being defeated by the reversal of life's idealism. Louis the Métis scout and Colonel MacLeod, who, like Walsh, is a member of the NWMP, are both cast as poker players; Mrs. Anderson, a self-righteous white woman who gets indignant over Walsh's sympathy for the Indians, is cast as Jennie the whore; and, most significantly of all, Sitting Bull is cast as the Prospector.

Despite just playing himself, Walsh is nevertheless portrayed as a man who has had to assume many roles to survive. Appearing "in civvies, impeccably dressed", his own past as a member of the Force is made evident by the presence of Clarence wearing the "red tunic" and standing just outside the scene observing Walsh (*Walsh*, 1983, 9). Clarence serves both here and in the main play as Walsh's double, a younger version of his idealistic self, still believing in the values of honesty and dignity symbolized by the tunic before being

overtaken by mid-life disillusionment. From their juxtaposition in this induction-scene, Pollock summarizes some of the main contrasting moral values of her play: innocence and experience, courage and cowardice, private beliefs versus public actions, moral engagement versus moral evasion, etc. Moreover, in his role as Walsh's conscience, Clarence reminds us that Walsh is not merely a man of action but a man who is prepared to reflect upon the meaning of his life. His unusual degree of self-awareness is disclosed in the climax of the scene. When the Prospector (i.e., Sitting Bull) begs for some money for the boy, Joeie (i.e., Sitting Bull's son, Crowfoot) Walsh says repeatedly, "I can give you nothing". Then in despair "Walsh hits him in the face, knocking him down. As he goes to get up, he plants a foot in his back, sending him sprawling" (*Walsh*, 1983, 15). This precipitates a primal scream from Clarence who is standing, with symbolical aptness, in the shadowy area at the edge of the scene. Walsh has descended at this moment as low as he can go, literally to a point of nothingness. The moment is a mirror-image of the scene in the main play where Walsh, overcome by his inability to help Sitting Bull and enraged by the Indian's stoical courage in the face of adversity, hits him again in exactly this way. This technique of visual repetition, with its concentration of effect, enables Pollock to dramatize Walsh's inner turbulence clearly and swiftly, and to suggest that he is paradoxically the victim of his own strong character. A lesser man would simply have acquiesced to government authority and then conveniently have forgotten about it; but Walsh, having acquiesced, is now destroyed by the very code of honour which he has so passionately upheld. Overall, the induction-scene functions as both theme and structure suggesting that the roles we play are invariably suspect and provisional, directed not by us but by historical and psychological forces much more powerful than we are.

Clarence's long scream heightens the significance of the tableau in which Walsh stands ready "with his hand upraised to hit the Prospector" one more time while the other characters are grouped around in typical attitudes (*Walsh*, 1983, 16). Since Clarence is no longer just a self-referential observer, Harry the wagonmaster (who also plays just himself) now assumes this role, coming forward to address the audience with a long exposition about Sitting Bull, the Sioux, General Custer and how "the 'merican Army was out to avenge the 'Custer Massacre'" (*Walsh*, 1983, 19). Although this darkly ironic speech is over three pages long in the published edition, it is not merely dry as dust historical evidence but is sustained by the dramatic energy which Pollock has released in the scene, by the striking contrast between the role - playing tableau in the background and the immediacy of Harry's 'real' personality in the foreground as he tells us what appears to be *the* historical truth, and by our curiosity about the historical and psychological circumstances which have caused Walsh's degeneration. The play is therefore not an historical chronicle, docu-drama, or piece of Brechtian revisionism; but, like the historical dramas of Schiller, Goethe and Lessing, it chooses to examine its historical crisis by means of a powerful central personality.

Nonetheless, history is by no means secondary to Pollock's intentions. The premise of the induction-scene is that the assumptions of the present will serve for the investigation of the past, as long as we understand what Pollock came to understand as she conducted her own historical research. The past is not merely a stable body of evidence but an ever-shifting set of so-called facts, which are ostensibly objective but in effect prejudiced by the ideological values with which we interpret them. The main play, alas, doesn't live up to the promise of the induction-scene. Where the latter is problematic, the former tends to be a schematic moral outline. Walsh is the well-meaning but ultimately ineffectual white man whose potentially tragic stature is undermined by his decision to renege on his responsibility to the Sioux; Sitting Bull is a variant of the Noble Savage, given to speaking in parables and the kind of sententious phrases which Charles Mair made a source of embarrassment in our dramatic literature almost a century earlier in *Tecumseh*; and the Indians, as in a formulaic Western, are the good guys while the American soldiers and government lackeys are of course the

bad guys. Clarence's idealism, maintained to the end despite the corruption he witnesses, is an ironic parallel to Walsh's moral decline and varies the controlling moral equation somewhat. But this is not enough to bring the play to a level of sustained moral debate. Since everything has been pretty much decided beforehand, the dialectical possibilities of the induction-scene are pretty much left undeveloped as the play follows its predictable linear direction. This means the audience is put into a limited position. We emphasize (and perhaps even sympathize at key moments) with Walsh, largely without qualifications; we valorize Sitting Bull and the Sioux, again largely without qualification; and we can luxuriate, if we wish, in a deep emotional bath of anti-imperialism. When Walsh accedes to his government's demands and sends Sitting Bull to his certain death in the United States, we regret his weakness, but this is essentially another form of empathy, allowing us the easy way out. Worse, the simplistic moral pattern encourages the audience to feel morally superior to every single character, Sitting Bull and Walsh included. This negates our sense of idealism, and relegates the moral problems of the play to the once-upon-a-time with absolutely no relevance to the present. Pollock is right: there is a large element of "historical pageant"⁶ to this play; enough, in fact, to subvert the complexity of moral argument which the induction-scene had led us to expect.

Stylistically, however, the play is on much surer ground, an object lesson in how an experimental playwright is constantly sharpening her dramatic methods. Each published version is increasingly economical and more precisely focused; characterization is elaborated without losing its central purpose; and, most important of all, she becomes more confident in her use of visual and aural synecdoche, as in the example of Clarence's Munch-like scream which brings the whole course of Walsh's life vividly into perspective. Through this technique of poetic compression, Pollock generalizes her themes by developing symbolical connections between various characters and situations. The symbols engender a kind of internal language which is conditioned by subjective values. Pollock is in effect exhuming the past, with our assistance, as a form of collective memory (dense, suggestive and elusive), and not as a body of historical evidence to be marshalled and subjected to rigorous analysis. In the induction-scene, for example, Billy the harmonica player at key moments plays "Garryowen" which Harry the wagonmaster identifies as Custer's marching song. Although Custer doesn't actually appear in the main play, only a few strains of this song are needed to make him and the battle of Little Big Horn as real a presence as any of the onstage characters. Thus, when Harry whistles the song after the scene in which Colonel MacLeod has made it clear that Walsh *must* order the Sioux back to the United States, Custer's death, Walsh's unavoidable decision and the eventual murder of Sitting Bull together with his family and people are *all* concentrated into the compelling intensity of a single moment.

Similarly, through a kind of network of inferences, Walsh's role as a victim of political machination is established and developed by assigning moral values to places which are never seen but often referred to. The United States is dangerous, aggressive, barbaric - a place where deals are made and where people die. Britain, as the centre of imperial policy, is byzantine in its complexity, remote and all powerful, able to colonize any form of political opposition at the mere stroke of a pen. Ottawa is similarly remote but also weak, a mere pawn of British and American foreign policy. Glengarry, however, where Clarence comes from (the Ralph Connor allusion is a nice touch), is an ideal word. So, too, is Brockville where Walsh's wife and two daughters live, emblems of his private integrity, kept intact despite the duplicity of his public responsibilities. The West, in stark contrast, is portrayed as the romantic cliché of new world hopes and noble savages, but it has been polluted by debased political values irreversibly brought to bear from centres of power located elsewhere.

Near the end of the play, Walsh and his men are assuming yet another set of roles: they are planning to dress

up as Indians to make mock attacks on train loads of Eastern visitors coming to see the last best West. Thus, in the image patterns that the play's geography has been articulating, even the West cannot be taken at face value - appearances to the contrary, it is no longer the genuine article. At the close, Walsh takes off his red tunic and gun as he tries to dissociate himself from the role that has destroyed him. But he cannot do so. Clarence has just reported the brutal murder of Sitting Bull ("They shot him twice and put the boots to him... and Little Crow says the soldiers dropped him in a pit of lime, so's his people couldn't bury him proper" [Walsh, 1983, 128]); meanwhile we hear the voice of Sitting Bull, from earlier in the play, talking of his own inevitable death ("My cup is broken. It has passed away" [Walsh, 1983, 129]). The West itself, as both a real place and a state of unimpeachable moral worth, has also "passed away": Walsh can of course do nothing, as we had discovered in the induction-scene, and so he "slams his hands down on his desk" as the action shifts to a final emblematic blackout (Walsh, 1983, 129).

(2)

THE KOMAGATA MARU INCIDENT (1976), LIKE *WALSH*, has many of the trappings of a history play and again provides the playwright with an opportunity to probe some of our smug assumptions about the peaceful settlement of the West. Her main subject is racism. In 1914 the Canadian government prevented a boat load of East Indian immigrants from entering Canada even though they were entitled to do so as British citizens. Their boat remained moored for two months in Vancouver Harbour while negotiations took place and the Indians suffered from hunger and inadequate living conditions. Pollock's research into the incident again made her reappraise the ways in which our history has been written. "As a Canadian, I feel that much of our history has been misrepresented and even hidden from us", she has observed in a Note to the published text; "until we recognize our past, we cannot change our future". Her play is the theatrical equivalent of the kind of task force inquiry which the government should have commissioned to find out what was really going on; but, as she also observes in her Note, the whole affair was soon "overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I" (*KMI*, [iii]). The retrospective frame of reference in *Walsh* allows us to treat its indictment of racism as an isolated historical event. But in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, the playwright is using much more direct presentational strategies to engage the audience's attention, to persuade it to take responsibility *now* for the pattern of racial prejudice found throughout our history.

The early versions of *Walsh*, as noted, suffered from too much historical documentation. As a moralist, Pollock seems to have believed that the truth is to be found in the so-called objective record. Even the later versions of *Walsh* are to a degree hampered by her self-assumed responsibility to publicize what she had found out about his life and times. *The Komagata Maru Incident* is an important stylistic departure, as clearly explained in her prefatory Note: "The Komagata Maru Incident is a theatrical impression of an historical event seen through the optique of the stage and the mind of the playwright. It is not a documentary account although much of it is documented. To encompass these facts, time and place are often compressed, and certain dramatic licence is employed" (*KMI*, [iii]). There are three playing areas, different in theatrical style but also inter-related in a number of significant ways. The main area is a brothel where two prostitutes, Evy and Sophie, entertain their lovers - Georg, a shady German immigrant, and William Hopkinson, an Immigration Department Inspector who struggles throughout the play to come to terms with his own deeply interiorized racist attitudes. Behind and surrounding the brothel is a runway where the Master of Ceremonies, T.S. (which possibly means The System), plays a number of different roles, creating the atmosphere of a carnival or seedy German-style cabaret. At the back, on a higher level, there is "an open grill-like frame"

which Pollock says is meant to convey "both the impression of a cage, and of the super-structure of a ship" (*KMI*, [iv]). This section is reserved for an East Indian woman and her child who together represent all the Indians on shipboard whom we never see.

Pollock has dispensed with the conventions of theatrical illusion. Characters remain onstage throughout the play, and simply move into the acting areas whenever necessary. There are no blackouts to simulate the passing of time; scenes are sequential, overlapping or simultaneous; characterization is not meant to be psychologically grounded but exists as the projection of interchangeable roles. We are never allowed to forget that this is a highly theatrical, non-illusionistic investigation of a continuing social problem. As both judge and jury, we are in effect being asked to pass judgement on ourselves.

Pollock has acknowledged that the play is an important point of departure in her career: "I started to explore structure, and it was exhilarating, and I decided that I never wanted to write a naturalistic play again".⁷ But the exploration, though consistently interesting, is often problematic. There are still too many loose ends, several key moments are awkwardly handled, and there is an overall discrepancy between intention and result. The juxtaposition of different theatrical styles is in itself not a problem. As an instance of rough theatre, it has extraordinary vitality, the power to disconcert, and a kind of edgy playfulness - coming mostly from T.S. as he shifts all too cleverly from one identity to another - which puts us on the defensive. Her main difficulty is the failure to establish a set of theatrical priorities. The sinister ringmaster T.S. steals the limelight, so that the real-life characters - Hopkinson and Sophie, Georg and Evy - tend to become merely pawns in his own manipulative games. This works to good effect when he is playing Hopkinson's superior in the Department of Immigration. But as a controlling theatrical technique, it is of limited use apart from the expedient of imparting historical information without boring the audience to death. The revisions to *Walsh* are instructive: the awkward voice-overs got replaced by functional characters like Harry the wagonmaster; T. S. is still somewhere between these two possibilities. The so-called everyday reality of the brothel is to a certain degree overwhelmed by T.S.'s grandstanding routines; and as a metaphor for the ways in which Hopkinson prostitutes himself, it seems both pedestrian and overstated. The Woman is a moving emblem of suffering and endurance but, as with *Sitting Bull*, the decision to portray her as a type-character robs her of much of her humanity and makes the painful experience on shipboard seem distant rather than immediate. She's like one of those symbolical characters in a drama by Andrejev or Maeterlinck: you know what she's supposed to represent but you have to work harder than you should to maintain your interest in her.

Pollock has explained that in writing this play she "wasn't so interested in character" as she was in later plays like *Generations*.⁸ Notwithstanding the honesty of her remark, her perhaps unwitting preoccupation with the characterization of Hopkinson is incompatible with the the investigative presentational style established by the regular foregrounding of T.S. and his performances of various characters. As in the exposition of a naturalistic play, we gradually learn - through implication, innuendo, strenuous denial, subtextual registers and then sudden disclosure - that Hopkinson's racist behaviour can be attributed to his heredity. Although his father was British - and proud of it - his mother was a mere Indian. Hopkinson has never been able to reconcile this split in his racial identity: hence the destructive forces at work inside his moral code.

Pollock uses some vivid theatrical techniques to render his obsession with hiding his real identity, not just from others but also from himself. During an attempt to board the *Komagata Maru*, Hopkinson's face gets covered in coal dust when the Indians hurl the ship's cargo down on him and his men. As Robert C. Nunn has

neatly put it: "Through a neurotic oversight the meticulous civil servant has placed himself where he will be overwhelmed by the dark-skinned men in whom he refuses to see himself, until his skin too is dark".⁹ Once Hopkinson is back in the brothel with his prostitute Evy, he is desperate to wash the dust off. Here both setting and character business interact effectively to underscore the extent to which he is prepared to lie to himself and to others. Yet this kind of symbolical evocation is the exception, as Pollock concentrates her attention on a more prosaic and derivative kind of characterization. True to the naturalistic premise, Hopkinson cannot go on resisting the dark weight of the past. In the court room scene at the end, he admits to his own part in enacting the government's racist policy, and as he recites a hymn to Shiva the Destroyer out of the depths of his racial memory, he is shot dead by an Indian as an act of revenge. Pollock's sentimental attitude towards her leading character is unmistakable:

I am very fond of Hopkinson; I see him as a far finer man than Walsh. Hopkinson is a person who has a guilty secret that is used against him by people in power. He atones for his actions by the manner of his death. When he says, yes, I'll testify, he accepts fatalistically the manner of his death in the nature of a Sikh, his mother's religion. He accepts responsibility for it and, to me, that's not despairing; that's a high point. That's why I have him say, "I open my arms" towards death, and speak the verse that is that part of his background.¹⁰

This kind of reductive approach to the character and the issues which he is meant to embody denies the audience a number of insights which the juxtaposed theatrical styles had in fact promised to deliver. We are being asked to think of racism as caused largely by personal neurosis. It can be, of course; but the broad sociological dimensions of the play had suggested that we were going to undergo a more complex, thorough and possibly analytical examination of the origins and effects of racism in Canadian society both in the past and the present. The emphasis on individual psychology, with its concern for the dignity of atonement, gives the audience relatively little to think about, beyond something lame or perhaps even self-righteous (e.g., "too bad he had such trouble accepting his mother's race"; or, "oh well, everything's all right now that he's able to come to terms with himself and behave properly by dying for his cause"). The audience is in effect left off the hook: it doesn't need to pass judgement on itself, since it can all too readily pass judgement on him. As instructive experiment in political dramaturgy, the play is ultimately frustrated by its surrender to naturalistic conventions and by its inability, for whatever reasons, to explore fully the presentational techniques in which, at one level, it seems interested.

OVERLY SIMPLIFYING THE VERY ISSUES IT purports to treat also causes a whole set of inter-related problems in Pollock's *One Tiger to a Hill* (1980), a hostage-taking prison-drama, loosely inspired by several real-life incidents but in no sense meant to be taken as a docu-drama. The main character, a lawyer named Everett Chalmers, winds up mediating between the prison officials and the prisoners with their hostages. A well-meaning ordinary man, Chalmers' strong but untested sense of social responsibility means that, like Walsh, he cannot stand idly by when injustices are clearly taking place. He has to get involved, no matter what the personal cost.

Pollock uses the moral changes which Chalmers goes through to bracket her entire play. At the start, he stands inside the sinister, multi-levelled "medieval fortress" of a prison as he describes it, and explains directly to the audience that he has been going past this prison for nine years, always interested in but always

unwilling to think too hard about "what it was like being inside, locked up" (*OT*, 76). To drive his point home he likens himself to those Germans who during World War II deliberately turned their backs on all kinds of atrocities ("Would I be any different in essence from all those good Germans who passed Dachau and Buchenwald, and never asked questions?" [*OT*, 76]). And when he has an opportunity to compensate for his own guilt, he does so, believing, however naively, that maybe one person, after all, can really change the system. As our guide to the inside, Chalmers is meant as a kind of surrogate for the audience; as Pollock has explained, "My hope is that the next time the audience reads about a hostage-taking event, I'll have given them a touch of Chalmers...".¹¹ At the end of the play, Chalmers again stands inside the prison, looking directly at us. But now everything has changed. The guard Hanzuk has just shot the Métis prisoner Tommy Paul and the social worker Dede Walker. As they lie dead on the floor behind him, Chalmers tries, however hesitantly, to account for what has gone wrong and what he will do next ("...Is everything lies?...tomorrow... I said...I will have breakfast...drop...the kids off at school...on Friday...I'll go to the Y...*he weeps* [*OT*, 137]). Pollock wants the scene to move us - "I want the audience to come away having been touched by that theatre incident so that the next time they read the paper, it isn't just the headlines and they don't say, of those fucking psychopaths, we should lock them up and throw away the key" - and, at the same time, she recognizes that despite its clear agitational objective the play will probably not lead to social change, for audiences are of course entitled to do nothing ("But I don't think they're going to be moved to action").¹² The play's idealistic commitment to social justice, its determination to examine contemporary rather than historical issues and its impatience with mere finger-pointing reveal a kind of moral seriousness which is all the more valuable for being so uncommon. But here, as in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, there are several dramaturgical problems which make it hard for her to realize her consciousness-raising intentions.

The main difficulty is Chalmers himself. As Nunn has rightly argued, "his part in the action is so peripheral that it will not bear the weight of the anguish he informs us he is suffering".¹³ He only addresses us at the beginning and the close. For the rest of the play, he is simply one character among many, with a dilemma which seems almost insignificant in contrast to what the other characters are going through. Brutal though it sounds, it is uphill work to care much about Chalmers. His worry over not being able to do much looks like a self-indulgent posture, even though this is not the impression that the playwright intends to create.

As for the main play, Nunn is again right: it borrows too extensively from "the clichés of television melodrama" and the final piling up of dead bodies is a routine taken "out of pure soap opera".¹⁴ Being derivative is no bad thing - the theatre, after all, is a derivative art form - but if borrowed strategies are awkwardly handled or inappropriate to what the playwright is trying to achieve, the results are bound to be pretty much unsatisfactory. To use Pollock's own term, it is hard to figure out the controlling politic of *One Tiger to a Hill*, apart from her quixotic statement that audiences will pay close attention the next time that they learn about a real hostage-taking incident. Pollock's own remarks on the play she meant to write are more interesting, in my view, than the play she has in fact written. She thinks that the left-wing social activist Lena Benz "is as ineffectual and weak as the Warden because she's given up"; that the Head of Security, McGowen, is sympathetic "because he's the ordinary person who has to do all the shit work"; and that the rehabilitation officer Soholuk "has the clearest idea of what's occurring" in contrast to the rehabilitation officer Dede Walker who, despite audiences' need "to make her a heroine", is in fact "the ultimate villain in the piece...that well-meaning person who causes the shit to hit the fan".¹⁵ But the play is so action-oriented and sensationalistic, so overburdened by crude characterization, and so weakened by dialogue alternating between the banal and the hyperbolic, that it doesn't seem much better than the average tv mini-special

purporting to treat a controversial issue.

The play is more important, I think, for what it tells us about Pollock's thematic preoccupations and the contours of her imagination. Despite the way the play sets him up as concerned observer, Chalmers is mostly in a psychological prison of his own making. Confined by his daily routines and bourgeois morality, and alienated from a life-threatening cause, he feels compelled to make the kind of weighty moral choices which his marginal status in the play serves to deny him. He is a character who wants to radicalize himself by throwing off the dead weight of the past and by embracing a different set of moral assumptions in order to set himself free from all forms of tyranny - social, political and psychological. He is, by accident as well as design, the prototype of the central characters in Pollock's subsequent plays: the Nurlin family in the naturalistic *Generations*; Lizzie Borden in the extended psycho-dramatic game of *Blood Relations*; Johnny Farley, Mr. Big and Leah in the mythic dream-play *Whiskey Six Cadenza*; and his namesake, the physician Ev Chalmers, in *Doc*, a 'realistic' study in time remembered.

(3)

THE NURLINS HAVE BEEN FARMING in Alberta for three generations. Old Eddy, now in his late seventies, emigrated from Europe in 1908 and has been working hard ever since to create a place of lasting value ("And when I go, what I'm leavin' is land, not money" [*Gen*, 193]). His son Alfred has accepted this legacy somewhat reluctantly, and though now in his mid-fifties still wonders if he should have made a different kind of life for himself. His wife Margaret, harbouring no such misgivings, content in her traditional role as wife and mother, gives him the strength to carry on. Their two very different sons focus the play's main conflict: whereas Young Eddy wants to sell off part of the farm to buy his way into a legal practice in the city, his younger brother David wants to retain every part of his grandfather's legacy, and commits himself to running the farm in spite of government interference and stupidity. Young Eddy's decision is also motivated by his recognition that the land will ultimately try to possess those who try to tame it. He wants, instead, to have a more independent kind of life; so, too, does David's girlfriend Bonnie who leaves David near the end of the play. Afraid that she will simply become another version of Margaret, she will probably not come back, even when she has found herself.

As this summary suggests, *Generations* is a case-study in naturalistic conventions. The setting of the New Place, where the family now lives, is realistically detailed and through inference tells us everything we need to know about the Nurlin family. Characterization relies on individualizing minutiae and psychological development; the dialogue is believable *conversation*, suitable to its time and place; and the land is a character in its own right, "revealed", as Pollock notes in the stage directions, "by the light and shadow it throws on the Nurlins' lives" (*Gen*, 141). Heredity, too, is a significant determinant of behaviour. Whereas Alfred and Young Eddy are temperamentally unsuited to a farmer's life, Old Eddy and David are governed by what David can only gropingly describe as the awesome "*power*" (*Gen*, 196) which the prairie seems to contain, and by a phallogocentric desire to make the land submit to their will.

When I saw Cecil O'Neal's production of the play at the Tarragon Theatre in 1981, I was struck by how every aspect of the naturalistic style contributed effortlessly to the pervasive lifelike impression. Nothing seemed old-fashioned or contrived. Even something as ordinary as making the morning coffee managed to convey something small but important about the characters. The only drawback was that the apparent naturalness

sometimes verged on the prosaic, and once the basic dramatic situation had been established, some of the developments - Old Eddy's ability to endure disappointment, Bonnie's departure, David's obsessive pursuit of his manly ethos and Margaret's benign acceptance of *everything* - seemed entirely predictable, close to the formulaic. But, ultimately, none of these things really mattered. The evocation of a sense of place was so keenly observed and honestly rendered that I could readily understand why naturalism, even now, can have the kind of radical impact that it had in the nineteenth-century. *Generations'* mimetic truthfulness makes an audience pay attention, as though for the first time, to a group of people whose lives have mostly been ignored by the theatre. Naturalism perhaps succeeds better than any other theatrical style in not only acknowledging but also authenticating their existence. Like Gwen Pharis Ringwood's sympathetic studies of prairie life, Pollock's drama - despite some of its reservations - is a celebration of the rural values of hard work, independence, self-discipline and moral certitude as it confers a kind of heroic dignity on those who struggle daily with the immutable forces of nature. Its dominant politic urges us to believe that the kind of traditional sacrifice to a larger cause made by Old Eddy, Alfred, Margaret and David is a more powerful form of self-realization than anything which Bonnie and Young Eddy can achieve through the single-minded pursuit of their own shallow interests.

The naturalistic style is made to look easy. But it gave the playwright no end of trouble, particularly during rehearsals for the premiere in 1980 at Albert Theatre Projects. As Pollock explains, naturalism doesn't succeed unless the real-life illusion is perfect in every single detail: "once you're in the kitchen, you've got all the stinking things you've got to do in the kitchen, like cook the food".¹⁶ Naturalism, despite its bad press, is a highly imaginative form of theatre. By giving us just part of the setting, it invites us to imagine the rest. Here we can readily transform the kitchen into the credible reality of the entire house. The naturalistic setting suits the development of her domestic themes and situations, but it seems to have frustrated her large intention of making the land itself into a living thing, as full of life as any of the characters. "You can't put the Prairies on the stage so you have to find another way of doing the outside scenes" Pollock argues.¹⁷ And although the solutions never really satisfied her, they were undeniably inventive, and tell us a good deal about the naturalistic paradox of using artificial means, not just to simulate reality, but to hint at the existence of a kind of omnipresent symbolical reality which is much harder to define.

She calls in the stage directions for a setting with a double perspective. From the vantage point of the New Place, we can see across the prairie to the Old Place, the original homestead where Old Eddy started his dream of a better life for his family. It is represented - or suggested - by a run-down porch with some worn steps and a few remaining posts. The Old Place, so clearly the victim of time and weather, brings the destructive force of nature within the naturalistic frame: the prairie landscape is thus portrayed as an eternal brooding presence, not just influencing but in fact controlling the lives of the Nurlin family. Moreover, the Old Place, as an enduring connection between the old and new worlds, has a kind of mythic dimension, summarizing the family's history in a single vivid image which is more poetic than real.

Fittingly, it is at the Old Place that the normally taciturn Old Eddy opens himself up a little to his oldest friend, an Indian named Charles Running Dog, who is not merely a character but an embodiment of the land itself - ancient, wise and full of insights denied to the more literally minded white man. The differences between these two friends are culturally determined: whereas for Old Eddy the land is "some kind of monster a man had to wrestle and fight", for Charlie "it's like a woman, you gotta woo her and win her" (*Gen*, 163). The Indians have cut off irrigation water to the farmers because the government hasn't paid them enough for it; and Old Eddy, as a practical farmer, above all else, tries to get Charlie to convince the Indians to change

their minds. As the two of them sit within the mythic aura of the Old Place, talking knowledgeably about the passing of time, the coming of death and the life-enhancing properties of water, they take on the stature of demi-gods from a distant legendary time, and the land surrounding them seems informed with the kind of awe-inspiring beauty which David ascribes to it. Thus, through the suggestive interaction of character, symbol and locale, the play's naturalism establishes a convincing illusion of contemporary farming life on the prairies and also manages to explore the kinds of ineffable themes and feelings which normally lie deep below the surface of human experience.

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WHATEVER THE STYLE OF PLAY, Pollock's characters are invariably challenged by the possibility of transforming themselves with a kind of idealism, a protean energy which verges on the mystic. To use the kind of theatrical metaphor which turns up in one form or another in all her plays, if we wish, we can perform ourselves into a different kind of existence - freer, less rule-bound, much more imaginative and much more connected with natural impulses. The self as a form of theatre: this is the controlling metaphor in *Blood Relations* (1980), Pollock's ambiguous, multivalent and in some ways dangerous retelling of the story of Lizzie Borden. The ideological assumptions of the play are meant to be unsettling. As a Conradian glimpse into our collective heart of darkness, the play suggests that the family and personal identity are *never* stable, *never* to be trusted, and that the desire to commit murder is a product of socio-economic and psychological factors over which a single individual might have very little control. "I'm saying that all of us are capable of murder given the right situation", Pollock has observed. "The structure [of the play] is a way of maintaining the ambiguity. You see, I don't say that Lizzy did it. The defence says she's not guilty. The Actress says she's guilty".¹⁸

The first version of the play, entitled *My Name Is Lisbeth*, was a conventional linear approach to the story and Lizzie's guilt was never in doubt (*BR*, 108-110). After directing the premiere in Vancouver in 1976, Pollock started to revise the text, coming up with the novelty of a double time-frame which adds a remarkable degree of psychological and dramaturgical complexity. The revised play, evocatively entitled *Blood Relations*, is set in Fall River near Boston in 1902. (What apt place-names for a play about repressed desire, guilt and ostracism, together with the possibility of being 'rehabilitated'!) Lizzie and her Actress-lover visiting from Boston while away the boredom of a Sunday afternoon by acting out some of the key events from ten years earlier in 1892, leading up to but stopping just short of the actual murders. Pollock herself describes this re-enactment as a "dream thesis",¹⁹ but Ann Saddlemyer has more precisely described it as a "psychodramatic game".²⁰ Lizzie plays the Borden's Irish maid, Bridget, who testified at Lizzie's trial because she was home on the day of the murders; the Actress meanwhile takes up the challenge of playing Lizzie herself. The psychodramatic game is not, I think, a play-within-a-play. Instead, the events of *both* 1902 and 1892 are juxtaposed throughout, to create a number of concurrent and interactive 'blood relations', many of which are ironic and threatening. Through this technique, the past, the present and (by implication) the future are all made to bear on one another. Unlike *Walsh*, the play cannot be treated as mere history play - it has a kind of timeless urgency which *must* be answered.

The Actress is not named but given generic status so that she can readily assume Lizzie's identity and so she can function (like Chalmers in *One Tiger to a Hill*) as the audience's guide, taking us inside the house and eventually inside Lizzie's claustrophobic mind. This game is made to look like fun - at first, but it soon

proves to be deadly serious. Its power to disclose what is normally hidden from view can cause permanent psychological damage, not only for the characters but for the audience as well. Once the audience has agreed to participate in the game, it cannot of course change its mind, even when it find itself being asked to take some responsibility for what happens to Lizzie.

Moving effortlessly back and forth from 1902 to 1892, *Blood Relations* has many of the thematic and structural features of a *fin-de-siècle* play. Victorian faith in normalcy, family life and traditional roles for women is being disrupted from within by repressed desires, dependent thinking, aberrant behaviour and (covert) lesbianism. Whereas Lizzie is the wayward daughter who must pay a price for her unconventional ideas and actions, her sister Emma is the dutiful daughter who embodies the traditional moral values we are supposed to admire. Because Lizzie's mother died in childbirth, Lizzie is being raised by her loving but weak-willed father who is regularly over-ruled by Lizzie's 'wicked' stepmother who of courses hates her adopted daughter. Lizzie demands her rightful share of the family inheritance, but Mrs. Borden is trying to persuade Mr. Borden to sign everything over to her 'villainous' brother, and together the parents are trying to marry Lizzie off to a respectable widower with three children. Lizzie will of course have nothing to do with this nonsense. As in an Alice Munro story, our interest is not fundamentally in the scrupulous attention paid to the surface period-details of clothing, domestic architecture and etiquette as regulated by Mrs. Beeton, but in the Gothic nightmare which is buried deep within the subtext. We watch with fascinated horror as it is gradually dug up, brought to the surface and acted out with frightening vividness by the Actress. At this psychological level, the play is full of images of being locked inside and of trying, however unsuccessfully, to break out. Lizzie is imprisoned both figuratively and literally inside the house by her parents and never gets free, even when they are safely dead. Lizzie's pet pigeons, symbols of her own caged identity, are padlocked inside the garden shed, until her father chops their heads off with an axe. Lizzie gets their blood all over her hands, an indelible symbol, like her flaming red hair and the red sores and scabs on her knees as a child, of her 'murdered' self as it is ritualistically sacrificed on the altar of social convention. In demanding her fair share of the estate, Lizzie, like many women in the 1890s, is demanding her right to be her independent self, to escape from lifelong imprisonment in the role of a contemptible Victorian spinster.

The play isn't grounded in the clichéd assumption that there is a 'real' and healthy Lizzie, intact and knowable, just ready to emerge from beneath the mask of her adopted identity. Lizzie's greatest fear is that underneath her role there is nothing, an abyss from which a complete sense of herself might never emerge. "I'm supposed to be a mirror", she says to her impatient father, "I'm supposed to reflect what you want to see, but everyone wants something different". And then she reaches a startling conclusion which is not resolved, least of all at the end of the play: "If no one looks in the mirror, I'm not even there, I don't exist!" (*BR*, 39). Her father of course doesn't understand, and neither does anyone else in her patriarchal society. So she gets her stepmother to look directly into her eyes, and asks what she sees; but the answer, predictably, is "...Myself" (*BR*, 64). Lizzie keeps returning to this nihilistic theme, imagining herself as an expressionless face ("Just black holes in a white mask" [*BR*, 44]) going up and down with all the uncontrollable energy of a carousel horse; and throughout she seems a figure always on the edge of an identifying context, trapped, as Pollock notes, in a "bell-jar effect" in which she is being forced "to fulfill other people's expectations of 'normal'" (*BR*, 55). Inhabiting their social reality instead of a room which she can call her own, she becomes obsessed with the eyes, both dead and alive, on animals and people, an obsession which dramatizes the eye/I connection and calls her own tenuous identity even further into doubt. Since she can't belong, and since she has no real identity in her isolation, is there anyone there who will answer to her name? Empowering the Actress to play the 'part' of Lizzie is a dangerous decision. Lizzie is surrendering, if only for the time being, the limited

amount of authority she has over her self, and runs the risk that the Actress, through the witchery of her art, will create an autonomous version of Lizzie which will wipe the 'real' Lizzie completely out of existence.

The Actress is brought just to the point of committing murder. As in *Walsh*, a vivid tableau imprints the full significance of the moment on our collective conscience. While the Actress stands with the hatchet upraised, completely absorbed by the unleashed desire to kill, Lizzie breaks the spell, as it were, by touching her, and the Actress, terrified by this 'controlled' encounter with her own demons, "whirls around to face Miss Lizzie who is left holding the hatchet". At this climactic moment, Emma calls down from upstairs, immediately returning the action to the so-called normal atmosphere of 1902. When Emma comes downstairs and sees Lizzie with the hatchet, she poses the question which she has asked repeatedly, like a haunting leitmotif, over the last ten years: "Lizzie, did you?". Lizzie replies that if she did, Emma, as a kind of mother to her, must bear some responsibility as well. The Actress, who has been watching this exchange, comes forward to tell what she has discovered during her investigation into the demoralizing environment in which Lizzie had been trapped in 1892: "Lizzie, you did". It is Lizzie, however, who has the final word: "I didn't", she says, and then as the "Actress looks to the hatchet - then to the audience," Lizzie says (cryptically), "You did" (*BR*, 70).

What might at first seem an enigmatic sidestepping of the issue is nothing of the kind. The last line encapsulates the full complexity of the murders, and draws everyone into the act of judgement. It was indeed the Actress, and not Lizzie, who was about to commit murder: as in psycho-therapy, she is not allowed to make Lizzie into a scapegoat, but must assume responsibility for her own powerful destructive feelings. At the same time, we the audience, as participants in the game of re-enactment, must be willing to take on our responsibility, not just for what happened to Lizzie but for what can always happen, even in our own time, whenever we insist that both men and women adapt themselves to a rigid standard of behaviour. We remember that in a critical scene earlier in the play Lizzie asks Dr. Patrick what he would do if he could only save one person when two were in fact dying (*BR*, 61). What she is really asking is which life is more precious: hers? or her parents?. She is struggling with the kind of irresolvable paradox found in a classical tragedy. If she is to live, her parents must die; if her parents are to live, she must die, psychologically if not literally. The Doctor cannot answer her question, beyond giving a stock answer ("What I do is try to save lives...." [*BR*, 62]). This kind of unanswerable dilemma means that the play can never really end. The break in the frame of dramatic action at the close to address both us and the Actress carries the play out of the theatre into life itself where it is much harder to avoid answering the kinds of difficult questions which Lizzie's situation poses to us.

What is most disturbing about *Blood Relations* is the way it undermines our normal expectations of dramatic character. The faithful recreation, at one level, of Victorian society might lead us to think that the play is mostly concerned with empirical reality: certainly Pollock followed her usual approach of doing a good deal of historical research, and some of the lines spoken in the text by the Defense are taken directly from actual transcripts of her trial. However, once Pollock had introduced the double time-frame and the role-playing, with their multiple levels of dream, memory and reality, she made a commitment to a different kind of characterization from which she hasn't turned back. Who is Lizzie Borden, we might well ask? Despite the attempts to contain her, Lizzie eludes definition. Like the proverbial madwoman in the attic, she is a prisoner of her own thwarted desires and cannot enact her sexual difference with the kind of absolute authority which will release her from the constraints of the past. Present but absent, visible but invisible, she is a fleeting image in the performance of a play written and acted not by herself but by someone else. Thus, it is not surprising that the essential indeterminacy of human character is what becomes the central theme of Pollock's

next two plays, *Whiskey Six Cadenza* and *Doc*.

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WHISKEY SIX CADENZA (1983) TAKES PLACE during the fall and spring of 1919-1920 in the coal mining town of Blairmore, Alberta, "a small, distant town that might-have-been", as Pollock points out in her stage directions. A place of uncertain identity, located high up in the enveloping mists of the Crowsnest Pass, Blairmore is caught between multiple borders (Canada and the U.S., Alberta and B.C.) and therefore resembles not a real place but a dream-world in which "images and figures often appear fractured, refracted, fragmented" (*Whiskey*, 141). So-called normal reality is but a pretence 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. This is what the West has come to: it is no longer a promised land (as in *Walsh* and *Generations*) but rather an evanescent state-of-mind, idealized on one level, but treacherous on another.

At the start, Johnny Farley returns from Toronto where he couldn't find a job; like many of Pollock's characters, he *must* return home to confront his own self within the context of the past. Eager to escape from his mother's suffocating love and from the coal-dark prison of the colliery, Johnny gets himself 'adopted' by the local rumrunner, Mr. Big, a master of gamesmanship whose greatest pleasure is to direct, enact and applaud his own 'performance' as a self-made romantic existentialist. Standing outside the normal constraints of the law, conveniently glossing over his shady past in the East in order to embrace the self-fulfilling myth of the West, he moves easily across borders (both real and psychological) in his legendary car, the Whiskey Six of the play's title. As the sole proprietor of the aptly named Alberta Hotel, Mr. Big is answerable to no one but himself, and his rhetoric is as inflated as his mythic pretensions, studded with talismanic words like "radiance", "incandescence" and "illumination", which he delivers with such philosophical panache that they *almost* seem true. Mr. Big is carefully watched over and harassed by Sergeant William Windsor of the Prohibition Police. Known locally by his nickname of Bill the Brit, he is the symbol of British political power as it extends its rigid moral codes to the farthest parts of the Empire. As in *Walsh*, *The Komagata Maru Incident* and *Blood Relations*, these 'prohibitive' moral values are portrayed as retrogressive, a form of old world tyranny which robs people of their right to an independent and visionary set of beliefs. Mr. Big and Johnny are placed in the kind of situation which recurs in Pollock's work, between imprisonment in the past or self-realization in the future; between impossible and possible worlds as they come into conflict to form what is essentially a morality play.

Mr. Big has also 'adopted' a girl known only as Leah, an orphan who, like her namesake Leah the Forsaken, symbolizes fallen innocence just awaiting redemption. In making Johnny and Leah into members of his self-created family, Mr. Big creates permanence from change, meaning from nothingness, a sense of belonging from alienation, and becomes, as he explains to Leah, "like God descendin' to take his Chosen up into heaven in a fiery chariot!" (*Whiskey*, 157). Despite our instinctive admiration for Mr. Big's histrionic style, we come to distrust him as a dangerous mythmaker whose fanciful stories and grandiose ideas about a new age about to dawn are largely corrupt and self-serving. Leah, it turns out, is not merely his so-called daughter but a Lolita, inciting his passion but also, in the end, victimized by it. Johnny, now in love with her, finds himself pitted in a moral struggle with a man to whom he owes his freedom. Like Lizzie in *Blood Relations*, Johnny is living out an irresolvable dilemma. If he remains with Mr. Big, he will be an accomplice not just in the

crime of rumrunning but in the bigger crime of a life-lie, and in the repression of his own 'natural' passion for Leah. If he betrays Mr. Big to Bill the Brit, along with the demi-Eden which Mr. Big has managed to create, he will have to descend into the mine which has killed his brothers, and return home to a mother whose burden of guilt and apocalyptic visions of hellfire are certain to destroy him.

Mr. Big, like a tragic hero, comes to recognize that he has been betraying his own ideals and that, to cleanse himself, he must take responsibility for his own actions. The ending is intentionally ambiguous: Leah, weary of what she calls their game of pretence, gives Mr. Big a pistol and says: "Now - make it right" (*Whiskey*, 246). As she runs out of the Alberta Hotel towards Johnny, Mr. Big shoots her in the back, and as she dies, the scene shifts imperceptibly to a version of the dream-like dance involving all the characters (except Bill the Brit and Johnny) with which the play had begun. Johnny, now older, enters in front of this kaleidoscope of memory to comment on the paradoxes of what has transpired. The pictorial arrangement of past, present and future encloses the continuum of memory for both our contemplation and his in a series of ever-shifting moments which are mostly self-referential. Johnny won't deny the persuasive authority of Mr Big's rhetoric - "It may all have been lies, but that still doesn't mean it weren't true" - nor Leah's significance as "livin' proof a transcendence" (*Whiskey*, 247). Lying is a form of truth, if one wants it to be so; Mr. Big, inspired by Leah, indeed answered to his name by sacrificing what he had created in order to set them all free. In the flickering light we see Johnny about to take the train that had brought him home to go...who knows where? It doesn't matter. What does matter is that he has now become the player of his own cadenza, occupying the borders of past, present and future at one and the same moment, in an "illuminated" state of being which is his rightful legacy from his 'father', Mr. Big.

DOC (1984) IS ALSO A PLAY ABOUT the self-referential encounter of parent and child. Catherine, a writer in her mid-thirties, goes home to see her father, Ev Chalmers, the Doc of the play's title. Recovering from a bad heart-attack, he is suddenly feeling old, and is only partly flattered to think that a new hospital is being named after him to honour a lifetime of dedicated service to his community. Unlike his namesake in *One Tiger to a Hill*, Catherine's father has been a man of determined involvement throughout his career who has saved many lives but at the expense of his family. His wife Bob loses her tenuous identity inside the straitjacket role of the doctor's wife, becomes an alcoholic and eventually commits suicide; his doctor-friend Oscar turns into a stranger; his mother commits suicide by walking into a train; and his children only know him as a distant figure who sometimes comes home briefly in the middle of the night. The main question of the play - was this sacrifice in fact worth it? - is too complex for a definitive answer, although there is a lingering sense that he was not acting as a compulsive egoist but knew exactly why he had made this choice.

Realistic only in its observed detail and lifelike conversations, the play has a non-linear structure, exists simultaneously on multiple levels of dream, memory and reality, and ranges widely through time and space. Katie, Catherine's "younger self" as Pollock describes her (*Doc*, [iii]), also appears onstage: Catherine/Katie can talk to and for each other, as two generations inherent in the same personality, both of them needing to come to terms with their parents' failing marriage and with their self-realization independent of their father's indomitable will. The main objective, as in *Blood Relations* and *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, is to exorcise the ghosts of the past, to allow past, present and future to co-exist without damaging each other. As an investigation of both personal and public forms of (moral) accountability, the play is full of images of the body as either sick, dying and self-destructive, or as healing itself, becoming its own doctor, repairing the traumas of childhood which have been carried irresistibly into adulthood through the obsessions of memory. The house itself becomes a symbol of how so-called normal reality is controlled from within by ever-shifting

states of mind. I remember that in the 1984 premiere at Theatre Calgary, the house seemed, on one level, a poetic spatialization of a Gothic labyrinth of black and white lines into which Catherine's mother Bob was gradually swallowed up as her daughter Katie called plaintively again and again for the mother whom she had never really known.

Catherine's greatest fear is that she will fall victim to the family malady of suicide, that as a woman she will be destroyed by her powerful father. But by leaving and by coming back with an autonomous identity as a writer, she can risk the investigation of the past and remain (unlike Lizzie Borden) in absolute control of herself. At the end, she asks her father if he will now open his mother's letter (which he has been holding in his hand throughout much of the play) to find out why she in fact committed suicide. But he says, in effect, that he doesn't need to ("I know what's in it" [*Doc*, 122]), and neither does Catherine/Katie, for together they have just spent the play talking themselves through the psychological demons which it contains. And so Catherine lights her letter, and as the play fades to black, the last image is of "the dying flame from the letter" (*Doc*, 126) as the lies of the past are sacrificed to the clarity of the here and now. Father and daughter are reconciled, to a certain degree, and Catherine can leave home without, as it were, taking it with her this time.

THE SELF-REFLECTIVE DIVIDED CHARACTER has turned up in one guise or another in all the plays examined in this introductory survey. The earlier plays emphasize public forms of ideology in which figures of authority must be destroyed if the central characters are going to succeed in liberating themselves. Hopkinson in *The Komagata Maru Incident* 'kills' his father, 'embraces' his mother, and thus integrates the two sides of his racial identity which he has been struggling to keep separate; David Nurlin in *Generations* sets the prairie on fire to protest against government inaction and fights physically with Old Eddy who is angered by his grandson's behaviour - in these rites of passage, David is relinquishing the old ways and establishing his authority as the rightful head of the family farm. If, however, the authority figures cannot be destroyed, the central characters pay a high price: Walsh ends his days as a drunk, watched over with contempt by the idealistic Clarence; and Chalmers in *One Tiger to a Hill* can only stand on the outside of the prison, weeping at his own failure to change the system from within. The more recent plays, in contrast, emphasize personal forms of ideology, a politic of the self, in which acts of self-annihilation *might* lead to personal freedom. Lizzie Borden in *Blood Relations* is no longer controlled by her parents, but in playing the reconstructive game with the Actress is perhaps substituting one psychological prison for another; Johnny Farley in *Whiskey Six Cadenza* denies and affirms his 'father's' self-serving myth and in this way paradoxically manages to become himself in the future; Catherine/Katie in *Doc* observe themselves in the mirror of the past and at the end, as an integrated 'adult' character, they manage to stand free of the father whose authority they had so deeply interiorized. Parent and child together, judging each other and eager to be free; experiencing the world as it is, but suggesting the world as it ought to be: this, finally, is the recurring moral politic at the centre of Sharon Pollock's dramatic imagination.

NOTES

1. Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman, eds., *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982), p. 122.
2. Don Rubin and Alison Cramer-Byng, eds., *Canada's Playwrights: A Biographical Guide* (Toronto:

Canadian Theatre Review Publications, 1980), p. 134.

3. Malcolm Page, "Sharon Pollock: Committed Playwright". *Canadian Drama/L'Art dramatique canadien* 5:2 (Fall 1970), p. 104.

4. *The Work*, p. 121.

5. *The Work*, p. 119.

6. *The Work*, p. 119.

7. *Canadian Literature: A Guide* (The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, 1986), p. 139.

8. *Canadian Literature*, p. 139.

9. Robert C. Nunn, "Sharon Pollock's Plays: A Review Article". *Theatre History in Canada/Histoire du Theatre au Canada* 5:1 (Spring 1984), p. 76.

10. *The Work*, p. 121.

11. *The Work*, p. 122.

12. *The Work*, p. 122.

13. "Sharon Pollock's Plays", p. 80.

14. "Sharon Pollock's Plays", pp. 80-81.

15. *The Work*, p. 121.

16. *The Work*, p. 120.

17. *The Work*, p. 120.

18. *The Work*, p. 123.

19. Sharon Pollock, *Blood Relations and Other Plays*, edited by Diane Bessai (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), p. 13.

20. Ann Saddlemeyer, "Circus Feminus: 100 Plays by English-Canadian Women", *Room of One's Own* 8:2 (1983), p. 85.

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