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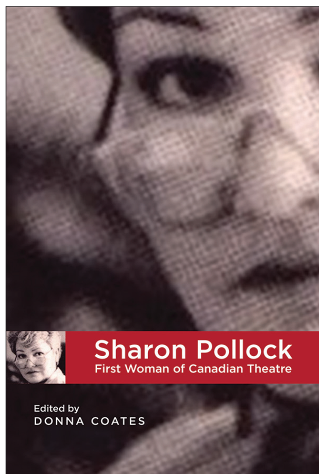

SHARON POLLOCK: FIRST WOMAN OF CANADIAN THEATRE Edited by Donna Coates

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Sharon Pollock and the Scene of the Crime

Shelley Scott

This essay originates with two comments Sherrill Grace makes in *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock*. First, in reference to Pollock's play *End Dream*, Grace writes, "Both in its historical basis and in her dramatic treatment of the subject, this play belongs with *Blood Relations, Saucy Jack,* and *Constance*" (333). Each of these four plays, which span the period 1980–2000, deals with an unsolved real-life murder. A few lines later, Grace makes the further comment that "Sharon . . . adores murder mysteries" (333). Pollock's interest in the murder-mystery genre comes as no surprise, since scholars frequently make passing reference to the mystery component in many of her plays and point out the sources of the real-life cases. However, scholars usually insist that Pollock's intentions extend far beyond a simple "whodunnit" plotline to explore larger thematic concerns. For example, in her introductory essay to Pollock's *Collected Works,* Cynthia Zimmerman notes, "A number of these historical works include an explicit mystery component" ("Anatomising" 5), but quotes Pollock herself as saying she is only interested in manipulating historical

mysteries for a bigger purpose. Most often, Pollock's plays have been admired for their multitude of angles, the contrasting perspectives of various characters, and the fragmentation of time and narrative, devices that do indeed lend themselves to multiple interpretations and thematic richness. Zimmerman, for example, has pointed out that "in a Pollock play the multiplicity of vantage points is not only critical to the story, it is also married to the play's structure" ("Anatomising" 8). But Pollock's technique of telling a story from competing points of view, her complex layering of versions of the truth, and her preoccupation with relations of power, also lend themselves particularly well to murder mysteries.

In this essay, rather than brushing aside the murder-mystery designation, I will look closely at the selection of plays Grace identifies in order to examine how they work when considered squarely within the conventions of the genre. Instead of dismissing that association as somehow a lessening or cheapening of the dramatic form, I will argue that genre conventions of the murder mystery play a significant part in making these plays effective. According to Grace, in 1992 Pollock made a proposal to CBC Radio to write "a series called 'A.J. Jones' . . . that featured a young, female, would-be detective and her talking cat" (*Making Theatre* 320). The proposal was rejected (apparently because of the cat), but as I will demonstrate, Pollock's interest in working within the detective genre has manifested in other ways in her more serious plays. *Blood Relations*, Pollock's most famous play and winner of the Governor-General's Award for Drama in 1981, treats the acquitted American axe-murderer Lizzie Borden as its subject. *Constance* (1992), a radio play, deals with the notorious killing of a child in England in 1860. *Saucy Jack* (1993) is set in 1888 and springs from the crimes committed by the most infamous of English serial killers, Jack the Ripper. With *End Dream* (2000), the story of the murder of a young nanny in Vancouver in 1924,[1] Pollock turns to Canada for source material.

Each of these plays can be understood to demonstrate features of the mystery genre. According to Lucy Sussex, crime writing is "marked by the subject matter of crime and its solution; structured around the

gradual revelation of criminous information (the mystery) of which detective fiction is a refinement; [and] focussed on the detective as ratiocinator of the narrative" (6). Sussex further identifies the "generic crime narrative form: the discovery of a murder, followed by investigation into whodunnit, the discovery of the culprit and the motive" (11). She points out, however, that the historical evolution of policing and prosecuting brought adjustments to fictional depictions too: "When lawyers came to dominate court proceedings, legal combat ensued, and also a theatre of narrative, the different accounts of how a crime had occurred" (11). Mystery novels have been popular since their earliest appearance in the nineteenth century and were being dramatized for the English stage as early as the 1840s (57).[2] Certainly, the four plays under consideration here fit the definition of the crime narrative, concerned as they are with the gradual revelation of a mystery. They also display some flavour of the courtroom, as competing theories are argued and characters take on the language of prosecution and defence. The question of the "detective" complicates matters, since there is no representative of the law in these plays per se; rather, the role of investigator or sleuth is embodied by an interesting range of characters that are never entirely successful in their efforts. In *Blood Relations* and *Saucy Jack*, the investigator is an actress and therefore someone already operating outside the norms of social convention, a woman unusually free to take on the typically male role of the detective. In *Constance*, the investigator is an unnamed male and the antagonist in the play, a representative of patriarchal oppression who tries to force a confession from the accused murderer. Most intriguingly, in *End Dream* the victim and the investigator are one and the same, a woman on the threshold of death who mentally replays the events leading up to her own murder. These wide variations should not necessarily be seen as exceeding the generic possibilities of the murder mystery because, for example, according to film critic Philippa Gates, "A genre is a body of films that have narratives, structures, settings, conventions and/or characters in common and that are readily recognizable to audiences and promotable by producers" (6). But she also points out that, while

audiences like to see the same *kind* of film, they do not want them to be *exactly* the same: change and innovation are also important.

One thing all four plays do have in common is a private, indoor, domestic setting. *Blood Relations* unfolds in 1902 in the same family home where the murders were committed ten years earlier. *Constance* is set in 1944 in Miss Kaye's room at a nursing home and recalls the murder that took place at her childhood home eighty-four years earlier. While Jack the Ripper murdered his victims in a public place, *Saucy Jack* plays out in a private home on the Thames, "*the week-end getaway of Henry Wilson, a senior bureaucrat at the Home Office*" (11). The murder that is committed within the time frame of the play, the poisoning of Montague, happens in this domestic location. *End Dream* occurs in the summer of 1924 in Vancouver, at "*The home of Doris and Robert Clarke-Evans*" (100). *Blood Relations* and *Constance* have narrative frames that take the audience back to the time of the murders, while *Saucy Jack* and *End Dream* deal with crimes much more immediate, but all take place in one confined and confining setting, the one place where all the clues and evidence of the mystery must come out. The circumstances of each murder are inextricably linked to the conventional gender roles, making the traditionally female domestic realm an appropriate location for every play.

Blood Relations illustrates one way Pollock deals with unsolved murder: she introduces an outsider, someone who was not present at the scene of the crime, an investigator who tries to uncover the truth. In a traditional murder mystery, this would be the character of the detective, a figure of authority who eventually puts the clues together. In *Blood Relations,* Lizzie Borden's friend, the Actress, takes on the role of investigator and stages a detailed re-enactment of the events leading up to the murders that Lizzie was accused of committing. She pieces together the events and arrives at a motive much as a traditional detective would. The audience journeys through the re-enactment of the crime along with the Actress until the very end, when Pollock undermines her "detective" and exposes the limits of her ability to know what happened. As Anne Nothof writes, in many of Pollock's plays,

"The compulsion to 'know the truth' is sabotaged by a demonstration of the impossibility of knowing the truth: the ambiguity is fascinating" ("Painting" vii). The Actress does not learn what Lizzie did; rather, she learns what she would have done in Lizzie's place and we, as audience members, are left wondering what we might have done in the same circumstances. We have been led, not to the solution of the crime, but to a profound understanding of Lizzie's sense of entrapment in a patriarchal household and an oppressively conventional society. As Pollock has confirmed in an interview with Robert Wallace in regard to *Blood Relations*: "I'm saying that all of us are capable of murder given the right situation" (123). In an interview with Nothof, Pollock conceded that her play appeals to "the people who are just looking for a suspenseful murder-mystery" ("Essays" 167). While the play does work within those generic parameters, this appeal does not preclude those same spectators from simultaneously appreciating the sophisticated meta-structure and the feminist social commentary that *Blood Relations* also provides – whether they expected to or not.

In her preface to the second volume of Pollock's collected works, Zimmerman also observes the parallels between the plays under discussion in this essay: "Like *Blood Relations, Saucy Jack* and *End Dream,* which also re-vision historical crimes, *Constance* is structured as an investigation and moral inquiry" (iii). Zimmerman says of the 1992 radio play, "in *Constance,* Pollock produces a sophisticated and complicated 'why done it'" (iv). As in *Blood Relations,* Pollock introduces an outsider who plays detective although, unlike the Actress, this investigator is cast in the role of an unsympathetic persecutor. Identified in the script only as "*Male, about 40*" (272), the character remains unnamed in the dialogue. At her advanced age (she is over one hundred years old), Miss Kaye at first mistakes her visitor for Death (275) and later dismisses him as "a seedy newsman" (291). He has come to visit Constance Kent, who now goes by the name Ruth Emilie Kaye, in her room at a nursing home, in order to force her to confess to the murder of her half-brother Francis eighty-four years ago. Explicitly constructing himself as a detective, the Male boasts, "I'm one who's penetrated your disguise, that's

who I am . . . Cracked the façade. Seen through you" (291). The strange thing is that, as a young woman, Constance/Miss Kaye had already confessed to the murder and served a prison sentence. Upon her release, she joined her brother William in Australia and lived a full and useful life, including setting up the very nursing home where she now lives. The motivation of the Male interrogator seems not so much to confirm the confession as to provoke Miss Kaye into displaying guilt and remorse. In that sense, he continues the patriarchal role begun by her abusive father and continued by her bullying bishop, another in a series of men intent on condemning her as: "Obstinate! Proud! Sullen! Envious! Thoughtless! Thoughtful! Insubordinate! Rude Independent Assertive Fanciful, Contrary" (308). Miss Kaye does not confess again. Instead, she actively embraces the litany of criticisms levelled against her and tells her Male visitor to "go to hell." The stage directions indicate that her last words of the play are spoken in a "*strong and clear*" voice: "Not! Guilty!" (309).

Constance supplies an interesting example of how Pollock uses her source material for her own creative and political ends. Zimmerman has argued that Pollock loves the historical mystery for the larger use she can make of it: "The issue under investigation is not so much if the incident happened, but rather why it might have happened, how it might have happened" ("Anatomising" 5). Zimmerman notes that it is injustice for the victims and potentially for the accused that moves Pollock: "From a deep, personal core comes Sharon Pollock's sustained preoccupation with justice, authority, betrayal, self-sacrifice, the marginalised, the silenced, and the high price of both surrender and resistance" ("Anatomising" 3). These preoccupations lead Pollock to imagine the circumstances of the crime. In the case of *Constance*, Pollock takes the known fact that Constance's father was cheating on his wife with their children's nanny and that, upon his wife's death, he married the nanny and had another child with her, a son named Francis. From this evidence, Pollock imagines that the father in fact murdered his wife by poisoning her food and drink. On her deathbed, Mother struggles to tell her daughter Constance of her suspicions, repeating the words:

"Your father . . . brings . . . drink food . . ." (285). The elderly Miss Kaye takes on the voice of legal prosecution when she tells her Male visitor: "I state – that Constance Kent's mother, in general good health except for depression, died suddenly in great agony of an ailment diagnosed by the attending physician as an 'obstruction of the bowels.' I state – that Constance Kent's father married the nursemaid Mary after the death of his wife. I state – an intimate relationship existed between the nursemaid and father prior to the death of the mother. Does this set of circumstances – suggest – anything to you?" (288–89). The Male refuses to take Constance's accusations seriously, as did the Doctor at the deathbed who dismissed Constance and called her "girlie" (287). Pollock is clearly portraying a culture where the Father can behave with impunity. He abuses his wife and children, he carries on an affair with the nursemaid Mary and later, after he has married her, he begins an affair with the next nursemaid, Jeannie. And, Pollock suggests, he may well have gotten away with two murders: that of his first wife and that of his child, Francis.

Here we return to the murder Constance is accused of committing, the killing of three-and-a-half-year-old Francis. The child is found stuffed down the privy with his throat slashed, but the surprising lack of blood at this location suggests he may have been killed elsewhere and his body moved, and that he may already have been dead when his throat was cut. From these known details, Pollock again concludes that the father was the murderer. Miss Kaye suggests: "A hand perhaps, clasped tightly over a small child's face . . . To prevent him crying out perhaps . . . As Father and Jeannie silence him for fear of discovery" (303). Pollock uses the devices of the murder-mystery genre in *Constance* to create intrigue and tension, which includes the graphic description of the victim's wounded body and the introduction of possible motives among more than one suspect: did the father kill the child accidentally while quieting him and then stage his death as a murder to avert suspicion? Did Constance kill the adored child in an act of revenge against her father and stepmother, a retribution for their murder of her mother and their cruelty to her and her full-blooded

siblings? Pollock draws deliberate attention to the conventions of murder mysteries when the Male visitor brings up the fact that one of Constance's nightgowns was found to be missing at the time, and Miss Kaye responds with exasperation that could almost be humorous: "Why why why is there always a missing nightgown? Covered with blood no doubt to explain the absence of same. Were waistcoats counted, I wonder"? (303).

But *Constance* deviates from a more traditional murder mystery by remaining unsolved. The Male visitor and the radio listener waiting for an explanation for why Constance confessed are left unsatisfied. For Pollock it is enough, as it was in *Blood Relations,* to create an unjust, patriarchal world where we might imagine a young woman driven to domestic murder. As Grace puts it, "True to form, Sharon explored the story of Constance Kent from a fascinating angle because she was not interested in whether or not Constance had murdered her little half-brother. Instead, she wanted to explore the broader context of what might have led a teenager to commit such a crime and to examine the contradictory circumstances surrounding the case" (*Making Theatre* 318). Pollock's choices become even clearer when her version of the Constance Kent story is compared to another of the many considerations it has received. For example, in her 2008 non-fiction book, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher,* subtitled "A Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective," Kate Summerscale concludes that Constance did in fact commit the murder, along with her brother William, and confessed in order to protect him, to allow him to receive his inheritance and move to Australia to become a scientist. Summerscale credits the promotion of the theory that the Father was the murderer to none other than Charles Dickens (207). And most contrary of all, Summerscale uses the case to detail the rise of the professional detective and the simultaneous popularization of detective fiction. When considered against this other treatment, we see an excellent example of how Pollock has used the murder mystery for her own, quite different creative ends.

Saucy Jack provides another historical example for Pollock's creative treatment and, as in *Blood Relations*, Pollock uses another actress character to re-enact the circumstances of the crime. While the Actress in *Blood Relations* acts out of curiosity as a sympathetic friend to Lizzie (who may be a killer), in *Saucy Jack*, the music hall entertainer, Kate, has been hired to portray Jack the Ripper's victims for the perverse entertainment of two wealthy gentlemen (one or both of whom may be a killer).[3] Pollock has explained that "the end or objective or motivation for the re-enactment of the women's deaths in the play is not to achieve the death of the women, but to achieve some other end or objective that relates to the relationship between the men" (5).[4] The murders and their re-enactments are acts of purported loyalty and friendship that bind the male characters together as a sort of extension of their extreme social privilege. As Nothof writes, "*Saucy Jack* (1993) replays the murders of Jack the Ripper from a woman's perspective, to show the ways in which social systems and habits are implicated in gender crimes" ("Painting" v–vi). Just as the Fathers in both *Blood Relations* and *Constance* get away with whatever they wish by virtue of their patriarchal status in a sexist society, here the two privileged gentlemen, Eddy and Jem, live in a world where, as Pollock writes, "women are killed because they can be killed with relative or complete impunity" (5). It is a chilling vision of a world of absolute power familiar to fans of the crime genre, except that Pollock allows her women – Lizzie, Constance, and Kate – to escape alive.

The dynamic between Prince Albert Victor (known as Eddy) and his brain-damaged tutor and friend, Jem, drives the play, and as far as they are concerned, Kate is a mere object of exchange between them. Perhaps more than in any of the other plays under consideration here, *Saucy Jack* operates within the parameters of a conventional murder mystery. As in the other plays, there are graphic descriptions of the murder victims' wounds, but in *Saucy Jack* the murder weapons (two knives in a blood-stained case) are constantly and threateningly present onstage. Furthermore, the audience is fed a steady stream of clues about the identity of Jack the Ripper. From Eddy's first appearance, it

is established that he is good at "slipping away" unnoticed from his life in royal society (21). He boasts that he is also good at killing things, such as quail, "And other things, larger things, more dangerous" (23). Eddy himself produces physical evidence by removing two rings from his pocket, rings that Kate has already revealed as belonging to one of the victims (29). Eddy is the suspect and Jem attempts to inhabit the role and position of the detective. He tries to interrogate Eddy, asking him about his whereabouts on a certain evening, reporting suspicions he has heard, and warning that a witness has come forward (32). Even in his defiance of Jem's line of pursuit, Eddy's choice of words implicates him: "You mustn't try to catch me up. You may be smart, but I'm cunning" (31). The problem is that Jem has recently suffered a serious head injury, his recollections are scattered and confused, and he may also be implicating himself as Eddy's accomplice.

As the play begins, Jem is already convinced that Eddy is Jack the Ripper and, in order to protect his friend and former student, he has concocted a plan to pin the blame on another mutual friend, Montague. Montague has just been dismissed from his position as a schoolteacher due to allegations of impropriety with a male student. The insinuations could look bad for a known friend of the prince, but if he succumbs to guilt and depression and dies at his own hand, he can be set up as the deviant serial killer Jack the Ripper and take all suspicion away from Eddy. Jem tries to convince Eddy to go along with his plan; he insists, "You lie and you know I know it" (37) and stresses that, "We're all in this together" (39). But Eddy is evasive: "I've not acknowledged that" (39). Montague generates further suspicion that in fact both Eddy and Jem are involved when, already feeling the effects of the poison they have given him, he says to Eddy, "What do you think would follow if suspicion as to the identity of the Whitechapel murderer fell on one so close to you, Eddy? And . . . there is . . . certainly a suggestion that – a second individual may be involved" (57).

Despite Jem's pretensions and efforts to play the detective, he is far too implicated in class privilege and insider status to function in this capacity. By virtue of her sex and her class, Kate is the outsider in

this play, and Pollock positions her against the triumvirate of highly privileged men. They see the role they have hired her to fill, which is enacting the murdered women, but she is playing another role of her own choosing all along. Kate serves as the real detective here, almost an undercover agent, who listens carefully as Jem and Eddy reveal their plan, pieces together the clues, and attempts to warn their victim Montague. At the end of the play, she explicitly assumes the traditional prerogative of the detective at the end of a murder mystery and reveals the fate of all three men in her final summation. Kate foretells the future deaths of the three men, and then walks out of the room alive. While the identity of Jack the Ripper has not been definitively revealed, in this play at least, his authority has been negated by the woman who outsmarts him.

Pollock's most recent murder mystery, *End Dream*, is based on the shocking death in 1924 of Janet Smith, a young Scottish nanny, whose body was discovered at the home of her wealthy employers in Vancouver. As Grace writes of the real-life case, "the Chinese houseboy quickly became a suspect. The newspapers went wild. Rumours of drug dealing, drunken parties, rape, and torture filled the headlines" ("Art" 4). This was an era of overt anti-Asian racism in Vancouver, a time when, among many other measures, "Caucasian women and Asian men were forbidden to work in the same public places" ("Art" 4).[5] The Chinese servant, Wong Foon Sing, was abducted and tortured by law enforcement officers; tried and acquitted; and sent back to China, with the mysterious death of Janet Smith still unsolved. As Nothof suggests, "*End Dream* (2000), like *Blood Relations*, uses a murder mystery to interrogate notions of responsibility, truth, and lies" ("Painting" vi).

Grace notes that the unsolved case of Janet Smith has inspired other literary treatments, but praises Pollock's approach, which is to create a threatening dreamscape, to conjure up Janet Smith as a sort of ghost figure and let her piece together the story through her own vague memories. Grace points out that "in *End Dream* Janet Smith, the one person whose voice was never recorded – who was indeed a non-entity until she died – gets to speak" ("Art" 2). As in *Constance*, Pollock

uses the source material of the case to make her own points and to tell the story in her own way. *End Dream* is told in a highly imagistic and fragmented manner. Grace interprets it as "a psychodrama with many expressionistic qualities, presented from Janet Smith's unbalanced perspective in a series of flashbacks just before she dies," (*Making* 334). Nothof agrees that "in *End Dream*, events are collapsed into the final seconds of a woman's life, evoked through light and sounds as lived nightmare" ("Staging" 140). Pollock evokes a sinister environment of crime and corruption through inventive staging techniques such as sound effects, lighting, and spatial dynamics ("Art" 5). The characters in *End Dream* never leave the stage; when not involved in the action, they remain on the periphery, watching, contributing to a claustrophobic atmosphere of secrets and suspicion.

As a murder mystery, *End Dream* works through a series of revelations, as Janet Smith labours under false first impressions and deliberate obfuscation, and then gradually uncovers one shocking truth after another. Young Janet has been seduced by wealthy Robert Clarke-Evans to come to Canada to care for his daughter; their meeting in London was conducted in a hotel room, but Robert failed to mention that his wife Doris would also be in the picture. When she first arrives, Janet continues to flirt with Robert and looks down her nose at Doris, whom she despises as an alcoholic liar. Besides the surprise of her existence, Doris is also the first to hint that things in the household are not what they seem. She tells Janet that they call their houseboy, Wong Foon Sing, Willie, as a private nickname. Doris says: "A very silly private joke and you must promise not to breathe a word of it. Never never never! Not to a living soul. See? You're a member of the family already. Privy to private jokes and sworn to secrecy" (104). Doris goes on at great length about all the things Janet will need to find out about the household; she emphasizes secrecy and loyalty in a peculiarly insistent way.

In addition to misleading Janet, Robert turns out to be a threatening figure. Like Eddy in *Saucy Jack*, Robert makes it a point of pride that he is potentially dangerous; he tells Janet that she is looking "at a

man who's killed men" (133) in the war. As the play progresses, Janet comes to understand that Robert and Doris run a lucrative business smuggling drugs hidden in pieces of furniture and in suitcases, and that they socialize with the most influential strata of society, including the son of the Lieutenant Governor (127). As Janet begins to understand more of what goes on in the house, she moves from innocent to investigator, looking for evidence of wrongdoing and finding a handgun (130). The discovery of the gun, which changes hands several times and is used in a threatening manner, heightens the atmosphere of danger. According to Gates, there are different kinds of "investigative protagonists, the detective/criminalist who solves the case by intelligence after the crime has been committed, and the more active undercover agent, who infiltrates the criminal community and dismantles it from inside" (*Detecting* 7–8). Like Kate in *Saucy Jack*, Janet Smith could be described as this second type of undercover agent, as she finds herself working for criminals and trapped in their home and centre of operations. The scandal of Janet's death brings her employers unwanted publicity and public scrutiny. The Clarke-Evans's insider status is also why the case attracts so much attention, as the men who abduct and interrogate Foon Sing are eager to make an accusation against Robert. But Foon Sing sticks to the story that Janet committed suicide, and even when he himself is arrested and tried for murder, nothing is ever proven. As Grace points out, we still do not know if Janet Smith killed herself or was murdered; although her corpse was disinterred, a proper autopsy could not be performed because it had been embalmed: "despite investigations and a trial, a host of conflicting details, a number of possible suspects, and a potential motive, the clues were destroyed or covered up" ("Art" 4). Grace argues that there are a number of possibilities surrounding Janet's death: perhaps "psychological and emotional pressure" pushed Janet to commit suicide; she might have been murdered by the drunken, jealous wife; "or has some drunken party guest – the son of the lieutenant-governor of the province maybe? – tried to rape Janet and killed her in the process?" (*Making Theatre* 335). Within the context of the play, the most logical conclusion is

that Robert discovered that she knew more than she should about his illegal drug smuggling operation and silenced her, either by his own hand, or by forcing her to shoot herself, or – most likely of all – by coercing Wong Foon Sing to kill her.

Another murder mystery feature of the play is the character Wong Sien, an older Chinese man who at first seems to be peripheral to the action, but in fact is central to its unfolding. He acts as a business contact for Robert; he serves as translator during the brutal interrogation of Wong Foon Sing; and then he acts as interpreter at Wong Foon Sing's trial. In this privileged capacity, it is Wong Sien that tells the audience the grisly details of Janet's fatal wound, conveys Wong Foon Sing's testimony that Janet killed herself, and contradicts that verdict by showing us forensic evidence: Janet's stockings, the feet covered in blood. Wong Sien asks: "These are bloody stockings worn by person who shoots themself. At time of death person is wearing shoes, and stockings. How does this blood come to be on feet of stockings, if shoes are on feet, at time of death?!" (158). Pollock writes Wong Sien as a classic mystery character who produces evidence that appears to contradict the official verdict and who turns out to be far more involved in the crime than he first appears.

Pollock invents an ironic twist to the story; in another revelation, Janet goes from disliking Wong Foon Sing to begging him to run away with her. Janet implores him to get the gun and escape with her. She insists, "We've got to help ourselves Willie because nobody else will help us. You were right, it is bad business and powerful friends and what can we do? I know what they're doing, and I know what they've done, everything that they've done, and it's not your fault Willie you're caught, and the two of us here, in this house, caught in this house" (158). Janet seduces him in an attempt to win his assistance. In a powerful moment of simultaneous time periods, Wong Sien describes the exit wound on Janet's corpse, even as Janet and Foon Sing share an erotic embrace. But in a final betrayal, it is Foon Sing who does Robert's dirty work by killing Janet at his request. The play ends poignantly, with Foon Sing kneeling beside Janet's dead body; he says,

"I did not want this. I do care for you. Did you have feelings for me?" (163). In this interpretation, as in *Saucy Jack*, the woman's murder is an act of loyalty between two men. In that play, it was based on their shared class privilege, while here, Foon Sing's allegiance is an act of survival, a dependence on the protection of his powerful employer in a country where his race makes him horribly vulnerable.

Many worthy scholars have written about Pollock's work and have explored a wide range of topics, from her use of historical material, to her complex framing devices, to the autobiographical elements, and much more. But in this essay, I have suggested that, for the spectator, listener, or reader, a large part of the reason that at least some of Pollock's plays work so well is their adherence to the conventions of one of the most successful of all genres. Zimmerman has observed of all Pollock's work that "inquiry provides the play's structure, as well as its moral imperative. This is most obviously the case when the play is structured as a murder mystery" ("Anatomising" 12).

Ann Saddlemyer further argues that theatre is the ideal place for "the process of judgment, assigning responsibility for action, distinguishing truth from fiction, sifting the pertinent from the irrelevant," the discriminating audience serving much like a jury (215). In his review of an early Canadian thriller, Carol Bolt's 1977 play *One Night Stand*, Alexander Leggatt agrees that a murder mystery can allow a playwright to investigate bigger ideas. He writes: "the thriller format carries, easily and naturally, a commentary on the characters and their world" (367). Jack Batten further observes that mysteries demand "intricacy in the plotting, surprise twists and rational explanations – the eventual certainty, as John Leonard of the *New York Times* has pointed out, of 'someone to blame and perhaps to forgive'" (qtd. in Batten 4). Most explicitly, Canadian novelist Ross Macdonald insists that mystery novels are really about the search for the meaning of life, a quest for a saving grace (qtd. in Batten 4).

As feminist film critic Jeanne Allen has written, part of the pleasure for the spectator is the "tightness and symmetry" of the murder mystery form: "it is pleasure produced by a highly controlled 'imagined

world' representing the chaos of psychic and physical violence and disorder" (34). Furthermore, Gates points out that, "The detective film . . . presents a fantasy of resolution for social anxieties concerning crime – and, more interestingly, gender" (16). While none of Pollock's plays under consideration here provide the certainty or the tidy conclusions that these theorists suggest is integral to the murder mystery, they do leave the audience with a very clear sense of blame and judgement, and a strong sense that a kind of justice has been done. Lizzie and Constance, as accused murderers, have had a version of their story told that takes into account their experiences and clearly indicts the patriarchal oppression under which they lived. Whether we believe them to be guilty or not, we have at least been witness to their circumstances. Kate and Janet give voices to the victims: Kate brings to life the victims of Jack the Ripper, women who otherwise would have remained nameless and unknown, and Janet Smith gets a chance to remember and recount her story in a way the real-life victim did not. Thus while the murder remains unsolved in each play, there is definitely a sense that some theatrical justice has been done and some injustice exposed. In this sense, *Blood Relations, Constance, Saucy Jack* and *End Dream* are all successful murder mysteries.

NOTES

1 "One Tiger to a Hill" also features the murder of a woman and is based on a real-life hostage-taking incident in a BC prison. "The Making of Warriors" includes the murder of American Indian Movement activist Anna Mae Pictou Aquash. In both cases, however, Pollock's focus is on indicting institutionalized violence and the plays do not easily lend themselves to a murder-mystery discussion. (Sharon Pollock, "One Tiger to a Hill," *Blood Relations and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Nothof [Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2002, 77–151]; "The Making of Warriors," *Airborne: Radio Plays by Women*, ed. Anne Jansen. [Winnipeg: Blizzard, 1991], 99–132).

2 Today there are also murder mysteries written for the stage, although many continue to be adaptations. According to its website, Calgary's "Vertigo Mystery Theatre is the only professional theatre company in Canada that produces a full season of plays based in the mystery genre. Since our very first production in 1978 – Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* – we have continued to expand our boundaries. Our seasons include everything from the classic *Blithe Spirit* to the highly contemporary and critically acclaimed *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. Our loyal audience is also growing. We currently welcome over 5,200 subscribers who are

joined each season by 25,000 single and group ticket buyers" (www.vertigotheatre.com). Vertigo produced *Blood Relations* as part of its 2009–10 season.

3 Craig Walker shows that while the Actress in *Blood Relations* enters into Miss Lizzie's telling of the events, Kate in *Saucy Jack* is more autonomous because she is not coached by the men as the Actress is coached by Lizzie. Walker suggests Kate's role is to compete in preserving memories of the victims: "Kate is engaged in a sort of mortal competition with the men for the control of the past" (148–49).

4 Grace reminds us that Pollock's comments about the women as objects of social exchange between men are similar to the ideas of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and other theorists that work with the idea of the homosocial ("Portraits" 129).

5 Grace points out that, for example, Asians born in Canada were not citizens and not allowed to vote, and that the infamous "head" tax made immigration difficult ("Art" 4).

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