



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

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Different Directions: Sharon Pollock's *Doc*

Cynthia Zimmerman

I have long been intrigued by Sharon Pollock's most autobiographical play to date, *Doc.* Commissioned by Rick McNair of Theatre Calgary, it was first produced at that theatre in 1984, directed by Guy Sprung. Substantially rewritten, it was remounted in September 1984 at Toronto Free Theatre, again directed by Guy Sprung. *Doc* won the Chalmers Canadian Play Award, the Alberta Writers' Guild Award and then, after publication, went on to win the 1986 Governor General's Award for Drama. It has been restaged innumerable times since, including at Theatre New Brunswick, where Pollock herself directed it in March 1986; for that production only it was re-titled *Family Trappings*.

Doc is a play I find as compelling, intense, and honest as Eugene O'Neill's autobiographical play, Long Day's Journey into Night. Both plays are semi-autobiographical, fictionalized reconstructions which revisit a traumatic time in the playwright's past. O'Neill did not permit Long Day's Journey into Night to be published or produced until after his death. Sharon Pollock was more of a risk taker. "Here's how

crazy I am," she said in an interview with Richard Ouzounian. "All the characters [except Katie/Catherine] bear their real-life names." She explained that she had not intended to write an autobiographical play. It was originally conceived as a "study of how family medicine has changed over the years." Her father, Everett Chalmers, who died in 1993, had been a renowned New Brunswick physician who had a hospital named in his honour in 1977. "Sometimes you don't know what you are writing," she said. "If I knew I was going to delve so deeply into my past life, I never would have done it." As journalist Russell Smith remarked, it is important to remind ourselves that "the fact that it has autobiographical elements is not what makes it a good play." Real life does not make satisfying fiction: a play needs crafting into something significant for others; it needs artful structure, focus on interesting parts and characters; it must be both emotionally moving and intellectually insightful. Doc is.

Any good work will encourage multiple readings and lend itself to multiple interpretations. What particularly intrigued me in the case of Sharon Pollock's Doc was the empathy generated by audiences and critics for the character Bob, the neglected wife of the famous doctor in the play, Everett Chalmers. While he was the ostensible central character and was even given the title to the play, hearts went out to his alcoholic wife who would eventually commit suicide. According to Sherrill Grace, "The reviewers . . . showed little interest in any of the characters except Ev and Bob" (Grace 243). But my concern was always for the young girl caught between these two powerful combatants, her parents. It seemed to me that it was her story that had been overlooked and needed to be better appreciated. Given that the character Catherine is a recreated version of Pollock, and given that the memories reconstructed and revisited to make this play are mainly Catherine's, why weren't people talking about her? Taking the daughter's overlooked perspective as my main concern, I have selected two productions staged in 1984 and 2010 respectively to illustrate how directorial choices can influence interpretation. Directorial decisions are able to guide reception to a different focus and to a much-altered

understanding of what has just been seen. *Doc* is about a dysfunctional family, but the directorial choices influence where "true" meaning lies and where, if characters are to be put on trial for past actions, blame is to be placed.

To make my point, it is necessary to recall the specifics of the complicated plot. At the opening of the play, middle-aged Catherine re-enters the family home after an absence of many years. She is here to see her father Ev because she was told he had had a heart attack; she does not know that this is the evening before his biggest public triumph: he is about to have a new hospital named in his honour. As she comes into the house, voices and ghosts from her past come to life. Between the moment when she greets her father and the moments they share at the play's close, time shifts back and forth. Onstage are enactments from memory (some shared, some only Catherine's or only Ev's) and these take up almost all of the playing time. However, the play begins and ends in the present.

Catherine's parents, Bob and Ev, had both been the gifted and "chosen" ones in their respective families: all of his mother's hopes were "pinned on [him]" (156), Ev says. Bob tells Katie (who later changes her name to Catherine) a similar story:

And I picked and sold berries, and my mama cleaned house for everyone all around, and my sisters and my one brother Bill, everything for *one thing*. For *me*. For Eloise Roberts. For Bob. (162)

These two fall madly in love, and Ev gives up his dream to train as a specialist. At that time they are both rising to the peak of their careers: he as a doctor, she as a nurse. If he regrets or resents that decision, there is no mention of it in the script. He is charismatic, resourceful, and driven to succeed, and his star continues to rise. However, for Eloise Roberts, becoming Ev's wife and the bored mother of their two children, Katie and Robbie, is hard because she has been ambitious and successful herself. In her case, marriage ends her career.

BOB: . . . I think of my mama who cleaned all around so I could go into nursing . . . and you want to know what's worse? My mama's so happy I married a doctor. I'm successful you see. I made something of myself. (moves away smiling; lifting her glass in a toast) I married a doctor. (167)

She falls in love with "the shining light" (156), and then dwindles into his wife. Her sense of entrapment and depression become acute. She is a haunting figure onstage in a housecoat and slip, her confinement thus a visual reality. Alcohol becomes Bob's way of leaving a situation she finds intolerable: "I feel as if I've wasted something" (161), she says, but "There's nothing I can do" (181). Her creativity turns into frustration and anger. She becomes seriously depressed, seriously alcoholic. While Ev cannot be blamed for the whole oppressive system, there is an incident that might have altered the course of events. It occurs when Bob says she wants to go back to work, back to nursing, and Ev refuses, saying, "I don't know any surgeon who wants his wife on staff" (158). He denies her autonomy, declaring,

Look, you're not just an R.N. anymore . . . you're not Eloise Roberts, you're not Bob any more . . . [You're] my wife. (159)

Ev exhibits the same traditional perspective when he says to Catherine, "A woman your age should be raisin' a family" (142). His is conservative small-town prejudice, the conventional male-centred viewpoint of the 1940s and 1950s. In his view, a smart woman is supposed to devote herself to her husband and children. She has to learn the art of substitution: that is, learn to want the lot that fate has dealt her, but Bob cannot. She cannot be the content domesticated wife that Ev, like every other professional man, selfishly wants. The crux of the matter is that he does not want her working for one of his colleagues or taking orders from someone else.

Bob cannot see herself becoming a philanthropist; she cannot adapt to Ev's demands and she cannot leave the marriage. Thus Ev sends her to a series of expensive treatment centres where she learns various hobbies like painting and making gloves (161), but his plan does not work out. After several unsuccessful attempts, she will finally succeed in committing suicide. Throughout this time, Ev continues to be a workaholic; he is hardly ever at home and the children are left alone with their despondent mother. Pollock asks us to consider whether his neglect of his family or his absence from them were the cause of Bob's suicide. His friend Oscar tells him:

It shouldn't have happened.

She asked for so goddamn little and you couldn't even give her that. (194)

Ev defends himself at various points in the play. He says to Oscar, "I was an insensitive son-of-a bitch when she met me, I haven't changed" (175); and later, "Her problem's got nothing to do with time nor work nor any other goddamn thing" (186); and still later, "You got no more idea of what she wanted than I have" (194). However, Ev can also be charged with neglecting his children, a charge his wife would have to share since both of them, for different reasons, have been completely self-absorbed. The consequence for Katie is that she believes it is her fault: because of her they had to marry, because of her and her brother they won't divorce. In a moment of anger, Bob puts this to Katie directly: "Why would he marry me, eh? Why would a brilliant young man, whole life ahead of him, why would he marry me? Eh? Do you know why? Do you know!" (183). Although Katie tells her mother she does not know, she admits to Catherine that "Inside I do know. Because of me – and that's what went wrong" (183).

In the present situation, the prevailing concern for the adult Catherine and her father is the revisiting of this family crisis: trying to understand what happened, ascribing appropriate blame, and coming to recognize the inevitability of guilt. Even now Catherine continues to feel partly to blame because she had been so angry and empathetic with her mother (146). She cannot forget some of the horrible things she had said to her mother, such as "someday you'll be dead and I'll be happy!" (193). Ev is challenged directly by Bob for his mother's suicide, by Catherine, by Oscar. Feeling on trial, he asks, "Was it worth it?" Finally, in his last scene with Oscar, Ev says,

Supposin' it were, her death my fault, put a figure on it, eh? Her death my fault on one side –and the other any old figure, thousand lives the figure – was that worth it? (OSCAR exits). Was it? I'm askin' you a question! Was that worth it! (195)

And this IS the question: worth it to whom? Who sets the standard? Who pays for it? The unanswerable question is asked repeatedly throughout the play – a troubling, rhetorical leitmotif.⁴

More needs to be said of Oscar's place in this story. Essentially he is a mediator and foil. Ev's best friend since childhood, he, too, is a doctor, but one without drive, without ambition. Temperamentally the opposite of Ev, he admires Ev and pines for Bob. Ev says Oscar has no "gumption," that he's been "a pseudo-doctor . . ., a pseudo-husband . . ., and a pseudo-father to my kids!"(195). In contrast to Ev, Oscar's desire to help lies more in the domestic realm. A number of times we watch him fixing things: repairing a hockey stick (129), bandaging Katie's wrist (160), and repairing Katie's shoe (151). However, he cannot fix Ev and Bob's marriage, although he tries to. He keeps Bob company when Ev is away; he even takes her on a trip that Ev has arranged:

How often do I ask for a favour? Take her to one of those islands you go to, eat at the clubs, lie in the sun, and – Christ, Oscar, I got to go, so gimme an answer, yes or no? (pause) You make the arrangements, I'll pick up the tab. (176)

Ev is not nervous in the slightest; "she wouldn't have you," (195) he says. Oscar spends a lot of time with Katie as well, but Katie suspects he mainly wants access to Bob (159). A gentle and sympathetic man in a white suit, Oscar is often there, but always on the periphery. In the midst of these intense characters, he hardly exists. Interestingly, Oscar tells Ev that his mother "had the good sense to get out. Leaving me with [my dad]. How could she do that?" (147). When Catherine says to Bob, "why couldn't you leave" (179), it would seem that the question is arising out of her own contemporary context. But the inclusion of Oscar's story reminds us that an alternative existed which Bob, because of her own conflicts and character, could not take. Thus Catherine is making a statement and not asking a question. Confined, Bob succumbs; her resourceful daughter will be the one that gets out.

The issue for me is this: Pollock said in an interview with me that she intended the play to be about Catherine, about her journey. As she put it:

Central to the play is Catherine's journey, the discovery which allows her to accept the responsibility that belongs to her and to lay the rest aside without guilt . . . But because Bob is more present . . . I don't think the audience sufficiently realizes what has happened to Catherine. Catherine is the figure that has learned from the tragedy. (Zimmerman 90)

However, it was not only the audience that did not appreciate Catherine's story; the critics and reviewers did not either. Sherrill Grace writes that "Doc is very much Bob's play" (Grace 235); reviewer Marianne Ackerman says, "Doc is less a drama about the struggle between the generations than about the inner mind of a workaholic professional"; and Ray Conlogue, in his review, argues that "the remembering writer feels [Katie's] impotence so strongly that Katie – adolescent or adult – never really develops as a character beyond the statement of rage." Most responses focus on the moral and ethical quandaries surrounding the adults in the gut-wrenching tragedy. Who or what is to blame:

the constricting repressive times; the egotistical workaholic doctor; the self-pitying, self-destructive mother? This happened: how could it? Why? These seem like obvious questions. Nonetheless, Katie's situation remains completely overlooked by the press, just as it is by her parents.

It is common knowledge to suggest that dysfunctional families repeat. Consequently, it is interesting to note that this theme of the neglected, abused, or misunderstood, unconventional daughter also appears in Pollock plays that precede *Doc.* In *Blood Relations* (1980) and *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), the young women protagonists identify with their charismatic fathers, their birth mothers have died, and they are betrayed by the stepmother who fails to protect them. While Katie's mother has not died, Bob is not a good mother to Katie. In fact, the emotional and developmental needs of the young Katie are not met by either of her narcissistic, self-centered parents. Ev is never home and Bob escapes into an alcoholic haze. When Catherine bears witness to Katie's lonely struggle, she calls out repeatedly to her father –"Daddy!!"(169), "Do something" (170), "Help me" (171).

Analyst philosopher Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes about traumatized and neglected children in *Childism: Confronting Prejudice against Children*. She describes parents who are abusive because they place their own needs above their children's developmental needs:

At its basis, childism is a legitimation of an adult's or a society's failure to prioritize or make paramount the needs of children over those of adults, the needs of the future adults over the needs of the present adults. It is role reversal at the level of a principle. (280)

This mistreatment, where adults do not "prioritize or make paramount the needs of their children" (279), can have significant consequences. The child comes to feel unloved, a manipulated pawn denied the right to be who she is. In the text, it is clear that Katie's struggle is enormous. "People lie to me" (188), she tells Oscar, and people are always

pretending: "I'll pretend too," she says, "pretend that I don't know, I'll pretend that everything's all right":

You all say she's sick, she isn't sick.

She's a drunk and that's what we should say! (193)

She says she hates her brother, that she hates her mother. Later, she deliberately changes her name to Catherine so that it is no longer the same as her grandmother's. She does not want to be like them. When Oscar urges her to look out for her younger brother, she is furious and says, "I am trying to teach Robbie to look out for himself!" (162). Later, when Oscar tells her that mother is not well and that she should "think about that," about "How she feels inside," she retaliates with a childish outburst, saying, "I wonder – what my father sees in you . . . You're not a very good doctor. What does he see in you? . . . I hate you! (168). In her eyes, these people are weaklings. She insists, "I can do things for myself" (174). She wants to be like her father who "works hard! [He] works really hard!" (160), and who is totally self-reliant because, as he tells Catherine, "there [is] fuckin' little else to rely on" (173). She hates weakness and she refuses to cry (190). In refusing to succumb to tears, Katie is proving her strength, proving her difference from those who collapse, but it is very difficult. At this point Catherine and Katie share lines as Catherine's memory and Katie's experience merge:

CATHERINE: I'm holding my breath and my teeth are together and my tongue, I can feel my tongue, it pressed hard on the back of my teeth and the roof of my mouth . . .

KATIE: . . . and I hang on really tight. Really tight, and then . . . I don't cry.

CATHERINE: I never cried ... (to BOB) but I couldn't listen like that.

BOB releases CATHERINE's hands, and moves away from her. CATHERINE runs after her as she speaks. It's one of the things you can't do like that!

KATIE: It's better not to cry than to listen.

CATHERINE: Is it?

KATIE: It's how you keep on. It's one of the ways. I'm surprised you don't know that. (191)

This is Katie's way to "escape" an unbearable situation. Unable to get the nurturing and understanding she seeks, Katie refuses the same to her mother. Katie's need for attention may also be the reason for another form of negative behaviour. "I'm accident-prone," she says to Oscar, "Some people are you know. Accident-prone. I do dangerous things. I like doing dangerous things" (160).9

But of course rage and tears are two sides of the same coin. Both arise from feelings of deep hurt. Katie believes that they didn't want to have her (155) and that they had to get married because of her (183). Like Young-Bruehl's patients, she feels a crucial need to understand the abusers' motivations. Thus she keeps notes to help her remember:

Everything's down in here. I write it all down. And when I grow up, I'll have it all here I used to pray to God, but I don't anymore. I write it all down in here. I was just little then and now— (174).

The maelstrom of feelings – anger, emotional alienation, isolation, and a sense of abandonment – and the attempt to take control of them is the consequence for young Katie. Catherine remembers it well: "For a long time I prayed to God. I asked him to make her stop. I prayed and prayed. I thought, I'm just a little girl. Why would God want to do this to a little girl? I thought it was a mistake. I thought maybe he didn't know" (132). Her vulnerability goes either unnoticed or

disregarded by the adults around her. But Katie keeps track of all the chaotic scenes, and when the adult Catherine returns home, part of her healing will be to love and accept the cruel, angry and confused little girl she had separated herself from. The merger of the split self is clearly articulated in the play:

CATHERINE: You can cry Katie \dots it's all right to cry \dots

KATIE: Would you want to have me?

CATHERINE: Yes, yes I would. (194)

In the production I saw, this was the point of embrace. Catherine, in her thirties, takes into her arms her younger, unguarded self.

The goal of Catherine's journey is the healing that must take place. First, she must accept and encompass her childhood self; she must close that divide. Second, she has to come to a deeper understanding and compassion for her father's story. At the play's closure, father and daughter together burn the unread letter his mother wrote him just before her suicide which, they both assume, is an accusing one. In agreement now, placed close to each other onstage, they speak gently. But there is also a strong sense that they have come to a new understanding about the limits of responsibility and the limits placed on choice. Perhaps now they have forgiven themselves and each other; perhaps now they can bury the past. Speaking of the 2010 production in which he played Ev, R. H. Thomson said, "everyone felt it was a cleansing thing, a cauterizing of the still bleeding wound." The lights go down on the dying flames from the letter.

In summary, this play is about resurrecting the ghosts of the past to review the story once more. Has time distorted the memories? Has the past been reshaped according to the psychological needs of the present? This is Catherine's reconstruction: what happens to the bright, unconventional, sensitive child? As I have suggested, her story has been neglected and must be reclaimed. Her needs and her

experience have been sidelined by the parents (who steal the show); the script (because she mainly bears witness); maybe by the casting decisions; and by critics and audiences alike. Her story must be reclaimed because this IS what happens – in *Doc*, in domestic disputes, especially where children are pressured to take sides, in divorce courts, and by audiences and everyone else. It happens in art, just as it does in life. Is it "childism," as Young-Bruehl believes: the presence of those comforting myths that children are resilient, they won't remember, they won't suffer? Although reviewers have written about how this play not only brilliantly explores family conflict but also looks to "the wider context of social forces and mores which must also assume some responsibility for family events," there remains a dimension to this drama that deserves more careful attention – that is, how Katie's experiences and her perspective become Catherine's story.

Finally, because I firmly believe in the marriage of text with performance, the recognition of production's interpretative role, this paper includes performance images that illustrate my point. The 2010 production by Soulpepper in Toronto, directed by Diana Leblanc, marries the *mise-en-scène* and the *mise-en-page*. The Leblanc production makes a clear attempt to address the oversight I have been discussing by drawing attention to the importance of Kate/Catherine's role.

This is a "staged photograph," especially arranged for publicity purposes. The production was mounted at the Toronto Free Theatre, September 1984, directed by Guy Sprung and designed by Terry Gunvordahl. Props, costume, and furniture all point to a period piece. There are many props from the time: the coat rack, the vanity mirror, the side table, as well as the ashtrays, glasses, and requisite alcohol. Ev (played by Michael Hogan) is placed in the centre, facing the audience; the other characters all look at him. Catherine (Clare Coulter) and Ev are in the present moment, which the house program states is 1978. They sit at the front of the stage in dark clothing. The ghosts from the past are behind them, dressed in white. We note how young Katie (Henriette Ivanans) looks in her pinafore and saddle shoes. Bob (Kate Trotter), in high heels, appears sophisticated and elegant. A blonde



Photograph by Nir Baraket / Toronto Free Theatre, September 1984

beauty, her satin dressing gown, when she closes it, looks like a stylish dinner gown, a clear marker of her social status. Oscar (Michael Kirby) is placed a bit further back, his doctor's white jacket hanging from the coat rack. The stage has a number of levels, for playing purposes, and although this is a black and white photograph, the stage itself appears to have a black and white emphasis. Ray Conlogue called this "the ultimate memory play set":

All black with white perspective lines of floor-boards fleeing toward a vanishing point and ghostly doors and millwork hanging in emptiness. . . . It floats the characters in a timeless suspension and lends credibility to the writer's daring jests with time and space. (M7)

The Soulpepper production of 2010 was directed by Diana Leblanc and designed by Astrid Janson. These photographs were taken during performance. In this scene, Doc (played by R. H. Thomson) is speaking to Catherine (Carmen Grant). Her father seems defensive, with his hand placed on his chest as he leans toward her. They are placed



Photography by Cylla Von Tiedemann / Soulpepper Production, August–September, 2010 / Young Centre for the Performing Arts, Toronto

far apart, the physical separation marking the emotional gulf. Between them, with her back to us, is young Katie (Hannah Gross). Literally, she seems like a branch from Catherine. The designer, Astrid Janson, known for using texture, fabrics, and careful colour schemes, dresses Catherine completely in red which make her stand out, clearly differentiated from the muted colours—beige, tan, brown—of her surroundings. In contrast, Katie wears the family colours: an off-white blouse and a tan plaid skirt in the same tones as her mother's dress and the couch. Of note too is the dream/nightmare background (the set includes what is called a "ghost chair"), and the stage is essentially bare; there is no attic space, no bedroom area, no foyer. Furniture and props — the couch, a chair, a side table — are minimal. The large, open space facilitates the quick time shifts the play calls for.

The evocation of a dreamscape continues as Ev and Catherine bear witness to a scene – Bob's enraged attack on Katie – from the past.



Soulpepper, 2010

This is the point in the text where Catherine says, "Let her go" (190). Ev and Catherine peer out from the plexiglass structure the designer created, each standing in an Ev-sized opening. This Bob (Jane Spidell) is a markedly different casting choice than in the 1984 version. Spidell is a fierce virago, a whirlwind, a volatile force.

Finally, here is an older-appearing Katie, with her hair neither loose nor braided, but tied back. She holds in her hands the notebook referred to in the script. It is red and, strikingly, she is now wearing a red sweater. This Katie is becoming Catherine.

What has happened? The period piece by Guy Sprung in 1984 has been reinterpreted by Diana Leblanc in 2010, twenty-six years later. Not one word of the script has been altered, but the interpretative focus has dramatically changed. The original production enacted the times: it placed the inset play in the restricting, constricting, and conservative small-town setting of Fredericton, New Brunswick, in the

Soulpepper, 2010



1950s. The attitudes and social expectations, like the furniture and costuming, were of that period. In the Leblanc production, the focus has entered into the realm of dream and nightmare, into the revisiting of the past, so much a part of psychodrama where participants recall and enact the physical and psychological material of trauma.

In the Leblanc production, Catherine is vibrant in red. She is the only character who wears highly coloured clothing, and this, I want to argue, makes her constant presence onstage more visible, more palpably *there*. Even when she is placed behind Astrid Janson's plexiglass wall, she stands out. Alert and engaged, even when she is only listening,

she has moved, as Sherrill Grace puts it, from "a passive observer of the tragedy" to "an active, remembering participant" (243). She has been taken from the marginalized place of essentially silent witness and given a greater onstage prominence. This is where, I believe, Catherine belongs. In the house program for the Theatre Calgary premiere, Sharon Pollock says the play is "[her] personal journey of discovery." She called the play *Doc*, but it is Catherine's story.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Ouzounian, "Sharon Pollock: *Doc* a Taste of Playwright's Own Medicine." *Toronto Star* 18 August 2010, www.thestar.com/print article/849365.
- 2 Russell Smith, "Want to Write That Book? Read On." Globe and Mail 29 Dec. 2011, n.p.
- For an excellent discussion of the Chalmers family biography, including important facts which have been altered or omitted from the autobiographical play, see "Part II: More Family Trappings Doc," in Sherrill Grace, Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock, 234–49.
- 4 In an interview, Pollock tells Martin Knelman that she is a workaholic and that she is "baffled by the response of people who see the play as a condemnation of her father" (74).
- Early in the play, shortly after Catherine arrives, she asks her father about Uncle Oscar. Ev tells her that Oscar "was fly-fishin'. He slipped and fell in the Miramichi with his waders on" (144) and drowned. Perhaps Oscar was another suicide?
- 6 Marianne Ackerman, "Doc Prescribes another Tonic for Calgary's Booming Theatre," Montreal Gazette 14 April 1984: E1.
- Ray Conlogue, "A Highly Personal Drama," *Globe and Mail* 10 Apr. 1984: M7.
- 8 See, for example, Brian Brennan, "Pollock Offers Best Work Yet," Calgary Herald, 8 Apr. 1984 F4; Stephen Godfrey, "Doc a Superb Family Drama," Globe and Mail 4 October 1984: E5; Martin Knelman, "Daddy Dearest," Saturday Night 99 (Oct. 1984): 73–74.
- 9 According to Young-Bruehl, "delinquency is symptomatic of a child's unmet need; it is not a manifestation of the inborn aggression or wildness or insubordination that childists... presume exists in children and youths" (284).
- 10 Amanda Robinson, unpublished telephone interview with R. H. Thomson, January 2012.
- 11 Ann Saddlemyer, "Two Canadian Women Playwrights." Cross-Cultural Studies: American, Canadian and European Literatures: 1945–1985, ed. Mirko Jurak Ljublijana, Yugoslavia: Edward Kardilj University, 1988. 253.

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