



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

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Sharon Pollock and the Garry Theatre (1992–97)

Martin Morrow

The first time I encountered Sharon Pollock, she was in the middle of a fight.

It was early in January 1988, the year Calgary hosted the Winter Olympics, as well as its accompanying Olympic Arts Festival. As its contribution to the festival, Theatre Calgary had chosen to do a major revival of Sharon's 1973 play *Walsh*. The festival would garner national, if not international, attention, so the stakes were high. At the time, I was a young entertainment reporter at the *Calgary Herald*. I came into the newsroom one morning to be told something was amiss with the Theatre Calgary production. The company had abruptly removed the signs advertising the play outside the Max Bell Theatre. After an initially evasive response from TC, the company finally admitted there had been what it termed a "contractual disagreement" between Sharon and the theatre – in essence, they had locked horns over her input into the casting of the play – and she had demanded that her name be removed from the posters and all advertising ("Playwright").

That was my introduction to Sharon Pollock: a playwright with a fighting spirit who wasn't afraid to cause controversy and embarrassment in the middle of an international festival, if it meant defending the artistic integrity of her work. Within a few years, as the theatre critic for the *Herald*, I would watch her take on a much bigger fight, as she attempted to run a viable theatre company without public funding in a low-income neighbourhood a world away from the brass-and-brick "culture palace" then known as the Calgary Centre for Performing Arts – today's Arts Common.

This, of course, was the Garry Theatre. Or, as Calgary residents had known it for many years before, the Hyland International – a seedy porn cinema from the pre-video days, presumably frequented by men in slouch hats and trench coats, newspapers strategically spread across their knees. John and Oreal Kerr had bought the property in the Ramsay-Inglewood neighbourhood, on Ninth Avenue East, a strip otherwise occupied mainly by antique shops, dive bars and greasy spoons. It was a pocket of Calgary awaiting gentrification, and what better way to get it started than to open that most bourgeois of enterprises, a live theatre?

At the Kerrs' invitation, Sharon, multi-Governor General's Award-winning, internationally produced playwright, took over the old grindhouse and proceeded to transform it. This might seem like a task more suited to young, hungry artists than to a distinguished writer in her fifties – especially when you consider how hands-on the job was, but Sharon rolled up her sleeves and – along with her son Kirk, a.k.a. K.C. Campbell – did a lot of the work renovating and maintaining the building. You have to understand where she was coming from. By 1992, the year the Garry opened for business, Sharon had already been through two brief, unhappy stints as the artistic director of regional theatre companies: with Theatre Calgary in 1984–85 and with Theatre New Brunswick in her hometown of Fredericton in 1988–89. She had resigned from both positions when she found, in her view, that the boards of directors were unwilling to support her desire to produce serious and demanding plays. Disillusioned with the

regional-theatre model and its pandering to the philistine tastes of a well-heeled elite, she was ready to run a company in which she was not beholden to a board and where she could realize her ideal of a theatre that reflected the whole community, not just its wealthy arts patrons. Her goals for the Garry Theatre were clearly populist. “We want to do affordable, accessible and entertaining theatre,” she told me in an interview in October 1992, shortly before inaugurating the Garry’s first season with that sure-fire Canadian hit, *Billy Bishop Goes to War* (“Billy”).

Before creating the storefront Garry Theatre, she and Kirk did a dry run in what had been, literally, a store. They had set up the Performance Kitchen in a former Chinese grocery in Ramsay and presented performances and readings in its tiny front space. I recall going there to see Mark Lawes, future co-founder of Theatre Junction, give a dramatic recital of Tennyson’s poem *Maud*. In theory, anybody could just walk in off the street and grab some theatre the way you’d pop in to buy a litre of milk. That idea extended to the Garry and I saw it in action the evening that I attended *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. Along with a typical opening-night crowd, there was a rough-looking old geezer who could have wandered in from the nearby fleabag hotel. I encountered him in the lobby during the interval. He came up to me, evidently excited by what he’d just seen, and asked if there was more. Yes, I told him, in a few minutes we’re going to go back in for Act Two. I saw him again when the play was over, looking even more enthusiastic. So, was that it? he wanted to know. Or was there a *third* act? If there had been, he would have been front-row centre. This was Sharon’s dream come true: theatre literally for the man or woman on the street.

At the time Sharon founded the Garry, Calgary’s professional theatre scene was small but diverse. Theatre Calgary, the city’s flagship organization, had been in a state of continual identity crisis during the late 1980s, but by the early 1990s was sticking resolutely to the mainstream. Alberta Theatre Projects had made the annual playRites Festival of New Canadian Plays its *raison d’être*, but relied heavily on a wrap-around season of recent New York and London hits to maintain

its subscriber base. It and TC were in a constant, if unacknowledged, rivalry. One Yellow Rabbit, still under the radar for many Calgarians, was in the throes of creating its own signature brand of poetic physical theatre. Theatre Junction was just getting started in the studio space of the Jubilee Auditorium, where it was mixing off-Broadway fare with modern and nineteenth-century classics. Sharon, in fact, had directed its first show, a revival of *Look Back in Anger*. She had also directed a memorable and controversial playRites premiere at ATP in 1991 – *Final Decisions*, a political drama about torture by a then up-and-coming Argentine-Canadian playwright, Guillermo Verdecchia, which reportedly caused a well-known Calgary arts patron to exit the theatre in disgust. Theatre observers like me were eager to see what her Garry experiment would bring to the mix.

With no government grants and no agencies or boards to answer to, Sharon could program whatever she liked – as long as her company made enough to pay for itself. Its seasons came to represent Sharon's own tastes, which tended toward serious and intellectually stimulating drama. She did Miller, Shaw, and O'Neill, *Of Mice and Men*, *Equus* and *Agnes of God*. The Garry also became, as we'd expected, an outlet for her own plays, both premieres and revivals. With an eye to the box office, however, she also programmed a fair number of crowd-pleasers. There was a Canadian Christmas musical, *The Other Side of the Pole*, in the first season, and later on, productions of *Dracula*, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the Harlequin Romance spoof, *Nurse Jane Goes to Hawaii*. The efforts at light-hearted fare were invariably disappointing; with the odd exception, like the acerbic *The Killing of Sister George* – in which Sharon played the title role of a gin-swilling lesbian soap-opera star – the Garry didn't do comedy well.

Aside from Sharon's work, there was a healthy serving of Canadian material. The Garry seasons included the revivals of *Billy Bishop*, Allan Stratton's *Nurse Jane*, Anne Chislett's *The Tomorrow Box* and David French's *Salt-Water Moon*; the Western Canadian premiere of Glen Cairns's *Danceland*; the remounting of a fringe play by K.C. Campbell called *Headin' Out*; and the debut of a docu-drama, *Highway #2*,

written by Sharon, Paul Gélinau, and Janet Hinton, about the enduring Calgary–Edmonton rivalry. The work at the Garry that most interested me as a critic was Sharon’s. Running her own company gave her an opportunity to revisit one of her earlier plays, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, as well as to premiere *Death in the Family* and *Saucy Jack*, and give her historical drama *Fair Liberty’s Call* its first production after its 1993 debut at the Stratford Festival.

The first new Pollock play to be produced was *Death in the Family*, which closed the Garry’s inaugural season in June of 1993. Although it starred Sharon – making her Garry acting debut – and was directed by former Theatre Calgary artistic boss Rick McNair, it was a decidedly minor affair. Originally written as a film script – and in fact later made into a television drama – it was a rural-set mystery thriller with elements of both Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*. (Interestingly, Sharon had directed Rick in a mid-1980s production of *Buried Child* and would later stage *Of Mice and Men* in the Garry’s penultimate season.) If *Death in the Family* seemed like little more than an entertaining potboiler, what it did reveal for those of us who’d never seen her onstage was Sharon’s considerable acting talent. Sharon played the troubled central character, Renée Havard, a middle-aged alcoholic living with her mentally challenged brother on a rundown Alberta farm. I described her Renée in my review as “gruff but glib, a colourful recluse staggering about her dilapidated homestead in gumboots and lumberjack jacket and guzzling straight rye from a jam jar” (“Pollock Play”).

Sharon’s next self-penned offering at the Garry, however, was a far stronger and more disturbing work. *Saucy Jack*, which made its debut early in the theatre’s second season, was Sharon’s take on the Jack the Ripper legend. In some respects, it was a sequel to *Blood Relations*, only this time the playwright was less concerned with the murderer’s motives than with the lives of the victims. Using the same play-within-a-play conceit as *Blood Relations* (or *Hamlet*, for that matter), an actress is hired to impersonate the prostitutes brutally slain by the Ripper during his rampage. In the process, the identities of these poor,

neglected women are reclaimed. Today, the play reminds one particularly of Vancouver's controversial Robert Pickton serial-killer case. It also anticipates Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, in which she gives a voice to the marginalized women victims of Homer's *The Odyssey*. At the time of *Saucy Jack*'s debut, Sharon told me, "I think of all the women who die, whose names we never know. We have had a whole series of prostitute deaths in [Calgary] and their names are forgotten" ("Ripper").

Saucy Jack was terrific and I said so in my *Herald* review: "This is a haunting, gripping drama, abetted at the Garry by Pollock's skilled, understated direction" ("Ripper"). I praised the bravura performance of Jarvis Hall as the semi-deranged scholar with royal connections, who may hold the key to the Ripper's identity in his shattered memory. I still remember his performance, along with the striking one by Rae Ellen Bodie as the actress who plays the prostitutes, and the subtly ghoulish set design by Kirk.

Sharon's third new play at the Garry, *Fair Liberty's Call*, also proved to be the company's last production. There was an odd symmetry in that; during the Garry's first season, she had simultaneously been preoccupied with preparing that play for its Stratford premiere. Now Calgarians finally got to see this new work by perhaps the city's best-known playwright, in what would turn out to be the Garry's swan song. *Fair Liberty's Call*, a historical drama about the United Empire Loyalists, was the kind of tough-minded examination of our country's past that Sharon does so well. In my review, I described it as having "the intellectual vigour of all her best plays, that determination to use history and legend as a key to the present." I called her writing "strong in irony and stinging insight" ("Pollock's Dark"). At the time this tale about the bloody birth of English Canada in the wake of the American Revolution, which pitted neighbour against neighbour, resonated with the recent atrocities of Bosnia and Rwanda. Even with the Stratford imprimatur, however, Sharon had a hard time getting it produced elsewhere. She told me in an interview at the time that the artistic directors of Canadian theatre companies tended to gently turn it down.

“They’d say to me, ‘This is an important play . . . but no, I don’t think there’s room on my stage for it’” (“Play”). It was up to Sharon to stage it herself.

At this point you might be wondering how she was able to produce large-cast plays like this one – or indeed whole seasons of ambitious work – without subsidies. It was far from easy, although she and Kirk did their best to get the most out of their main asset – the theatre itself. From the outset, they offered competitive rental rates and sublet the place to everyone from touring companies to church groups. Quest Theatre, Calgary’s young people’s troupe, became a resident company for a time, and there were late-night and summer programs of fringe-style fare. Still, they quickly ran into trouble. In the Garry’s first season, Sharon hired professional talent represented by the Canadian Actors Equity Association. While they were paid their Equity salaries, the Garry wasn’t able to pay the benefit dues that were part of the contract. A portion was still owed by the end of the second season, at which time Actors’ Equity put the Garry on its default list. Essentially blacklisted in the professional theatre community, the Garry ended up relying on non-Equity actors and even then was not always able to pay them. The Garry didn’t discharge its debt until the fifth and final season, allowing *Fair Liberty’s Call* to be produced as an Equity co-op.

That handicap was sometimes evident onstage. It led to actors being miscast – more often than not, playing roles they were too young for. And the lack of a production budget could be embarrassing – I have memories of some hilariously inept special effects for *Dracula*, and 15th-century knights wearing 19th-century sabres in *Saint Joan*. There were times when, frankly, had Sharon Pollock’s name not been in the program, I might have thought I was watching a community theatre production. But Sharon also attracted some promising young talent and a few of the big ensemble shows, like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Of Mice and Men*, were surprisingly strong. Sharon herself could always be relied on to strengthen a show with her own not-infrequent performances.

In the end, though, running the Garry demanded too much of Sharon and Kirk and their collaborators. After *Fair Liberty's Call* – the high note at the end of a rough fifth season – it was time to call it quits. As Sharon later told me, the Garry “was sucking everybody dry” (“Pollock Feeling”). That it had lasted five seasons was remarkable. The Garry had been founded out of Sharon’s bloody-minded determination to buck the subsidized theatre model and still create serious and significant work. Ultimately, it took the dedication of a small core of theatre artists to keep it going despite insufficient revenue. If its chances of success were always slim, the Garry did allow Sharon finally to run a theatre her way, while it provided training and opportunities for young actors in the Calgary community.

Despite the varying quality of the productions, my personal memory of the Garry is a fond one. The theatre really did have a folksy, welcoming feel to it. Sharon often worked the box office during shows, while I remember Kirk simultaneously stage managing and running the concession stand. The place also had a youthful vibe. Sharon had gathered round her a bunch of passionate young people, hard-working and, yes, sometimes hard-drinking, too. I knocked back more than a few pints with them after-hours myself. In June of 1993, when I sat down with Sharon and Kirk to assess their first Garry season, Sharon struck a rebellious note when she explained what she got out of the experience. Running the Garry, she said, kept her from ossifying into part of the theatrical establishment. “It’s stimulating to work with people who, in a way, have nothing to lose in the theatre. I feel there’s more openness and frankness and a more productive exploration of what we do in the theatre, and how we do it. It forces you to constantly reassess something that you would otherwise take for granted” (“Noted Canadian”).

Professionally, as a theatre critic, my relationship with the Garry was generally supportive. I didn’t pull any punches when it came to critiquing the productions – this was, after all, a company being run by one of Canada’s major playwrights and deserved serious scrutiny. At the same time, I was quick to point out when a show was good

and to urge people to head down to Inglewood and see it. Over the course of the Garry's life, I got to know Sharon a little better and spent some of that aforementioned drinking time with Kirk. I remember a number of intense discussions with both of them about what they hoped to achieve with the Garry and the state of Canadian theatre in general. I was aware that they relied on my *Herald* reviews to pull in audiences and I attended every play up until the final season. That season, 1996–97, there was plenty to pull focus from the Garry – ATP's controversial staging of *Angels in America*, Theatre Calgary's struggle back from the brink of bankruptcy. There was also the city's increasing theatrical activity in general. For me, the Garry ended up largely on the back burner. My lack of coverage may have contributed in some way to the theatre's demise at the end of that season, but I got the sense that by then it was already running on fumes.

However, I was left with tremendous respect for Sharon and what she had attempted to do. Certainly, as a mid-career playwright, she didn't need to plunge into such a risky and potentially embarrassing venture. Yet she did it wholeheartedly. Where she might have merely leant her name and prestige to the Garry, or stayed aloof as an artistic director, she got down-and-dirty in its day-to-day operations – from selling tickets to even cleaning the toilets when necessary. That last detail comes courtesy of Garry guest director Christopher Foreman, who then got annoyed with me when I repeated it in the pages of the *Herald*. But for me it illustrated Sharon's incredible dedication to the enterprise. Sharon may be a fighter, but hand-in-hand with that pugnacious spirit is a pure love for creating theatre.

Garry Theatre seasons:

- 1992–93:** *Billy Bishop Goes to War*; *The Other Side of the Pole*; *The Tomorrow Box*; *Macbeth*; *Jack's Daughters*; *Death in the Family* (Pollock; premiere).
- 1993–94:** *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*; *Saucy Jack* (Pollock; premiere), *Agnes of God*; *Nurse Jane Goes to Hawaii*; *Headin' Out*; *Death of a Salesman*.
- 1994–95:** *Loot*; *The Komagata Maru Incident* (Pollock, revival); *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; *The Diary of Anne Frank*; *Saint Joan*; *Highway #2, the Great Divide*.
- 1995–96:** *Gaslight*; *Salt-Water Moon*; *Dracula*; *The Killing of Sister George*; *Danceland*; *Of Mice and Men*.
- 1996–97:** *The Lion in Winter*; *Equus*; *Scotland Road*; *A Moon for the Misbegotten*; *Fair Liberty's Call* (Pollock; western Canadian premiere).

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