

Honor Moore
Poet, playwright, critic

February - March, 1978:
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Book: THE NEW WOMEN'S THEATRE: TEN PLAYS BY CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN (edited and wrote introduction, a history of women dramatists from Hrosvitha, the 10th century nun, to the present) Published by Vintage Books, trade paperback division Random House 1977

Plays: MOURNING PICTURES (in verse, is included in The New Women's Theatre; reviewed in Ms. November, 1974)

On the basis of Mourning Pictures, I received a CAPS Fellowship from the New York State Council on the Arts in 1976.

Productions: Lyceum Theatre (Broadway), 1974; Lenox Arts Center, Lenox, Mass. 1974; and various universities and community theatres.

YEARS (in progress).

Poems: Magazines: American Review, Chrysalis, The Nation, Thicket, Amazon Quarterly, Hudson River Anthology, Sunbury, etc.

Anthologies: We Become New (Bantam 1975), The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook (Knopf 1975), Mothers/Daughters (Beacon Press 1978 Lyn Lifshin, editor).

Long Playing Record: A Sign I Was Not Alone (1978, Out and Out Books Records) with Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Joan Larkin.

Journalism and Reviews:

"The Lunch Girls" play review (forthcoming in Ms. May 1978)

"Theatre Will Never Be the Same" (Survey of Contemporary Women's Theatre, Ms. December 1977)

"Can You Talk About Your Mother Without Crying?" (Review of Womanrite Theatre, Ms. November 1977)

"A Raucous New Persona Called I" (Review of three poetry anthologies Ms. January 1977)

"What It Feels Like to be Dying" (Review of Michael Roemer's film, "Dying" Ms. April 1976)

"Word Puzzles Against Chaos" (Poetry review, Ms. April 1975)

"Permission Granted" (Article about the mother as muse; Harpers Weekly, May 1975; to be reprinted in Lynda Koolish's forthcoming anthology of women poets writing about their works)

"Interview with Charles Willie" (Interview with CW who left Episcopal Church hierarchy over women priests issue; Ms. Dec. 1974)

Forthcoming: Interview with my father, Bishop Paul Moore (for Ms.); Article for "The Writer on Her Work" anthology edited by Janet Sternburg; Norton 1979.

2. Honor Moore

Readings:

Readings of poetry and lectures on women and theatre: Nearly a hundred across the country including MLA Convention in NYC 1976, poetry reading with A. Rich, A. Lorde, June Jordan; Harvard University, University of Texas (Austin), The Woman's Building (Los Angeles), Barnard College, The Poetry Center (Philadelphia June 1978), Doctor Generosity's Poetry Pub (NYC), Chatham College (Pittsburgh), Hunter College, Brooklyn College, Boston University, The Bacchanal (Berkeley, California), The Intersection (San Francisco), Women's Interart Center (NYC), etc.

Teaching: Poetry workshops for women at the Manhattan Theatre Club (1976, 1977); Finkelstein Memorial Library (1976-1977), Henry Street Settlement House (1976), Chatham College (Pittsburgh, 1977).

Member: PEN, Poetry Society of America, The Dramatists Guild, Columbia University Seminar: Women and Society.

Board of Directors: Poets and Writers, Inc.; Manhattan Theatre Club (ex officio), Jenny McKean Moore Fund For Writers, Chrysalis (contributing editor).

Founder: Poetry at the Manhattan Theatre Club (now in its sixth year, directed it from 1971 through 1973)
The Summer Players, Cambridge Massachusetts (1966)

Representation:

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Julian Bach Literary Agent
3 E. 48th St.
NYC 10017

Play Agent: Audrey Wood
International Creative Management
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NYC 10019

*Came to multiple measles, chickenpox,
and croup.
Came to water from springs.
Came to leaning houses one story high.
Came to rivalries. Saturday night battles.
Came to straightened hair, Noxzema, and
feet washing at the Hardshell Baptist church.
Came to zinnias around the woodpile.
Came to grandchildren not of her blood
whom she taught to dip snuff without
sneezing.*

Came to death blank, forgetful of it all.

*When he called her "Oman" she no longer
listened. Or heard, or knew, or felt.*

V

*It is not until I see my first-grade teacher
review her body that I cry.
Not for the dead, but for the gray in my
first-grade teacher's hair. For memories
of before I was born, when teacher and
grandmother loved each other; and later
above the ducks made of soap and the orange-
legged chicks Miss Reynolds drew over
my own small hand
on paper with wide blue lines.*

VI

*Not for the dead, but for memories. None of
them sad. But seen from the angle of her
death.*

Honor Moore



My Mother's Moustache

My mother said I'd inherit a moustache and I did.
Hers she removed with green wax she melted in a pan,
a two-inch saucepan,
when the hairs grew too evident.
At fifteen, a dutiful daughter and fascinated
as well by my possible beauty, I bought my own
doll-size waxworks and inherited
my mother's ritual for a while.
I'd cook my wax, let it cool a little before spreading
it on; then I would wait for the unnatural stuff
(this wasn't at all
like candle wax; it never flaked)
to harden, and eyes shut, I'd rip it all off in one piece,
relishing the hot pain, the gasping pores—ignoring
the tears my eyes spewed against my will,
the cowards! The first time was the worst.
My peach-fuzz moustache which I thought too bushy
for beauty
was blonde and soft; wax would not guarantee new face
hair
as blonde or as soft.
Even my mother said, "After
the first waxing a moustache becomes darker and
thicker."
But, defying heredity and believing in

from We Become Kew, Bantam '75

perfectibility, I began,
new barefaced hopes throbbing through the pain.
It was hairless for a time. I waited, climbed on the sink
to get nearer to mirror. "Let nothing grow!" No luck.
Sprouts pushed through my skin.

I'd read of Russian princesses
whose lovers saw their moustaches as signs of great
beauty;
now I imagined singing mezzo at La Scala,
moustache flowing to Puccini, like
the dark diva who smiles with Björling
(Angel's long playing *La Bohème*.) I stroked my new
dark
hairs, vowed to keep them and did until pink powder
turned
my moustache orange.

I returned to the ritual,
waxing once a month, and it took me six years to rebel.
I switched to cream, a less utilitarian means.

The results were disastrous: It smelled
destructive, demanded more treatments,
caused pink eruptions near my mouth, uglier than the
hair.

I tried a second brand, two creams: one opaque, scented
rose for removal,
the other clear, an after-cream
to soothe the skin, prevent pimples. It did not work at
all.

I had tampered with the nature of my face. I yearned
to be fresh faced, windblown, organic
or even hairy. I let it grow.

My inheritance re-emerged black and stiffer. I
struggled to find it beautiful for myself and my heirs,
ignored my penchant

to see my image as bristling,
rejoiced secretly when the summer sun turned me
blonder
and my moustache invisible, and hoped for a flash,
a permanent paling, an end to
bouts with demons whose hairy fingers

would never quit my face and allow even two inches
of blonde lip. October came and diluted my tan.

In November my
blonde hairs vanished. December brought
back the brunette. I wanted peace and no hair. I settled
for compromise. I perform new rites of whitening:

On a minute white tray, I blend one
part "accelerating" powder with
two parts "greaseless" white cream, making sure that I
am thorough.

Then, carefully, with a tiny white spoon (both these
tools

come in the bleach box),

I spread the paste around my lips,
let it dry twelve minutes (no cooking, no pain, no mess)
while

it surreptitiously softens and whitens, lightens
even brightens the surfacing
memory, my mother's moustache.

Tirade

You cut my passion back like a hedge, gardener,
as you plant bulbs for spring and gas insects
with the other hand. You want to keep me
geometric like an English manor garden.
Someday the kingdom will band together and rise
up: Bees from behind, wasps from above, snakes
to poison, thorns to puncture. Someday life
will get itself together and bloom over
your never-mournd shaved English grave. Keep
keeping your nails clipped, forgetting to watch
and to wonder, clipping your hair, slipping
away in machine-cut rhythm. I watch you mister,
here from my hedgerow, eyes invisible, roots
underground, my leaves drowning in sunlight.
Drunk from rain, I grow and grow. Quiet.
I won't stay in line forever.

Conversation in the Eighth Street Bookstore

The man behind the counter is young and blond.
I ask "May I put up a poster?"
"Sure," he says, and hands me some scotch tape.
Proudly I stick it up: two big female names.
I return to the counter and browse:
Poetry, The World, a new Anne Waldman . . .
"Are you one of the poets?" he asks. I look
up and feel interrupted. "Yes,
I'm the second name." "That's terrific,"
he says. I say "Yes, I'm happy about it,"
and politely start to browse again—
"I read at St. Adrian's last week,"
he says. Interrupted again, I say "Good!
How did it go?" He says "That room is
sort of depressing, it's so dark." I say "But
how did the reading go?" "Pretty good,"
he says. I ask his name and we shake
hands. Wanting to be polite, I continue
the patter. "Yeah, St. Adrian's is
dreary; it has that awful mural. . . ."
He says "I know the guy that did it; he lives
on my street." "It's a perfectly good
piece of work," I say, "technically, but
it oppresses women." "Oh well," he shrugs, "it's
only art." "It abstracts those dancers,"
I say, "to a line of ink blot cunts."
"What's wrong with that?" he asks. "It oppresses
me,"
I say, knowing those are fighting words.
"I can't buy that," he says. I say "But
that mural shows women degraded, objects,
not whole human beings!" "It's just art,"
he repeats. "Art is very important,"

I say. "Art perpetuates attitudes by
perpetuating images." "I
like looking at women," he says. "I
like looking at women, too," I say, wanting
to escape. "But that's not women, that's
slavery, not people. Art is
about freedom. I want to see free women."
He breaks in: "I think you've bought too much
rhetoric and not enough reality."
"My feelings are real," I say boldly,
desperate to feel steady because
by now there's a small crowd. "I disagree."
"You can't disagree with my feelings,"
I say loudly. "I don't feel welcome
at St. Adrian's. I become one of those
women on the wall—a black jockey
on a lawn." "How do you know," he says,
"that some women don't like being stripteasers?"
"Maybe they do," I say; "I've never
done it, but they're still exploited." "So
are all of us, every second," he says,
"by everything." "I'm hip!" I say;
"I'm only pointing out another
instance." "What's goin' on?" a voice behind me
says, a female voice. "Where's she comin'
from?" Suddenly it's darker and I sweat.
I hear my voice quaver. "I'm talking about
my feelings." The man's white shirt glistens.
"If you were a woman, you might feel
differently." "I wouldn't," he says.

Note: *Poetry* and *The World* are poetry magazines; Anne Waldman is a poet; St. Adrian's was a bar in New York's now razed Broadway Central Hotel where weekly readings were held.

Carolyn Kizer



The Dying Goddess

The love goddess, alas, grows frailer.
She still has her devotees
But their hearts are not whole.
They follow young boys
From the corners of their eyes.
They become embarrassed
By their residual myths.
Odd cults crop up, involving midgets,
Partial castration, dismemberment of children
The goddess wrings her hands; they think it vanity
And it is, partly.

Sometimes, in her precincts
Young men bow curly heads.
She sends them packing
Indulgently, with blown kisses.
There are those who pray endlessly,
Stretched full-length with their eyes shut,
Imploring her, "Mother!"
She taps her toe at these. A wise goddess
Knows her own children.

On occasion, her head raises
Almost expectantly: a man steps forward.
She takes one step forward,

A MYSTERY

The fake tortoise-shell, long-handled brush I use to scrub
my back clean clattered from the tub's edge this morning
as I walked past the bathroom.

The brass plant-spray fell apart in my hand, and my French
lip gloss ("Frostberry") rolled across the sink and off
as I fumbled to load my

big blue bag that Thursday thudded from the hall table
but didn't spill. Often, frenzied, I drop purses
and once carried a small clutch

so what fell was less heavy. I've dropped Grandma's gold ear-
rings but not my mother's Empire plates, have been
lucky in movies and dropped

only hats and mittens. Years back I switched to dollar
acrylic hats I can't lose: No one wants one. They're
still there when you go back -

my Norwegian mittens weren't: They'd have glimmered bright
in the dust - cream wool, felt cuffs red with flowers. Once
as I cleared drawers looking for

my lost silver bangle, a cellophane package gushed
hundreds of minute fake pearls across the floor which
slopes - the house is old. George bats

them at night, alternating paws. I'd assumed him too
myopic to toy such tiny beads though he does
traverse the knick-knacked mantle

2.

A MYSTERY

never touching a thing, except at dawn when he shoves
breakables that careen off, crash, rouse me to let
him out: Cats like to wander,
murder, leave mice, whole or dismembered, communications
on the rug....

My thumb is bleeding. I chose a tumbler
with a jagged lip. No one
warned. They deny they knew, offer iodine. Close friends
have begun to hide fragiles when I visit - "...from
love..." And I, avid lover
of china and glass, though loath, must hone my taste to chic
Italian plastic while training to wake in time
to spare George his destructive
hike across the mantelpiece. If George breaks things because
he wants, do I? Poltergeists possess touchy young
women. I'll learn to be cautious.

Poem in Four Movements for my Sister Marian

Honor Moore



photo credit: Susan Rennie

I.

There has always been something strange about
 how gracefully six-foot-two you are, something too fragile
 about your gold skin that dulls
 quick as a smile turns to a mouth
 gaping pain. In
 California, between cold mountains and
 the black-blue ocean, you left your college room, moved into
 a glass house I've never seen —
 no roommates, your own space. Your first
 night alone, through
 the glass in the black, a flat face, an arm
 moving. Something splurts across glass, I am not there. You turn
 off the lights, see a man's bare
 legs flashing, running, disappear.
 You telephone
 a boyfriend, crack open the first ice frozen
 in your own house. Drink. Wait. He plays the alto sax, he has
 very white teeth, not teeth blotched
 like yours, neon-white, when some drug
 cooled an infant
 fever. A Mediterranean beach
 burning, you flat, gold hair spread, body going dark - when your
 mother died, you took your first
 trip across an ocean - sixteen,
 with a best friend:
 Italy, France, Spain, Morocco - she stayed,
 you blazed home. The acid North Africa sun did not bleach
 the stained front teeth, but your skin
 stayed gold for weeks. His mother is
 dying, she has
 cancer. A die-press crushed the father's arm,
 he can't work. The boyfriend, twenty and very poor, can't know
 what's hit him. You are trying
 to teach him and stay standing, but
 this cold first night
 your solitude is terror shoving,
 pressing in. You hear the bicycle, he bends through the door,
 hands over two stolen sheets.
 Together you loop a white curtain
 the length of glass,
 sleep. When you wake up wrapped in each other,
 you can't see the ocean, but you have forgotten the fear.

II.

Too fast.
 bones through skin. Two bones break, leave
 sharp points to pierce skin, skin turns
 dead-white, holes bleed.
 Bright sun or clouds or rain. The morning or
 night, you don't say. I am not there. A truck coming, curving

down a mountain. You riding
behind a man on a motor-
cycle, your knees
sticking gracefully out. Not the one who
plays alto sax. A party, a picnic, your hair pulled back -
maybe blue on your eyelids,
a scarf swirling purple on your
neck on the way
to the top. I am not there. Coming down
the steep road fast, the truck slips too close to the white line, knicks
your left knee, breaks the leg twice -
above the knee, and below it
near the ankle.

"My knee - skin graft - conscious the whole time - I'm
all right." I put the phone receiver back in its cradle
a continent away. All day
bones in my head press against
my brain: a dance
class on a beach, you bending, stretching your
perfect leotard-black legs.

III.

I sit next to you, watch your face,
avoid the leg:
two giant casts, steel-hinged together, skin
graft exposed, oozing blood, pus. You exclaim its progress
like a mother. "It's March, late
night cool, no rain yet . . ." you write from
Santa Cruz. "And
also, I want you to trust me." A man's
cracked voice sings stereo next to your bed. I watch your face
mouthing his words, "I'm easy . . ."
Trust you. If I were to look at
your knee longer
than an instant, if I were to swab clean
the square jagged wound like the nurse does with cool cotton, if
I touched your leg too long, if
I signed it like a high school friend,
that would mean I
accept, and it's too fast. Trust you. What if
that man that first dark night, after seeing you - blond, distant -
had come up the beach with some
blunt dark weapon, had smashed through
glass, your see-through
wails, had approached, with the weapon, you alone
in your own house. I did not see his face, can't look at yours -
the strain - as your long arms lift,
guide the weighted leg carefully
to the floor, then
grasp an overhead bar and trapeze you
into the wheelchair. "Something in our relationship is
confused," you write. "And also

I want you to trust me." How
do I trust you?
You let yourself break, leaned too far and broke
like a red amaryllis pulled over by the new weight
of its huge blooms. And something
else - we sisters have been a wall,
not against, just
standing, and part fell, and the man driving
the motorcycle broke a bone that didn't need a cast
and didn't bleed. If the truck
had jumped the line completely, you
would not have lived -
What is the strength of a woman against
a truck? Against speed on a road? There has always been something
strange about how gracefully
six-foot-two you are, too graceful.
What is the strength
of a woman nineteen against dark nights
alone?

IV.

Your thick green letter resting on the window sill,
the demand, "and also, I want
you to trust me." Blood coming out
of the knee, and
pus; the dark jagged outline of the graft,
your leg shrivelled to the shape of a bannister peg, you -
part of the structure of my
future - stand: image, evidence
that future is
vulnerable. "Hope you are well," you write,
"all my love." Once when I was a child clenching my hands to
fists at the movies, a drop
of sweat burned a brown stain inside
my left ring
finger. I felt the sharp point of heat, but
the mark surprised me. Yesterday, Jane, a friend not seen
for ten years, visited here from
Canada, left leg just out of
a cast. They say
she'll ski in three years, but she's a dancer . . .
leg smashed, a car's back fender, forty m.p.h., two months
after yours. "The leg may be
slightly shorter," they tell you -
I am not there -
"has to wear a lift, may have a slight limp
when exhausted." Blood vessels grow back, but can a bone stretch?
If the truck had jumped the line
completely, you would not have lived;
a year later -
the neon-blotches, your imperfect teeth,
you in my mind. Last winter when the amaryllis
fell and split in two, I bound

its green stalk with Scotch Magic Tape.
It grew, healed back
together - a slight lump, but from a distance
whole. And the flowers came - huge white trumpets with pink edges -
anyway. You at a distance
whole, but more complicated than
my idea of
perfection. The mullion's shadow, a line
across the green first page of your letter. I take it from
the window sill, there is no
shadow. Jane's feet rest, in orange
sandals, on the
Oriental rug. "Does it hurt?" She says
"I don't know hurt anymore, but I do feel it," and pulls
her long purple skirt to her
knee. I look, want to slide my hand
along the scar
blurred through the tight surface of her stocking,
but am afraid. Bones through skin, two bones break, leave sharp
points to pierce skin. You are
twenty. What you
mean by trust is letting go. How graceful
you are. Three thousand miles from here bones knit like stalks, a square
jagged scar is healing, a
chiropractor rectifies a
spine strained to the
left by the weight of two casts. You write "It
hurts less." When I see you, we will sit in the sun, your bleached
denim skirt pulled up, and
I will massage your leg, your knee,
June heat beating
down on my thirty-year-old hands, my veins
in blue relief, brown stain on a left ring finger faded.
Change. I will rub the flaccid
calf muscles, the dark scar streaks. I
will be careful
not to hurt. I will rub only the edge
of the skin graft, shutting my eyes, seeing it turn lighter
as the sun turns your leg dark
leaving, imbedded in your knee
like a metal
pattern in Moroccan wood, a jagged
silver square, impervious to ultra-violet rays.

Ms CONTENTS

DECEMBER/1977

VOLUME VI, NO. 6

THEATER

34
Ntozake Shange
Interviews Herself

36
Theater Will Never Be the Same . . .
by Honor Moore

ART

40
Woman's Art: "It's the Only
Goddam Energy Around"
An Interview with Miriam Schapiro
by Harriet Lyons

TV

44
This May Be the Year
To Stay Tuned
by Ann Northrop

DANCE



46
Dance Is Climbing the Walls . . .
by Jennifer Dunning
. . . and Taking to the Streets
by Amanda Smith

FILM

50
Coming Attractions . . .
From the Folks
Who Are Taking Over Hollywood
by Marjorie Rosen

53
The New Breed of Studio
Executives Talk About Power

DESIGN

54
Rethinking Closets, Kitchens,
and Other Forgotten Spaces
by Cynthia Rock, Susana Torre,
and Gwendolyn Wright

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE ARTS

EXPLOSION

Page 33

LITERATURE

Does Genius Have a Gender?
56
"Woman writer" has no meaning—
not intellectually, not morally,
not historically . . . a writer is
a writer.
by Cynthia Ozick

57
In each of my books, I "invented"
plot and characters, in each a
theme erupted that concerned
the struggles of women.
by Janet Burroway

58
What Your Favorite Authors
Are Writing . . .
compiled by Alice K. Turner

POETRY

60
Natural Resources
A Poem by Adrienne Rich

62
Unsinkable Charleen:
Renegade Muse of the South
by Lew Powell

POP MUSIC



64
Cryer & Ford:
Hang On to the Good Times
by Susan Dworkin

66
Platter Patter:
The Top 40 Music Moguls
by Steve Ditlea

67
A Revolution Per Minute:
Women's Labels
by Barbara Pepe

68
Olivia: A Vinyl Victory
by Lady Borton

PHOTOGRAPHY

Women Cover the Arts
In this issue, the work of . . . Lynn
Davis, Jane Elliot, Linda Gordon, Inge
Morath, Judy Olausen, Suzanne
Opton, Joyce Ravid, Marcia Resnick,
Penny Wolin-Semple, Martha Swope

THE Ms. GAZETTE

19
News from All Over

87
A Guide to all the Arts—
What's Happening and Where
by Cynthia Navaretta

DEPARTMENTS

4
Letters from Readers



10
Money: This Year's Best Toy Buys
by Letty Cottin Pogrebin

25
The Way We Live Now:
How Not To Save a Family—
A Social Worker's Diary
by Madeleine Wagner

97
No Comment

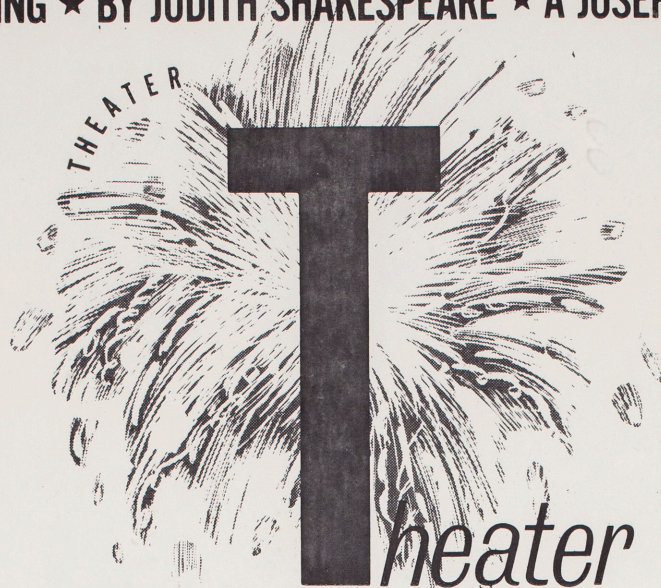
104
A Holiday
Poster for
Free Children

SERVICES

100
Ms. Classified

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Theater Will Never Be the Same

By Honor Moore

It's all right to be a woman." The Women's Movement inaugurated its own theater with that message in the early 1970s. Then the New Feminist Repertory Theater produced Myrna Lamb's acerbic play, *But What Have You Done For Me Lately*; It's All Right To Be a Woman Theater improvised requests from the audience; and Sally Ordway, Susan Yankowitz, Dolores Walker, among others, formed the Westbeth Playwrights' Feminist Collective.

But women's theater has matured beyond the exhilaration of consciousness-raising. Collaborative theater groups like Womanrite Theater Ensemble and The Cutting Edge in New York, Circle of the Witch and At the Foot of the Mountain in Minneapolis, and Rhode Island Feminist Theater (RIFT) in Providence create and perform pieces that range from the life of Anne Hutchinson to rape to mother-daughter relationships to women's spirituality, in styles that range from clown-show to farce to tragedy. (See directory on page 89 for more theater groups.) The off-off Broadway and community phenomenon that has been women's theater is inching into the mainstream.

Producer Burry Fredrik says it was "not by design" that the three plays she's bringing to Broadway this season are about women—two, written by women. *The Dream Watcher*, by Barbara Wersba, stars Eva LeGallienne as an eccentric old woman who befriends a young boy; *The Night of the Tribades*, a

historical play by Per Olov Enquist, is about the love relationship between Strindberg's wife, Siri von Essen, and an actress, Marie Caroline David; and Judith Ross's comedy, *An Almost Perfect Person*, directed by Zoe Caldwell, headlines Colleen Dewhurst playing a woman involved with two men; she is not, as Mary was 15 years ago in Jean Kerr's *Mary*, an editor of letters to the editor at *Ladies' Home Journal* but a former labor lawyer who has just been narrowly defeated in a bid for public office.

"Of the two thousand scripts a year that come into my office, twenty percent are by women—and more than a third of those are recommended for production by my staff of readers," says Gail Merrifield, director of play development at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater. "The scope of these plays is broader than it was in the late sixties—the subject matter is no longer political in a narrow sense."

Seven young women, portraying students at Mount Holyoke in the sixties, dance to a bouncy calypso beat. It is strange at first and then moving to see these women—who throughout the play have been competing, waiting for phone calls from men, examining a first diaphragm, wisecracking ("I think all men should be forced to menstruate . . .") "I'm having trouble remembering what I want . . .") and otherwise comically demonstrating white middle-class female paralysis—dancing together so happily.

Photograph of Zoe Caldwell and Colleen Dewhurst by Lynn Davis



(Left) Eve Merriam with the cast of "Viva Reviva." (Center) In L.A., "Sleepwalkers" bridges the generation

The playwright's choice of dance tune—"If you want to be happy for the rest of your life / Never make a pretty woman your wife"—illuminates that contradiction with poignant irony. This and other moments in Wendy Wasserstein's hilarious *Uncommon Women and Others* make me weep, not laugh.

After the play (a workshop at the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference in Connecticut), a woman director tells me she feels that Wasserstein's comic approach trivializes female experience. Another woman disagrees: "We have to have farce as well as tragedy about women's lives!" The next morning at the conference critique, a man says he thinks it peculiar that most of the laughter during the play was male. Later I talk with Marilyn Stasio, critic and conference-appointed literary adviser for *Uncommon Women*. "The reason the women weren't laughing as loud is that Wendy was getting us right here," she says, mimicking by abruptly leaning over, a kick in her gut. I'm sorry this kind of reaction didn't emerge at the critique. "I had things to say," said a woman producer, "but I preferred to talk to Wendy myself."

Women playwrights are a vulnerable minority. There are rarely enough of them in one place—three of 16 playwrights at the O'Neill, for instance—to constitute a context in which their plays can be seen in terms of each other's plays. What happens instead is that they are judged against men's plays or against everyone's ideal of a play about female experience. Nonetheless, Wasserstein says, "every writer at the O'Neill is treated with equal respect." "But," she adds wistfully, "I wish there had been more women playwrights because they would know what I was trying for."

A friend and I subway out to a park in Brooklyn to see Aishah Rahman's third produced play, *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird*

Dies in a Gilded Cage, done by the mobile unit of the New York Shakespeare Festival. She is one of several new black women playwrights. (*Cockfight*, by Elaine Jackson, opened the season at the American Place Theater in New York this fall—her first play, *Toe Jam*, was done in 1975 at the New Federal Theater on Henry Street, where Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* ran prior to the Public Theater; *Circles* and *The Tapestry*, one-acts by Alexis DeVeaux, were part of PBS's "Visions" series and have had theatrical productions since; and *The Sistuhs* by Sandra Sharp, vignettes of relationships between black men and black women, done last year at Cleveland's Karamu Performing Arts Theater, was held over an unprecedented 16 weeks at the Los Angeles Actors' Theater last summer.)

A jazz combo plays as a sizable crowd gathers for *Unfinished Women*. Kids run in the aisles, scale the bleachers, spit on people, shout. My friend, taking note of the excitement and small-town feeling in the audience, says, "This must be what it was like for Shakespeare!" The loudspeaker asks whoever is peashooting onto the stage to please stop. Suddenly it's dark. A black man in blackface prances center stage: "Ladies and Gentlemen . . . presenting. . ." He is master of ceremonies and introduces the characters: five young women, jazz legend Charles Parker, Jr., and a social worker who doubles as a European lady, his mistress.

It is the young women who draw my attention. Three are black, one Hispanic, one white, but all are dressed in identical pink sundresses, all lug identical oversize suitcases, and all—are pregnant! It is March 12, 1955, the day Charlie Parker died in the apartment of a rich white woman; also the day, by the playwright's invention, these five must decide whether to give up their unborn children for adoption.

Photographs (left to right) by Suzanne Opton, Jane Elliot, Judy Olausen



gap. (Right) Minneapolis's *At the Foot of the Mountain*—trusting each other with emotions.

"I use Charlie Parker as a symbol of the girls' absent lovers—his struggle as artist, jazz musician, black man, and his personal fight against drugs are reasons why their men aren't there," Rahman tells me. The juxtaposition of two unrelated stories is a risky experiment that pays off because the play is not realistic. "I'm looking for new forms."

Rahman's use of characters (who are also types), songs, and poetic language places the action at a distance reminiscent of Brecht—and of Adrienne Kennedy, another black woman who writes poetic rather than realistic plays. I have to "see" all of *Unfinished Women* by reading the play the next day: the Brooklyn performance, like many this summer for the mobile unit, was not completed. The peashooters and shouters finally overcame the actors. Happily, *Unfinished Women* goes indoors at the Public Theater in December.

"I want to produce a whole series of theater pieces about stages in women's lives," says Susan Albert Loewenberg, director of Los Angeles's Artists in Prison, who has expanded the group's work to include programs for ex-convicts and other culturally disadvantaged people. The second in the series is in progress: playwright Susan Yankowitz (recently in L.A. for the production of her new musical, *True Romances*, "a relentlessly heterosexual, white middle-class fantasy about how movie models for romance don't work") conducted a writing workshop for pregnant women; out of it will possibly come a theater piece. The first in the series, *Not as Sleepwalkers*, was produced at the Woman's Building in June and toured California this fall.

Sleepwalkers was a collaboration among novelist and poet Deena Metzger, director Jeremy Blahnik, and 12 women. "Jeremy and I were trying to figure out how to facilitate a writing workshop for aged women," Metzger recalls. "We thought if we brought

women in their twenties together with women over sixty-five, something would happen." Each of the six older women was paired with a younger woman who was responsible for writing her life history and providing her with transportation to and from class. "We started with the given that the older women are guardians of women's culture, tribal elders to whom we don't usually pay attention. They were charged with creating an initiation ritual for the younger women, who in turn were to invent a ritual to empower the older women as tribal elders." Independently each group decided that hearing secrets from the other would be effective rituals.

The theater piece is the story of the process of forming the relationships and of telling the secrets. Reading *Not as Sleepwalkers* was for me profoundly moving, so powerful and courageous are the perceptions and admissions, so delicate the language (all classes were taped—its text was culled from what was written by the women and transcribed from the tapes). The final speech gives a sense of its tone: Denise, one of the young women, says, "I wrote 'There is something that I have always wanted to tell you' four times before it finally came out. The something that I wanted to tell you, older women, is that I don't think that I ever really loved anybody in my family, actually really loved anyone in my family, except for my grandmother. And everything leads from that."

Likewise the material for *Womanrite's Daughters* came consciously from the lives of the group's members (see *Ms.*, November, 1977); the source of Megan Terry's *Babes in the Bighouse* was interviews she and other members of the Omaha Magic Theater had with convicts, and Deborah Fortson's mime piece, *Baggage*, had its source in her own pregnancy and mothering. Last summer, women from two feminist theater groups, The Caravan Theater of Cambridge

(continued on page 74)

and *At the Foot of the Mountain* from Minneapolis, came together for a month at Maiden Rock Farm in Wisconsin to exchange skills and work on pieces about mothers and daughters.

"From the start, there was a question about whether the priority should be theater work or the emotional work of building a community," says Bobbi Ausubel of Caravan. "We tried to honor each other with our emotions." Feelings and skills were shared, but the piece the groups performed together at the end of the month was not about mothers and

As one producer put it, "I do men's plays to get funding."

daughters, but about their time at Maiden Rock—a piece, like *Sleepwalkers*, about the healing of divisions and the caring for children.

Negative reviews for the 1970 off-Broadway production of her first play, *The Nest* (about three female roommates), and difficulty in getting her second produced (*Birth and After Birth*, a threateningly bold farce about a couple and their four-year-old) has not discouraged Tina Howe from writing—"I get furious, and that makes me even more determined"—but she did switch subject matter. Her latest work, *Museum*, successfully produced at the Los Angeles Actors' Theater is "about the ambiguities of modern art and the amazing behavior of people who come to look at it." Adds Howe: "*Museum* has nothing to do with women—I wanted my work to get done!"

Despite the disclaimer, *Museum* is a good example of the kind of theater that women are exploring. It is choral in form; it has no protagonist. In collaborative pieces like *Sleepwalkers*, one reason for the choral form is obvious: as Dinah Leavitt of the Boulder Feminist Theater put it, "Each woman writes herself an equal part."

Some of these choral works are musicals like Elizabeth Swados's *Nightclub Cantata*, Eve Merriam's *Viva Reviva* and *The Club*, Sarah Kernochan's forthcoming *Pranks for Warped Children*, and Myrna Lamb's work in progress, *Mother Ann*, about the 18th-century mystic and founder of the Shakers. Lamb's opera, with music by Nicholas Meyers, will have a chorus of Shakers. Other works, like Susan

Griffin's *Voices* and Shange's *Colored Girls* . . . are written in poetry for female voices and have no conventional plot. Still others are plays with several or at least a duet of female main characters: Megan Terry's *Babes in the Bighouse*, Liz Stearns's adaptation of Kathy Kahn's book, *Hillbilly Women*, *Unfinished Women*, *Uncommon Women*, Leigh Curran's *Lunch Girls* (about seven waitresses in a Manhattan key club), and Anne Burr's play in progress, *Solid State* (about two elderly sisters who live together).

Perhaps these works are merely reflecting the revelation of consciousness-raising that one woman's experience is not unique, or perhaps women are simply dazzled by the spectacle of a group of women on stage. For me, these forms represent an antihierarchical move away from the male-invented "leading lady" isolated in her predicament, and a return to the all-female chorus which some scholars claim may have preceded the male chorus of Greek tragedy.

But the chorus is only one common thread. Many plays by women do have a leading character, but she is usually not a "lady." Susan Miller's *Flux* embodies several of the qualities I see characterizing women's plays now. Dina, one of her characters, "talks dirty," but she is not defined by her language as are some male-invented female characters. It's just that she, like many of us, uses such language in daily life. Like many other plays by women that have one main character, *Flux* takes place in the past and the present, and inside and outside the leading character's head (as she struggles with her work, with contradictory impulses in a romance with an older woman, and with a former professor who functions as a sort of internal censor).

As do characters in many of these plays, *Flux*'s protagonist sometimes addresses the audience. In Francine Stone's *Dead Sure*, a young mother, whose psychotic husband holds her children hostage threatening to kill them if she doesn't return to him, is often interrupted by a memory, fear, or dream that she tells to the audience—moments which director Carole Rothman underscored beautifully (in a recent New York workshop production) by catching the mother's face in a spot of light and darkening the rest of the stage.

Other playwrights divide a character into several selves to dramatize internal conflict. In Ruth Wolff's *Abdication*, Princess Christina is haunted by her younger selves, Chris and Tina, who appear to enact scenes from her past, and in Loretta Lotman's *Pearls That Coalesce*, three actresses portray different aspects of a young woman who is coming to terms with her lesbianism. Still other characters have hallucinations that are dramatized. In Corinne Jacker's *Bits and Pieces*, a dead husband returns to taunt his mourning wife, often to comic effect.

For many women directors and playwrights, ac-

tivism is just as important as aesthetics. Nancy Rhodes, a young professional director and graduate of New York University School of the Arts, is one of a group of women called Action for Women in Theater (AWT), who recently published "A Study on Employment Discrimination Against Women Playwrights and Directors in Non-Profit Theaters." Having been repeatedly told that there were "not many qualified women to choose from, one or two perhaps" for a play she was producing, Rhodes gathered approximately 60 names of experienced women directors in three weeks.

AWT has surveyed 43 nonprofit theaters across the country that receive more than \$50,000 a year in grants. For the 1969-70 through the 1975-76 seasons, only 7 percent of directors hired and 7 percent of the playwrights whose works were produced were women. There was no appreciable increase in the number of women playwrights or directors over the seven years except at the Mark Taper Forum Lab, the experimental workshop division of the Los Angeles regional theater. According to the report: "The women who . . . had been involved in a workshop situation never seemed to receive the usual promotion to directing major productions. . . . Once in the assistant director / workshop category, their careers, unlike those of their male counterparts, reached a dead end."

Lynne Meadow, who directed the highly acclaimed *Ashes* last season at the Public Theater, maintains that if she had not become producer of her own theater (the Manhattan Theater Club), "nobody would have hired me." Ellen Sandler, an actress who also directs, knows that it will be difficult for her to move from off-off to on Broadway. "When producers think in mainstream terms, they see playwrights and directors as men."

"It is the women producers who have to take the chance and hire women," Carole Rothman says, referring to the fact that the percentage of women hired by the Arena Stage in Washington and Stage West in Massachusetts, both of which are run by women, is no higher than the average. She also suggests a women's equivalent to the Negro Ensemble Company—founded in the sixties to produce black plays and to hire and train black directors. At least one women's theater is trying to fill this role: "Our policy is to bring women theater artists to the attention of the public," says Margot Lewitin, artistic director of New York's Interart Theater.

But like virtually every women's theater organization I've come in contact with, the Interart cannot get sufficient funding to pay competitive salaries or to mount the number of quality productions they wish to. All these groups feel they would get more money from both the government and the private sector if they weren't women. Andrea Balis reports that her group, The Cutting Edge, lost grants when it became all female. And the woman producer of another

theater says, only half in jest, "I do men's plays to get funding."

The funding crisis and employment discrimination hold women back in the same way. In order to develop and reach larger audiences with their work, women playwrights and directors need to be hired beyond the workshop stage. Martha Boesing, of Minneapolis's At the Foot of the Mountain Feminist Theater, speaks for many of the collaborative groups when she says, "We're very young—the only way we're going to get *really* good is to be able to go off and work for long periods of time in our own space on salary."

Action for Women in Theater has taken its case to the National Endowment for the Arts, which they hope will put pressure on theaters that receive federal funds. These theaters can be urged to hire more women directors and produce more women's plays. AWT has also assembled lists of women directors around the country and has begun to collect scripts for a women's play bank.

Despite their poverty, groups like At the Foot of the Mountain continue to produce work and to mature. This encourages and inspires me, as does the fact that women in theater are working together to change conditions. Though some of the women in AWT feel their action may adversely affect their employment opportunities, they are taking the chance because, as Carole Rothman says, "Even if it doesn't help us, it will pay off for women all over the country."

Lenox, Massachusetts:

The stage is bare except for one young woman. This is *Viva Reviva*, a new musical by Eve Merriam and Amy D. Rubin that Merriam calls "a second look at some classic situations." Hamlet has left. Ophelia bends over the stream, sings the famous lines "Good night, ladies. / Good night sweet ladies," and then drowns herself. After a silence, she sits up: "As I went under / my whole life flashed before me and I saw / I had always been going down / I had always volunteered to be under . . . / I was drowning myself for nothing . . ." Then she stands and moves toward us, "I . . . ripped off the sentimental garland of flowers . . . / and like the first creature emerging from the sea on the first morning of the world / I gasped upon the shore / began to crawl, stood upright, and walked naked, solitary, free."

The classic stage suicide, archetypal image for nearly five centuries of ingenues, has risen from the dead. The mirror of theater history has cracked and we are on the other side.

Honor Moore, a poet and playwright, is the author of "Mourning Pictures," which was developed in a workshop at the Lenox Arts Center before going to Broadway in 1974. She edited "The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary American Women," published in May by Vintage Books.