
Joyce Williams O'rourke

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/4525

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

The most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript from the microfilm master. UMI films the original text directly from the copy submitted. Thus, some dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from a computer printer.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyrighted material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each oversize page is available as one exposure on a standard 35 mm slide or as a 17" × 23" black and white photographic print for an additional charge.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. 35 mm slides or 6" × 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
New female playwrights in the American theatre, 1973–83: A critical analysis of thought in selected plays

O'Rourke, Joyce Williams, Ph.D.
The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1988

Copyright ©1989 by O'Rourke, Joyce Williams. All rights reserved.
NEW FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE, 1973-83: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOUGHT IN SELECTED PLAYS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Speech Communication, Theatre, and Communication Disorders

by

Joyce Williams O'Rourke
B.A., Talladega College, 1962
M.A., University of Alabama, 1968
May 1988
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special appreciation is extended to Dr. Bill Harbin, my advisor, for his invaluable guidance, inspiration and patience in directing this dissertation. For their encouragement and scholarly example, I offer thanks to several LSU professors: Drs. Gresdna Doty, Harold Mixon, Mary Frances Hopkins, Francine Merritt, Fabian Gudas, Owen Peterson, and H. B. Rothschild. Among the many supportive friends, I am particularly grateful to Dr. Anway Jones, Joe Harvey, and Paula Thompson. Special thanks to Dr. John Pennybacker for "giving me the chance." I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my family: to my mother, Mrs. Rheuhama F. Williams, who never lost sight of my dream; to my own children, Yolanda, Sancerie and Kenneth Jr., who constantly inspired me to become an appropriate role model; and finally to my dear husband, Kenneth, for all that he is, all that he has been and all that he has given me. Many thanks are due, but I humbly dedicate this dissertation to Dr. Waldo Braden, my adopted mentor.
# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................ ii

ABSTRACT ........................................................ iv

INTRODUCTION ..................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: A LINK WITH THE PAST: Rosalyn Drexler ... 26
Rosalyn Drexler, Mary Gallagher, and Tina Howe

CHAPTER TWO: THREE VARIED VISIONS OF THE PRESENT ..... 83
IMPULSE: Lavonne Mueller, Adele Shank, and Wendy Wasserstein

CHAPTER THREE: TOWARD UNIVERSAL FEMALE TYPES .... 171
Ntozake Shange and Others

CHAPTER FOUR: TWO PULITZER PRIZE RECIPIENTS .... 212
Beth Henley and Marsha Norman

CONCLUSION: PROJECTIONS, PATTERNS, AND NEW DIRECTIONS .... 250

APPENDIX A ....................................................... 260

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED .................................. 262

VITA ................................................................. 270
ABSTRACT

Historically, the female playwright has been plagued by a lack of visibility. Long hindered by a limited number of women writers as role models, by the few receptive stages on which to mount or test their works, and by a public accustomed to a male dominated stage practice, female playwrights nevertheless in the last two decades have produced an extraordinary body of work, signifying a new thrust in the American theatre. Ten playwrights have been selected as representatives of this movement: Tina Howe, Rosalyn Drexler, Rose Goldemberg, Mary Gallagher, Adele Shank, Lavonne Mueller, Wendy Wasserstein, Ntozake Shange, Beth Henley and Marsha Norman. These innovative and prolific writers have invigorated the American stage and influenced their contemporaries, both male and female; two of them received Pulitzer Prizes. Since these playwrights were themselves influenced by preceding pioneers, their predecessors are examined to indicate the continuity of a phenomenal movement in drama. Similarly, the study acknowledges lesser known writers of their own era.

As a collective, the ten female writers represent the creative impulse of the 80's. Each has a distinctive body of plays, has had works produced in a major theatre setting, and was significantly productive during the decade of 1973-83.
The individual plays of the ten writers have been examined in terms of thought, as delineated among Aristotle's six elements of drama and interpreted further by Oscar Brockett. My objective has been to focus upon ideas, themes, objectives, and trends peculiar to these particular writers or applicable to an even larger collective of contemporary female playwrights. Each playwright has her unique vision, concerns, and style, presenting varying interpretations of human action and of the female in particular in her social, political, and artistic roles. The quest for familial bonds and individual autonomy emerge as constant themes among the selected plays. Despite the diversity, this study clearly celebrates the onset of a growing number of female playwrights in the mainstream of American theatre, and, as such, it adds to the scant critical dialogue available on American women dramatists who significantly contributed to the evolving drama during 1973–1983.
NEW FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE, 1973-83: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THOUGHT IN SELECTED PLAYS

Introduction

Male dominance in our American culture and in the theatre has perpetuated a "venerable tradition of prejudice against women in the theatre."¹ Female playwrights have had limited representation in traditional anthologies; their plays, compared to works by male playwrights, have been less likely to be produced. Critics, most of whom are male, often have expressed difficulty in understanding the feminine point of view. Moreover, for centuries, women have tended to view themselves as less creative in the arts, less powerful and less important than men in seats of influence.² Margaret Lamb aptly has said: "The theatre has always been mired in the swamp of particular social, political, and psychological circumstance; and it has often been closely associated with sex, one way or another."³

The proliferation of American female dramatists during the decade of 1973-83 challenges the tradition of female impotency in playwriting; indeed, it provides, as critic Mel Gussow notes, one of "the most encouraging and auspicious" developments in current American drama.⁴ What has generated the new wave of female writers? Their emergence in remarkable number can be attributed to several exceptional circumstances, most of which resulted from the revolutionary
feminist movement that gathered strength in the 1960s. Over the last decade, women have steadily assumed more roles of authority and creativity in all areas of the theatre; women writers, performers, producers, directors, costume and lighting designers have met less resistance and become more prominently visible. Playwrights' workshops and grant-awarding foundations have aided the women's cause; and influential companies, such as the American Place Theatre and the Actors' Theatre of Louisville, have actively solicited and produced plays by women. Although many of the practicing women writers have not yet achieved a high level of critical and public acceptance, nor, in some cases, fulfilled their early promise, "the talent is there, as is the commitment to playwriting."7

Another factor encouraging the new generation of female playwrights is the growing strength of feminist theatre. Michele Wandor believes that "women surface as playwrights when conditions are right; when there are changes in the dominant sexual morality which benefit the social position of women, when a movement for political change includes a feminist component or when revolutions in the theatre itself make it possible for women to seize the time and make their own mark."8 Feminist theatre emerged in the early 1970's as an outgrowth of the radical theatre struggle of the 1960's and the consequent resurgence of the women's liberation movement. To force a reevaluation of the relationship
between women and the arts, the Women's Theatre Council, in 1972, established a credo:

The Women's Theatre Council is a nonprofit corporation of women playwrights established for the purpose of developing a professional theatre which will nurture the works of innovative playwrights and reach out to a disadvantaged audience that has not had the chance to experience an authentic contemporary theatre which reflects the spiritual, social and aesthetic concerns of our times. And we feel that we come together, as a group of women because we reflect a particular sensibility.9

The body of literature on feminist theatre, feminist art, feminist criticism, feminist playwrights and women workers in the theatre is still sparse, but information on these areas of the women's movement steadily builds annually. In Feminist Theatre Groups, Dinah Leavitt states that "feminist criticism of both art and literature started with an historical analysis of women artists and writers," examining the image of women and positing the question: does there exist "a specific female point of view in the response to art per se, the creation of art and the interpretation or appreciation of art."10 Janet Brown believes that "feminist drama" may be so called, "When woman's struggle for autonomy is a play's central rhetorical motive...."11 But widely
divergent interpretations have been applied to feminism, feminist drama and feminist criticism; clearly the movement chooses to celebrate pluralism and the interplay of many visions. A major province of feminist drama, it is argued, is the political arena, or consciousness-raising; another emphasizes the analysis of female images and stereotypes in traditional literature (usually literature written by men); and a third area explores the use of improvisation and audience participation for the purpose of assessing female and male roles and relationships.

Feminist criticism has meant recently "an analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition--which translates sexual difference into literary difference of genre, structure, voice and plot." This theory has prompted a body of criticism for women's work in poetry and prose, but the theory does not comment sufficiently upon drama by women. While some women believe that the most important criticism lies in the realm of social and political relations, others stress that aesthetic matters are of greatest significance. It is not easy to discern ways of resolving these differing calls, since many feminist critics argue that both sexuality and textuality (style and content) demand different sets of standards for female writings. Despite the conflicting approaches, all seem to call for a criticism that recognizes the uniqueness of female identity and the validity of women's experience.
Women's theatre has matured beyond the exhilaration of consciousness-raising, according to Honor Moore. From four pioneer groups organized in the early 1970's, more than eighty-nine feminist theatre groups have developed. Many are totally collaborative, from script to production, such as the Womanrite Theatre Ensemble and the Cutting Edge in New York; the Circle of the Witch and At the Foot of the Mountain in Minneapolis; and the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre in Providence. These groups, in Moore's words, "create and perform pieces that range from the life of [historical figures, like] Anne Hutchinson to rape to mother-daughter relationships to women's spirituality, in styles that range from clown-shows to farce to tragedy."

Despite the emergence of such groups and the increasing number of female playwrights who are "exploring and expressing women's identity, potentialities and the nature of oppression," serious criticism on the works of such groups remains scanty. Charlotte Rea explains that "by dramatizing their conflicts and joys, the women in these groups seek to make other women feel good about being female and to experience outrage at what they consider to be the gross injustices in the relationship between the sexes." Although these organizations wish primarily to reach women "by doing theatre," the ways and means remain unclear, for critical examinations of their work are much needed.
Many women maintain that artistic skill rather than sexual gender should be the focus of criticism. Michele Wandor says that we are fallaciously "used to assuming that a writer is a writer is a writer," and while Ruth Goetz agrees, believing that women obviously write plays from different perspectives than men, they are nevertheless artists first:

Men write from different perceptions each from the other. They've been doing it for a few thousand years and that part of their work that endures is coiled within itself and totally different from any other man's. Did Ibsen write like Sardou, did Brecht write like Shaw. . . . What about their male sensibility, did it impose similar vision or technique on their ideas? Of course not, and neither has femaleness done it to woman playwrights. . . .

As an artist, Tina Howe feels passionately about this issue:

I don't have time to worry about my feminine bias because I am so absorbed by the sheer radiance of having caught hold of a moment of truth. . . . When I see the audience, 20 rows ahead of me in that darkened room . . . connecting their fantasies to my fantasies, I get an enormous feeling of power, not of my power, but of the
power of what happens when people gather for the mystery of the theater.  

For Tina Howe, only a poetic vision matters; there are no special advantages, insights or artistic powers of sex.

Women dramatists who have succeeded in being produced credit the women's movement for breaking down prejudicial barriers, but Michele Wandor asks, "Why is it that we know so few women playwrights, when the novel, past and present, boasts so many women in its ranks?" Male dominated criticism and limited production opportunities have repeatedly confronted the emerging woman dramatist as she has sought a place for her work in the world of theatre. Helen Krich Chinoy states:

As women with new self-awareness and enthusiasm try to use theatre to explore what it means to be a woman, they also look back in the hope of locating themselves in some female tradition that will help them understand their problems in the present as well as for the future. . . . It has not been easy to see a female network in the composite art of theatre and to find a sense of 'we-consciousness.'

The dominance of the male tradition as critic and as artist continues to be a major obstacle for the new woman writers.

Nevertheless, many female dramatists found new strength and encouragement for their work in the objectives set
forth in 1972 by the Women's Theatre Council, a group of six playwrights, (Maria Irene Fornes, Rosalyn Drexler, Julie Bovasso, Adrienne Kennedy, Rochelle Owens and Megan Terry), who "dedicated themselves to the discovery and production of new plays by women." The Council did not fully materialize, however, nor did the members come up with their projected 600 plays in the next year. Instead, the Council joined forces with the Theatre Strategy, a larger group of 23 playwrights, including males like Sam Shepard and Ed Bullins. Although this group, like the Council, soon dissolved its formal ties, it has remained faithful to the discovery of new writers, including females, into the 1980's. Female playwrights of the next decade accepted the challenge proposed by the Council; the writers of the 1973-83 era surpassed the projected quota of 600 plays.

American female playwrights have begun to build a new tradition, taking up new subjects, exploring various styles and offering challenging ideas. Mel Gussow notes that today women playwrights "are unafraid to be bold, vulgar, or proud, to flex their muscles, their womanly strength, or, if they feel like it, to reveal their femininity. Feminism, though still a vital issue, more often comes through indirection." Judith Barlow admits that current women playwrights "are the heirs of a neglected but negligible tradition." but they are nevertheless bringing "new life and breadth to the American theatre."
Historical Background

Women were not to assume a professional status as playwrights until the seventeenth century when Alphra Behn dared write plays. Although later, Elizabeth Inchbald in the 18th century and Anna Cora Mowatt in early 19th represented for women playwrights achievements of historical importance, it was not until shortly before the turn of the 20th century that American women began to write for the stage in notable number. Much of this interest sprang from an organized, articulated Woman's Movement which first came into fruition in the 1890's. Organized womanhood held to the belief that women should expand their sphere of activities and at the same time increase social pressure to force America's strict conformity to existing moral standards. Many suffrage plays were written by American women; and with the coming of World War I, women became partners in the Independent Theatre movement which began to take root in America's major cities.

During the 1920's playwrights examined the idea of liberation for the individual, rather than of women as an organized group. Rachel France asserts that for the New Woman "personal freedom was the main concern." Some American women dramatists had achieved prominent recognition in the early years of the 20th century: Rachel Crothers (1898-1958); Zona Gale (1873-1938) and Zoe Atkins (1886-1958), who were awarded the Pulitzer Prize; and Susan
Glaspell (1882-1948), also a novelist, who wrote two popular one-act plays. Lillian Hellman (1905-1984) produced popular and celebrated work over several decades. With the nation's entry into World War II (1939-45), "serious drama, unless politically neutral, all but disappeared," and for the remainder of the 1940's (and much of the 1950's), the drama by female and male playwrights alike conformed to established, conventional, social and political opinions.

Judith Olauson, in American Female Playwrights, maintains that between 1950 and 1970 a pattern emerged from the efforts of American female playwrights which indicates that women have made a vital contribution to the American theatre. In the 30's, attention focused upon "social and domestic themes, conventional family situations and historical romance setting." With the outbreak of World War II, however, playwrights became strongly influenced by commercial, industrial, and economic conditions; subjects of national loyalty and economic disruption became dominant. But, Olauson points out, "from 1945-1950 attention was brought back to domestic situations, themes of family life, home-building and post war social problems." Delinquency among teens, environmental concerns, war prevention, and the new post-war image of women became topics for dramatic treatment. The decade of the 1950's, characterized by fluctuating social and political inconsistencies, brought a decline among women writers: anti-feminist views governed
Women were typically portrayed as helpless, deranged, psychologically disturbed, or non-conforming unattached females.

After World War II, a few women emerged as significant American playwrights: Hellman, Carson McCullers, Alice Childress, and Lorraine Hansberry. But the political and social revolutions of the 1960's gave rise to an aesthetic revolution as well. With the rise of Off-Off Broadway in that decade, women playwrights produced work in greater number than at any other time in the history of the American theatre. An avant garde movement in the theatre, led by the plays of Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, Adrienne Kennedy, Maria Irene Fornes, and Rosalyn Drexler, among others, brought ferocious energy and startling irreverence to stages too long bound by convention.

Fornes, Owens and Terry were among the many playwrights, female and male, who responded to the American social upheaval of the 1960's and early 1970's by producing alternatives to the conventional commercial fare. Theodore Shank identifies this evolution as an "alternative to theatre of the complacent middle class," which concentrated on civil rights, free speech, anti-establishment, and anti-nuclear development, in its material and practice. Audiences for alternative theatre comprised intellectuals, artists, political radicals, laborers, blacks, Chicanos, women, or members of the gay community. Playwrights
explored new aesthetic directions to express their convictions. The two major strands of alternative theatre, commitment to social change and to theatrical experimentation, formed perspectives from which artists might view human experience. Shank distinguishes first the perspective from which artists analyzed personal and social relationships, social institutions, political issues and social change; the second perspective, inward and self-reflective, allowed artists to consider individual perceptions, the structure of thought, the nature of consciousness and the self, in relation to art. In short, alternative theatre invited male and female playwrights to evaluate the quality of life for all Americans.

Various theatrical groups framed and extolled the individual, in the vein of the absurdists, or chose the newer emphasis which recognized the commitment of a group. Since traditional theatrical spaces hindered community participation, audience-performer relationships were redefined. Still other important changes included a creative method based upon the collaborative efforts of a single production, less emphasis on language in favor of the visual element, and an aesthetic shift from fostering a fictional illusion to a consciousness of the real political world.

Off-Off Broadway, as the alternative theatre was termed, produced a new audience and a new kind of theatre.
As early as 1959, Caffe Cino was one of several independent theatrical organizations which produced plays, playwrights, actors, directors, designers, and technicians in a new tradition. One of the most successful, Ellen Stewart's La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York, led the way in introducing unestablished American playwrights and a new aesthetic. Megan Terry (1932- ), a pioneer leader of the new feminine consciousness in the theatre, come into prominence in the Off-Off Broadway movement as a founding member and director of the Open Theatre's Playwrights Workshop (1963-68). She has written over sixty plays and received many awards, including an Obie and an Earplay Award for a radio play, and has collaborated with other notable playwrights, such as Sam Shepard and Jean-Claude van Itallie. Her use of character transformations which shattered rigid conceptions of role playing had, and still has, a significant influence upon contemporary drama and performance theory.38

Terry's plays employ naturalism and absurdism (The Gloaming, 1967), satirical comedy (The Tommy Allen Show, 1971) and music (Viet Rock, 1966 and Massachusetts Trust, 1968) to explore public issues of war, politics, and sexism. "I design my plays," she says, "to provoke laughter--thought may follow."36 With emphasis upon character transformations and unconventional plots, she generally depicts outsiders
struggling to maintain their individuality against a system which perpetuates conformity to the status quo.\textsuperscript{37} 

Terry's plays probe human relations in a variety of circumstances. Often, the plays focus upon women, in domestic situations or in relation to other females, or in relationship to society, always with a compassionate view. She draws from vaudeville, gangster movies, melodrama, camp, naturalism and abstraction to create a series of images depicting confinement, dependency, domination-submission, ritual, friendship, deprivation and loneliness as "emotional conditions that characterize a prisoner's life."\textsuperscript{38} Her work, probably to a greater extent than that of any other contemporary woman writer, has greatly influenced the female dramatists of the last decade.

A second influential playwright of the avant garde, Off-Off Broadway movement of the 1960's and 1970's, is Rochelle Owens, a pseudonym chosen by Rochelle Bass, who doubles as a playwright and poet. Owens (1930- ) came to public prominence with her first play, \textit{Futz} (1965), which relates the story of Cyrus Futz's love for his pig and the reactions of a "Puritanical" society that hypocritically punishes innocent sensuality.\textsuperscript{39} In other plays, Owens satirizes human frailty, using parody, regional dialect, and the comic grotesque.\textsuperscript{40} The bestial tendency reappears in \textit{Beclich} (1968) wherein people become animal-like; \textit{The String Game} (1968) examines cultural clash, \textit{Homo}, a class struggle;
and *He Wants Shih* (1974) and *Chucky's Hunch* (1981) explore the quest for self identity. Owens, a highly experimental playwright, has included historical biography among her theatrical, mystical and sensuous plays. She rejects conventional realism, drawing from surrealism images of irrationality, dreams, and the subconscious. In her plays, distorted identities move around the world to Africa, Greenland, Europe, China, and back to America, living at the extremes of experience in sex, violence and creativity. Owens says of her work, "I am interested in the flow of imagination between the actors and the director, the boundless possibilities of interpretation of a script. Different theatrical realities are created and/or destroyed depending upon the multitudinous perceptions and points of view . . . in the creation of the design of the unique journey of playing the play. There are as many ways to approach my plays as there are combinations of people who might involve themselves."45

The third of the three females representing the influential movement of the late 60's and the early 70's, Maria Irene Fornes (1930- ) migrated to the U.S. from Cuba at the age of fifteen. Like Terry, Fornes' plays were nurtured and performed by organizations that promoted new playwrights: the Open Theatre, Judson Poets' and La Mama. A prolific writer, Fornes has received three Obies and numerous fellowships. Her characters fall in and out of
relationships; they seem to be innocent beings left easy prey in a corrupt and absurd world. Often, her characters create rich fantasies for themselves, parodying film stars and scenes. Vaudeville, burlesque, musical comedy and camp make up the material of Fornes' comedies; the plays also abound in word play and reversals of conventional experiences.

Fornes' play, *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977), continues to provide a strong voice for the feminist movement, as well as exert influence upon contemporary female writers and directors. The audience divides into several groups to view the play (set in a country house) in different scenes and sequences in a loft which serves as the theatrical arrangement. The play compels audiences and characters alike to explore what it means to be oppressed as a woman in America.

Megan terry, Rochelle Owens and Maria Fornes remain active experimenters among contemporary playwrights and, while they are not included in the present study, their work has wielded enormous influence upon the theatre of their day.

In 1974, Margaret Lamb recommended three general areas in which critical work relative to women in theatre might prove valuable: "First, sustained research on women in theatre history. Second, an examination of the different sorts of significant creative work being done by women in
the theatre now and the relation of this work to announced feminist attitudes and goals. Third, various critical approaches now taken to work by, for and about women."42 A substantial body of criticism on contemporary female playwrights has not evolved consonant with the output of plays. This study is designed to help fill that gap.

Certainly, the remarkable emergence of female playwrights in 1973–83 marks this decade as one of the most outstanding in the historic profile of the female poet and argues against the old label of women poets as a "silent minority."

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this investigation is to identify and analyze the feminine aesthetic in twentieth century American theatre by examining the works of selected recent female playwrights. Specifically, the study explores the ideas or themes at work in the plays in order to identify the dramatists' views of the human condition. Thought, one of the six elements of drama in the Aristotelian view, "concerns the poet directly, for thought is one of the 'causes' of action."43 Action or plot, is the progression of events, and constitutes "what happens" in the play. In his translation of the Poetics, Francis Fergusson states that "Thought follows the conception of the plot and the characters [and] refers to a wide range of the mind's activities, from abstract reasoning to the perception and formulation of emotion; for it is thought that defines all
the objects of human motivation. . . ." Oscar Brockett expands the definition of thought to include specific ideas or general themes, derived from any one of the six parts (such as language), or from all the parts as a cohesive whole.

All of the selected plays were examined in terms of their structure (form), character, language and spectacle (the visual and aural elements) to discover in what ways these elements contribute to the play's major ideas or themes. These questions primarily framed the analysis: (1) How is the plot structured? (2) How are the characters developed? (3) What ideas are expressed through language and other means? (4) Do the ideas support identifiable major themes? (5) What seem to be the major characteristics of each playwright's unique view of the human condition? and (6) To what extent is this view identifiable as "feminine"?

I have also examined the critical receptions and performance histories of the plays, and the personal and professional biographies of the playwrights. An essential question has pervaded my study: do the works represent significant new trends or developments in the American drama?

These criteria governed the list of selected playwrights: (1) the plays were published between 1973-83; (2) the plays were produced in a professional house, whether
on, Off, Off-Off Broadway or in a regional theatre; and (3) the playwright has a body of work (three or more plays).

The ten principal writers selected as representative of the many female playwrights who have emerged in the American theatre from 1973 to 1983, listed alphabetically are:

(1) Rosalyn Drexler (1926– ); (2) Mary Gallagher (1947– ); (3) Rose L. Goldemberg (1928– ); (4) Beth Henley (1952– ); (5) Tina Howe (1938– ); (6) Lavonne Mueller (1945– ); (7) Marsha Norman (1947– ); (8) Ntozake Shange (1948– ); (9) Adele Shank (1940– ); and (10) Wendy Wasserstein (1950– ).

Although some of the writers of the present study have had plays represented in other studies and/or anthologies, none has had her work analyzed in conjunction with all of the other selected female poets. This collective establishes a continuity or historical progression among the American female playwrights. Springing from a definite heritage, the playwrights have explored various visions of a similar impulse, graduating from simple and passive characterization to more complicated and active roles, and molding a feminine aesthetic that has gained national recognition.

Honor Moore, in The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by American Women (1979), examines one play each from the writings of ten female playwrights; of those in the present study, only Tina Howe appears in Moore's anthology. A Century of Plays of American Women (1979), edited by Rachel...
France, analyzes a one-act play by Rosalyn Drexler (Skywriting) and notes other short plays by women writers from 1900-1970. Susan LaTempa devotes her anthology, New Plays by Women (1979), to lesser writers who have yet to produce a definitive body of work, such as Toni Press, L. M. Sullivan, Helen Ratcliffe, and Betsy Julia Robinson. Janet Brown's Feminist Drama: Definition and Critical Analysis (1979) offers an analysis of one play each by Tina Howe and Ntozake Shange during 1973-83, in addition to one play by Rosalyn Drexler written in the previous decade. Judith Olauson's The American Women Playwrights: A View of Criticism and Characterization (1981) provides character and thematic analysis in serious dramas by women for four decades: 1930-40, 1940-50, 1950-60 and 1960-70. Michele Wandor's two volumes, entitled Plays by Women (1983), features British playwrights, with the exception of Rose Goldemberg, whose play Letters Home appears in the second volume. Brenda Coven's American Women Dramatists of the Twentieth Century: A Bibliography (1982) includes one hundred and thirty-three of the most important American women dramatists of this century, through 1981. In summary, most of the existing studies cover either the decade prior to 1973-83 or end with the mid-1970's.

Four unpublished dissertations proved useful in determining background material for this study: Silvia Zastrow's "The Structure of Selected Plays by American Women

Joseph Mersand's When Ladies Write Plays: An Evaluation of Their Contributions to the American Drama (1937) further establishes a historical attitude toward the female playwright in America. Judith Barlow's Plays by American Women: The Early Years (1981) contributes to the overview of the American female playwrights from 1845 to 1928. Although
none of my selected playwrights is included, the anthology, *Plays by and about Women* (1974), edited by Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch, is devoted to drama of the twentieth century.

Information for this study has also been gathered from newspaper and magazine reviews, scattered essays in periodicals, letters from and interviews with the playwrights. The specific plays considered in this study are listed in Appendix A.
NOTES: INTRODUCTION


2 Ibid.


5 Gussow 26.


7 Gussow 26.


13 Honor Moore, "Theater Will Never be the Same," Ms (December 1977): 36.

14 Leavitt 8.

15 Moore 39.


17 Rea 82.

18 Wandor 7.

20 Howe quoted by Goetz 8.

21 Wandor 7.


28 France 20.


30 Olauson 174.

31 Olauson 174.

32 Olauson 175.

33 Olauson 175.

34 Lamb 47.


37 Marranca 184.
38 Marranca 185.
39 Vinson 616.
40 Vinson 617.
41 Vinson 616.
42 Vinson 616.
44 Fergusson 25.
CHAPTER I: A LINK WITH THE PAST:
Rosalyn Drexler, Rose Goldemberg, Mary Gallagher and Tina Howe

Catharine Hughes describes the development of American playwriting in the years immediately following World War II as being on the brink of its first golden age. Arthur Miller made a tentative beginning in 1944 with The Man Who Had all the Luck, and followed with the award winning plays, All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949). Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, staged in 1945, was followed by A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1954); all proved powerfully arresting works. In the next decade, William Inge contributed Come Back, Little Sheba (1950), Picnic (1953) and Bus Stop (1955). These young writers, averaging just 34 years of age, became the American theatre's major playwrights in the decade following the war. All of them, of course, were males.

"Although theatre has been most often perceived as an exclusive men's club," observes Julia Miles, director of The Women's Project, a federally funded developmental environment for female playwrights and directors at the American Place Theatre, "there have been exceptions." Rachel Crothers had twenty-seven Broadway productions in the 1920's and 1930's. And later, others, such as Lorraine Hansberry and Lillian Hellman, made significant contributions. Still later, in the 1960's, when the Off-
Off Broadway movement was at its peak, Rosalyn Drexler, Maria Irene Fornes, Adrienne Kennedy, Rochelle Owens and Megan Terry, among others, furnished important works. Many of these playwrights, such as Drexler, have continued to write for the theatre, challenging the largely male-oriented tradition. Playwrights, whether male or female, have had to respond to a historical calling which demanded a more scrupulous reality for women.

Any ten-year period, such as that covered in this study, involves many degrees of social change, including major and minor upheavals. In retrospect, the decade of the 1930's in America is associated with the Great Depression and gradual recovery with the coming of World War II; the 1940's are marked by the War itself, and the post war adjustment. The 1950's indicate a period in which material security, conventional form in both life and art, and the anxieties of a new nuclear era seemed to reign. These years, characterized by McCarthyism and the Cold War, have been described as a time of restraint, passivity, "silent" students, and slow but steady economic growth. The 1960's brought social chaos and turbulence, producing "seasons of discontent," "a dramaturgy of the maimed," and an "age of rubbish." With the United States involved in the strangest internal war of its history, social unrest, civil disobedience, overt left-wing activities and public
demonstrations for various social and political causes emerged as evidence of the uneasiness of the times.

Nora Sayre, in her book, *Sixties Going on Seventies*, says we must see this transition in "chunks and slabs: pieces of a perennial process which disintegrates, congeals, dilates, collapses and expands." Some have called the 1960's, the "decade of American agony" and others "a time of liberation [in which] the shackles of tradition and circumstance were to be thrown off." David Halberstam divides the decade into two periods: the first half is filled with expectation and hope; the second half, an era of pain, disillusionment, and bitterness--from civil rights and brotherhood to Black Power. Many theorists extend the social searching of the decade into the next: "Public life in the early 1970's was not the result of a new phase but merely the garbage of an older one, the unfinished business of the 60's."

The recent decade of the 1970's is difficult to characterize perhaps, because we have just lived through the years; nevertheless dramatists of the era indicate the tenor. Critics often note the similarity of the 1970's to the 1950's; student passivity and a national emphasis on material growth and economic welfare seem characteristic. The 1970's, the era of Watergate, disco music, and the aggressiveness of getting ahead in business with a M.B.A., are humorously summed up by one writer as a time of dribs
and drabs, without sufficient coalescence to be critically examined.\textsuperscript{9}

What was the status of women during these decades, socially, economically, and psychologically? In examining the changing patterns in American culture, some believe that the 1940's, particularly during World War II, mark the watershed in changing women's status.\textsuperscript{10} With the onset of the war and the manpower shortage that resulted, "women's economic status changed significantly for the first time in years."\textsuperscript{11} The Department of Labor lifted many restrictions on the types of jobs suitable for women, who now became crane operators, riveters and truck drivers. Here was laid the foundation for the women's rights movement of the 1960's and after.

Although the 1950's are generally viewed as an era of tranquility and traditional values, women continued to enter the job market and to expand their social roles. In the revolutionary 1960's, especially, women began to declare their individuality; they stepped forward to express with passion their views about all of society's ills. New concepts of individual identity and womanhood emerged. By the end of the 1970's, single women were involved in independent, self-determined life styles, and in careers once thought of as exclusively male.

Four selected playwrights, Rosalyn Drexler (1926- ), Rose Goldemberg (1928- ), Mary Gallagher (1947- ) and Tina
Howe (1937- ), represent the transition from a traditional past to the era of this study, 1973-83. These dramatists, who began to write in the 1960's, aptly serve both as a link with the past and a sign of the future. I selected them as representative transitional figures for several reasons: in addition to the criteria noted in the introduction, each began writing prior to 1973, each tends to write about female roles and relationships in a domestic setting, and each has been involved in artistic groups which focus upon aesthetic and political concerns in contemporary theatre and art.

Rosalyn Drexler, painter, sculptor, singer, wrestler, and writer, resides in her birthplace, New York City. Her writings include novels, short stories, plays, and screenplays. Drexler, who sometimes assumes the name of Julia Sorel, began her playwriting career to escape the confinement of her situation as a housewife: "About 1960, 1961, I did it [playwriting] for spite. I was married and I couldn't get out very much and my daughter was young then. And I couldn't stand anybody knowing what I was doing. I had no privacy, but when my kid went to school, I closed the door and I said, 'Oh boy, this is my secret project and I'm going to amuse myself.'"12 The resulting first play, Home Movies, was produced Off-Broadway in 1964 by friends connected with the Judson Church theatre; it was, she claims, an environment unusually sympathetic to her work:
"Maybe it has something to do with economics. All artists together, men and women—no money—you're working together and the big apple is pretty far away."13

*Home Movies* received an Obie Award in 1964. Drexler went on to create more than twenty plays; an anthology of her works, *The Line of Least Existence*, was published in 1967. In 1973, she received a Rockefeller grant to study playwriting abroad, and in the same year, became affiliated with the playwriting unit of the Actors' Studio. In 1974, she won an Emmy for a script written for a *Lily Tomlin* Special, and in 1984, she was honored with the Creative Artist's Program Grant for fiction.14


Critic Sara Sanborn states that "The raunchy and ridiculous are Drexler's home territory—you feel that she spends a lot of time in all-night cafeterias."15 Further,
Drexler's word-play renders a "stinging slap," as "she weaves a seamy web of parodies . . . which [moves] back and forth between the absurd and the everyday." Rosalyn Drexler, herself, says, "I try to write with vitality, joy and honesty. My plays may be called absurd. I write to amuse myself. I often amuse others."17

Strains of absurdism in Drexler's writings have antecedents in Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), whose plays, essays and manifestoes influenced Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, Beckett and others in the 1950's and 1960's. The absurdists elevated caricature into an art; their rejection of realism began as a thought "at the end of the nineteenth century and later directed the experiments of symbolism, expressionism and surrealism." Drexler acknowledges the particular influences of Ionesco's The Bald Soprano and The Lesson, and Jarry's Ubu Roi. Drexler, too, is concerned with the absurdity of the human condition, and her work demonstrates her ideas by violating realistic conventions, rejecting plausible behavior, and vehemently questioning customary concepts of character and language.

Rosalyn Drexler's work also reveals influences of her relationship with the Judson Poets' Theatre, an operation which contributed in many ways to the American tradition of musical theatre, on a small scale. Unlike Broadway, the Judson school was a non-commercial producing organization which came into existence in 1961, emerging from a
subsidized arts program of dance and theatre at the Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square. Al Carmines, assistant pastor and director of the program, worked to build one of the finest Off-Off Broadway organizations in New York, offering a wide range of fare, from small-scale musicals to productions of Strindberg, "happenings," and popular culture pieces.

Drexler's plays, often conceived as musical pieces, feature characters freely breaking out into song or dancing their way through the action, especially in the early works, such as Home Movies, The Line of Least Existence (1967) and one version of The Writer's Opera. Bonnie Marranca notes Drexler's preoccupation with athletic physicality, describing the play, The Bed was Full (1972) as "forever embroiled in farcical encounters and manic chases. . . ." She adds that Drexler's characters, "full of energy . . . let loose an anarchy on stage that is both blatantly comical and mildly threatening at the same time."22

The theatricality and irreverence found in Drexler's plays are complemented by a highly individualistic, precise use of language, comprised of puns and witticisms that bring to mind the playwrights of the Ridiculous, particularly Ronald Tavel. Marranca points out, for example, that "many of her plays come close to being campy and parodic."24 Hot Buttered Roll, produced in 1966 in New York and 1970 in London, contains "nothing which is not parodied, undercut,
vilified, or grotesquely degraded. . . ."23 Characters are not "realistically" developed; they exist "merely to bounce off others, serving for the most part as foils to the unending barrage of puns and language games in which they all engage."26

Except for one attempt at conventional realism (The Investigation, produced in 1966 in New York and 1970 in London), and a mythological-historic recreation in the tradition of classical Greek tragedy (She Who was He, 1973 and 1976), Drexler's plays, with their deliberate rejection of a "well-made" structure, strongly reflect her absurdist influences. At times, a Drexler play relates to abstract themes that do not surface immediately in the world of the play itself (loneliness and despair in Softly, and Consider the Nearness, 1964; alienation and tragic separation in Skywriting, 1968). She is always willing to sacrifice plot and characterization for word-play and visual theatricality in staging. She manipulates her characters' entrances and exist, and juggles their identities with an unending series of assumed masks, like a skillful "ringmaster" creating "entertaining spectacles for the stage."27

Home Movies, Drexler's first play, acknowledges her debt to the Judson style: cabaret-like in staging, with a piano in one corner of the stage, song and dance routines are presented by characters dressed in outlandish costumes (daisies sewn on the nipple of bras). Furthermore,
Drexler's poetic and painterly imagination is demonstrated in the play through her manipulation of stage pictures, which depict the Verdun family in a series of bizarre encounters and farcical chases; vaudeville, burlesque, and the acrobatics of the circus or sports arena, are drawn upon to create an anarchic vision where anything and everything goes.

As the characters in the play enter into fights and move in and out of disguises, deliberately obtuse language becomes a potent weapon to shield each from himself or herself and from each other. Mrs. Verdun says, "Perhaps, it will when you visit Lourdes," and Violet replies, "Lords? And ladies too?" Barranca summarizes the technique: "Dialogue becomes evasive; it is employed for its diversionary tactics." Word-play dominates to the extent that a potential encounter of emotion is lost in abstraction, as an innocuous realm of language turns upon itself.

The title, Home Movies, parodies the candid, sentimental approach to domestic life chronicled in home movies. The episodic plot, with no causal relationship of events, establishes a ludicrous world where the illogical becomes the norm. Mrs. Verdun, an imposing Bible-carrying woman in mourning, is reunited with her dead husband, brought to her in her closet during a delivery man's surprise visit. Vivieene, the daughter of Mrs. Verdun,
loves to appear nude in public and enjoys a relationship with Charles, a consumptive intellectual. Charles stutters; his lines are mouthed by Violet, the house maid, in black dialect.

In Drexler's world reason and convention are turned upside down, logical or conventional codes of behavior do not exist, and life proceeds by chance; nothing need necessarily follow anything. *Home Movies* jumps from episode to episode, offering a passionate rejection of traditional values, aesthetically, socially, and religiously. What man cherishes or would preserve on film is worthless, because his very existence is dubious.

*The Investigation*, with its conventional, causal plot, seems, initially, to be Drexler's concession to realistic drama. Two tough detectives seek to coerce Larry into a confession by getting him to reenact the crime. Using physical and mental abuse, the detectives taunt, cajole, threaten, bully and rant. Levels of ambiguity are injected into the plot, however, as the detectives, not Larry become demonic. The realistic terrain shifts as the characters hide behind masks and word play, denying their identities and the identities of those around them. Throughout the realistic plot structure, Drexler weaves ambiguous behavior and a diction which spins out one pun after another. The play's thought, characteristic of her work, takes up themes of sexual and social relationships. In brief, it is an
imaginative satire of society's penchant for crime and violence.

_Hot Buttered Roll_ continues Drexler's dramatic use of these themes. The protagonist, a billionaire lecher named Corrupt Savage, hides from reality (like many Drexler characters), preferring to get his kicks from the glossy magazines under which he lies buried on his bed. He also tapes his love encounters; his sexual life is vicariously lived through tapes and films. A victim of technology, he measures the intensity of his sexual excitement with a sex-o-meter. Three hunters would rob Savage of his wealth. When Jordan, the pimp, confronts Savage to get him to write a will, their conversation rambles off into permutations of the word "will:"

SAVAGE: I have a will.
JORDAN: Not a strong will.
SAVAGE: A will to win.
JORDAN: A willy-nilly.
SAVAGE: A willful will.
JORDAN: A will or won't.
SAVAGE: A will.
JORDAN: A wilt!
SAVAGE: Why are you attacking me?

The play undermines realism in various ways. The gangsters do not behave like conventional criminals; they drift off into a host of unrelated topics while supposedly
planning the deed. Savage, contrary to his miserly instincts, generously leaves his wealth to his servants, even after he learns of their intent to rob him. Drexler thwarts "our expectations . . . rendering her characters without a stable inner core or a set of beliefs."31 The world of the play transforms itself at whim to conform to unusual and unlikely external situations as they arise. One critic identified the play as a surrealistic comic strip which makes the point that "pornography confuses fantasy with reality--reality isn't good enough for you afterwards."32

Skywriting, a short one-act play, represents a departure for Drexler both in subject matter and the basic tempo of the piece. The frequently produced play renders testament for the concerns of male and female relationships. Throughout the simple plot, Drexler explores extensions of self and other, reexamining these proscribed roles. The woman gains strength from the encounter with the man and challenges the status quo:

You want it because it's mine. . . . And you think that I belong to you too, and that's why you want me. You want me and my art production. You want my art reproduction and my entire reproduction system. You have both my systems. THE HOW TO LIVE FOREVER SYSTEM and THE HOW TO LIVE HARMONIOUSLY AS A WOMAN SYSTEM.33
The usual multiple assortment of Drexler characters (sex maniacs, drug addicts, or talking dogs) has been reduced; *Skywriting* has two characters, a man and a woman, and the environment is domestic. The couple squabble over a picture post card with clouds painted on; who is the rightful owner of the post card? Each argument drifts into questions about ecology, marital indiscretion, and domestic problems. Man and Woman are physically separated in two adjoining sections of the stage, each relating to the other through the inanimate card that he and she occasionally hold. Drexler makes a "poetic explication of a collapsing marriage that is ultimately resolved, if only superficially and arbitrarily, when the couple holds the enormous card together: at the end of the play." Rather than language (as in the earlier plays), an image now holds Drexler's isolated people together.

In *She Who Was He* (1973, produced in 1976), Drexler switches to an entirely different mode. Retreating into the world of myth, this lavish entertainment in the style of a grand opera deals with the Tutmose dynasty. Its hero is a legendary queen whose life is traced from her cosmic birth to her death at the hand of her successor. Employing ritualistic stage devices and a language more poetical than usual in her plays, *She Who Was He* provides a feminist view of history. The twin themes of violence and sex are present again, but sex now transcends the perverse
manifestations of the earlier plays and the characters attain self-respect in their own right. Moments of genuine affection and understanding between characters emerge. It is a play about a girl coming of age and then assuming power in an antagonistic, patriarchal society. Some have faulted the play for being over-written, with too much exposition and repetitive imagery, but most critics agree that She Who was He succeeds in presenting a vivid theatrical experience.\(^3\)\(^6\)

While the use of word play to make satirical points is typical of Drexler's early work, Arthur Sainer notes that She Who was He follows another route:

[The play] leaves the modern and concrete for the ancient and mythical. Its tone is lofty and even autumnal. Wounds are real and the murder of queen Hatshepsut is very real. Drexler has gone back to pre-Biblical times to introduce the spectre of death and the transcendence of myth into her work. Ephemeral hijinks have given way, at least for the moment, to the eternal seriousness of myth.\(^3\)\(^7\)

Her interest in mythology is reflected in an article by Drexler criticizing the style of dressing "androgynously":

Diana is my household god: Diana of Ephesus, the multi-breasted goddess of the moon, of forest, of animals, of women in childbirth, whose temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. I
choose her fecund simplicity to protect me from
the mutilations of androgyny and from a mock
eroticism that begins and ends cold.  

Janet Brown has cited this serious interest in women's
mythic roots to parallel the progress of feminist movement
in recent years. She sees Drexler "beginning to adopt an
approach that is more affirmative of women and more
comprehensive in its treatment of serious plots."  

Janet Brown has cited this serious interest in women's
mythic roots to parallel the progress of feminist movement
in recent years. She sees Drexler "beginning to adopt an
approach that is more affirmative of women and more
comprehensive in its treatment of serious plots."

A prolific writer, Drexler has written many other
Graven Image (1980), Vulgar Lives (1979), The True Artist
(1981), Starburn (1983), Delicate Feelings (1984), and
Transients Welcome (three one-acts, 1984). Of these,
Writer's Opera, like Home Movies, received an Obie in 1979.
Cited by the author as her most interesting play, Writer's
Opera was first directed by John Vaccaro, who is associated
with the Theatre of the Ridiculous. Ronald Tavel along with
John Vaccaro, Bill Walters, and Ronald's brother, Harvey
Tavel, created the Theatre of the Ridiculous as an Off-Off
Broadway group in 1966. Their manifesto declared: "We have
passed beyond the absurd. Our position is absolutely
Tavel and Vaccaro were later to go separate directions; each had distinctive interpretations of the manifesto. When Tavel left the group in 1967, he presented *Gorilla Queen*, one of the best known Ridiculous plays, at the Judson Poets' Theatre. Since that time, there have been rival efforts by the Theatre of the Ridiculous and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, founded by Charles Ludlam. Writers Kenneth Bernard and Bill Vehr have also been associated with the Ridiculous movement.

The plays by the Ridiculous playwrights have many similarities. Oscar Brockett characterizes them as "fantasies based on popular culture myths, many drawn from old movies, which ludicrously exaggerate the notion that happiness lies in a life of sexual gratification." The plays, he adds, "transcend pornography because there is in them no sense of furtiveness, guilt, or abnormality (no matter how extravagant the occurrences)." Additionally, the scripts abound in outrageous puns and plays on words. Tavel claims as his aim "to hit you in the subconscious."

Bonnie Marranca describes the Ridiculous as "an anarchic undermining of political, sexual, psychological and cultural categories, often using dramatic structures that parody classical literary forms or re-function American popular entertainments. . . ." It is a highly self-conscious grab-bag style which combines camp, kitsch, transvestism, the grotesque, the visually flamboyant, and
literary dandyism. It goes beyond the absurd in the sense that it is less intellectual, more earthy, primal, and liberated; it depends upon icons, artifacts and entertainments of mass culture in America, including old movies, popular songs, television and advertising. Among those who have been influenced by and made use of this style since it has spread from theatre into the world of film, television, rock music and fashion are Rochelle Owens, Alice Cooper, Bette Midler and, of course, Rosalyn Drexler.

Michael Feingold in 1979 classified The Writer's Opera as "a totem to the avant garde of 10 and 15 years ago, proving that the guard still advances and that the way to be ahead of everyone else is to have a past one can pull materials from." In truth, The Writer's Opera does reclaim the Ridiculous mode of the late 1960's. Drexler's opera writer, Susan, lives in a ratty flat with her mother and her alcoholic son, Bill, and makes lists—the basic and essential form of writing. Susan's life is a success story, but not without disappointments. She wins grants, acquires a rich patron, publishes and becomes famous, while Bill, rescued from booze and crime also becomes an artist. The atmosphere is one of continuous agony; Susan and Bill have a love-envy relationship. At times, Susan is sympathetic toward Bill's reform; at other times, she nearly urges him to destruction. Bill receives more understanding from his companion, a transexual who is also his father. Ironically,
the father provides the love of which the mother is incapable. Ultimately, one of Susan's artist friends (a lover) kills himself on videotape in a gallery, and Drexler's parable becomes clear, that the world's destructiveness toward art parallels the artist's self destructiveness; only art survives.

In Drexler's crisp and engaging style, strategies are borrowed from melodrama, burlesque sketches, and soap opera. Epigrams blossom and "tense discussions take conversational left turns." In terms of Drexler's philosophy, "nothing is worth saving but waste." Characteristically, Drexler has a debate between mother and son on the purpose of life trail off suddenly into the question of why there are no frogs on Monet's lily pad. A fierce argument converts into a lesson in how the Spanish cook veal kidneys. Drexler's language, like her people, has an air of uncontrollable violent growth; the play provides an unexpected blend of order and chaos.

**Vulgar Lives**, in its plot, takes more of an absurdist route than **Writer's Opera**. Characters, with problems of drinking, obscenity obsessions, identity, deformity, lust for little girls, and tendencies toward transvestism, consult Dr. Farber, a psychiatrist, who is assisted by a gorilla. Each patient has his/her own effigy to be used as an emotional escape or defense mechanism, once inside the office; the doctor himself enjoys tossing darts at the
effigies in his spare time. For amusement, the patients exchange riddles and even play musical chairs, but no one is satisfied with the treatment for his/her problem. Drexler seems to suggest that society needs its scavengers, menials, monotonous drudges, and its vulgar lives. With every individual the potential creator of himself, all become contestants in life, a game for winners and losers. Drexler's indictment of society stresses that eventually chaos benefits society as the one human condition which promulgates and begets order. The doctor and patients in Vulgar Lives explore the meaning of life, deciding that life is a rodeo; "spectators and performers cling to hope by a slender horsehair." When the psychiatrist concludes that life itself is a pretty good excuse for going on, they all sing together:

Vulgar lives
We lead such vulgar lives
fribbling away the daylight hours
in fruitless employment
pseudo-enjoyment
grist for the mill
meat for the chopper
What life is, is damn improper.

In short, we must make the best of life as we find it to exist.
Graven Image (1970) records on camera a young lady's efforts to see that justice is done in the case of her mother's death. The eighty-year old mother was shot with her own gun by two juveniles while her semi-invalid husband was terrorized. Throughout the play, the daughter, Amy, dons a wig to become her dead mother, although the relationship between the two had not been a wholesome one. Amy is not certain of her own relationship with her father, either as daughter or as mother. In and out of several fantasies, Amy seeks her mother's murderer only to have him restage the crime, when she dies willingly in her mother's graven image.

While the lesbian-photographer, Gottfried, could only capture on film the many poses that the mother once assumed (as portrayed by Amy), the true image is deeply etched within Amy. Her father senses the hauntngs of the mother and he declares, "Remote shadows of her being beat their fists against my prison." Despite a troublesome relationship, Amy had submitted to her mother's possessiveness. Now she wishes to avenge her mother's death and reconcile her own identity as well. As things go full circle and the past returns, Amy's dead mother rises within Amy. Without the mother, Amy cannot fully realize her individuality. The play addresses the mother-daughter relationship, and finds in its ambivalence and unresolved mystery.
Starburn, a musical and novel centers around Jenni Love, a feminist punk/funk superstar. UFO's, the mysteries of death, incest, drugs, violence and sexuality fill the lives of a female band who sang the popular song:

Gimme/Gimme your life
You already half dead anyway.

Jenni's father is a timid and suicidal homosexual; her grandmother owns a health farm but worries most about her son "touching her." As for the rest of the band, Anna's father killed her mother; Martine was saved by a blonde wig when her three brothers were shot; and Ruth spent two years in a home for delinquents after stabbing her father with the same knife he used on her mother. A rock critic describes his ideal woman as a two hundred pound retarded adolescent: "She has none of the self-consciousness that mars sophisticated, older women. Her simplicity helped me to take advantage of suppressed longings. Ambitious women hamper self-expression in a loving man. . . . They take note of failings."

Jenni finds that the climb to stardom, like most worthwhile pursuits, demands a kind of boldness. Opportunists and competitors can stifle creativity; many artists try to "burn" each other. In spite of physical abuse, incriminating evidence on a murder charge and sexual violation by an alien, Jenni Love survives. Drexler's play
pits the female against the system, and the female emerges a victor.

The three one-acts that comprise Transients Welcome continue the saga of typically bizarre Drexler characters. "Room 17" represents an escape for Linda Normal, wife of Willy Normal. Linda, a traveling saleswoman, parodies the wife of Willy Loman of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Prior to Linda's death, we realize that she longs for privacy and distance between herself and her spineless husband. Invading her domain is a man-sized cockroach, indicative of all the filth characteristic of such a pest. Linda recalls that her own husband is as much a parasite as the cockroach. To her embarrassment, her dear son discovers her in a compromising position with the "lowest creatures" (the cockroach); in her son's view, she is the "lowest of the low." Moreover, she has given her son ammunition against all women: "Woman is a perilous craft, and crafty though she is, cannot avoid the rock in her path, so ready is she to abandon herself to the elements . . . to wreck what has formerly had direction and buoyancy." Linda finds peace via death in the hotel fire, but she actually suffers smoke inhalation when she returns to the fiery room just to answer "Willy's call," as she has been conditioned. Only Drexler's cockroach survives to sing a song of triumph over humans.
Blanche from a streetcar named "Despair" parodies Streetcar Named Desire in Drexler's "Lobby." Oscar Wilde appears as a restless artist in this one-act piece. Within the everyday flow of traffic in the lobby of a hotel, a community forms, as the lives of several people become exposed and intermingled. More pointedly, as in the lobby of a hospital, Drexler advocates that "all life is an emergency room."

The last of the one-acts, "Utopia Parkway," is the most abstract. In this, the artist is a dancer with a reconstructed face. Death has been inflicted as a kind of punishment upon all the characters and they appear to us from the dead. In death, the past and present unite; a still-life collage painting of all the characters symbolizes this union at the end of the play. From Drexler's vantage point, death in the abstract is life.

Transients Welcome notes the ephemeral journey of life, with each person representing the transient enroute to death. On another level, Drexler seems to pose the ultimate question, "Can transients ever be secure in a world that is also transient?"

Throughout her long career, Drexler has not lost an exuberance for language. Even when poetry and plot are interwoven to reproduce and parody the effects of an opera, words dominate as the means of expression, not music. Arias, duets and trios are all spoken, not sung. The
reality of a Drexler play becomes anarchy without a goal, employing a melange of vulgarity, poetry, nonsense, cliches, puns, and rational diction. Drexler denounces exposition in the conventional sense of playwriting as a false thing; she prefers more subtle dimensions of language usage.

Jack Kroll has called Drexler "one of Off-Off Broadway's original and delightfully crazed playwrights." Her zest for life, apparent in her plays, can be traced to the rebellious spirit of the 1960's and the influence of the feminists' zealous quest for individual expression. Kroll asserts that, like her absurdist ancestors, she "evokes and investigates the internal contradictions constantly subverted by the rough realities of culture and by its own guilt."

Drexler's plays reflect a preoccupation with the struggling female artist, ultimately expressing a strong allegiance to the cause of women, their autonomy, and sisterly community. In an analysis of roles in various relationships, Drexler creates levels of absurdity to comment upon the disintegration of the ideal family. Also, she offers several perspectives of art which may become craft minus emotion and reality minus reflection. In Green River Murders, Drexler's play in progress, she will include a fantasy scene and parody of the Biblical "Last Supper." We can expect more from her creative fires because she is an original, a visionary for contemporary America.
Drexler and Rose Goldemberg are contemporaries (Goldemberg is only two years younger than Drexler), but Goldemberg began writing plays much later. Goldemberg, too, often writes about violence and passion; both playwrights have written about domestic life, but only Drexler can be identified with the Ridiculous or absurdists.

Rose Leiman Goldemberg was born in 1928, in Staten Island, New York. Whereas Drexler did not attend college, Goldemberg received her B.A. (magna cum laude) from Brooklyn College and M.A. from Ohio State University. She started writing poetry as a child, always knowing that "I wanted to be a writer." She studied at the American Theatre Wing and Columbia University, and this background prepared her to teach playwriting, acting and directing at the university level. Between 1954 and 1960, a flood of her early creative pieces first began to appear under the name Rose Leiman Schiller. Moreover, she has authored numerous screenplays for television and films ("The Burning Bed" and "The Medicine Men" for NBC, "Victory of the Heart" for ABC, and "Land of Hope and Growing Pains" for CBS; and Doubles for film); four books (All about Jewelry, 1983; Antique Jewelry, 1976; The Complete Book of Natural Cosmetics, 1974; and Here's Egg on Your Face, 1970); a radio adaptation ("Voices in My Head," 1975); and a five-hour television miniseries ("A Celebration of Women," for CBS). As a playwright, she received two faculty research grants, two New Jersey State
Council on the Arts Grants, and several other awards and honors.  


While *The Merry War* is a collage of the best, worst, saddest and funniest things in love and marriage, *Rites of Passage*, more singular in plot, has Charley Gordon's wife dying, although to him she's terribly alive. Four Louisas swirl around him in his solitude accusing him of some terrible infidelity. In fact, five women haunt Charley—all of them his wife. He must deal with his young daughter who cannot accept her mother's fate, and with his own needs for a lonely, vulnerable schoolteacher who comes to visit. His exorcism of the Louisas and his coming to grips with the core of his guilt is the crux of the play.  

A Jewish father in *The Rabinowitz Gambit* presides over the engagement of his brilliant chess-bum son to an irresistible suicidal blonde in a seedy hotel room in New York on New Year's Eve. In the course of the play, the two young people discover love and that much in life is game playing. *The Rabinowitz Gambit* won first prize in New York's Sullivan County Dramatic Workshop, 1975.
As playwright-in-residence with the O'Neill Foundation, Goldemberg first wrote Gandhiji in 1970 and staged it at Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, in the same year. Although the play's theme is "to live with a saint takes the patience of one," it takes "a far less reverential look at Mohandas Gandhi than the recent film." In this play, we see that greatness has a price for which Gandhi's loved ones, particularly the women, must pay dearly.

All of the action transpires in Gandhi's mind a split-second before an assassin's bullet darkens it forever. Gandhi and a troupe of imaginary strolling players act out his life for his and the audience's judgement. He painfully fights for a rational control of his passions in search of the calm of truth. In a less saintly way, he routinely places enormous demands upon those around him, as if their basic purpose on earth was to help him achieve a higher spiritual plane. Thus, Gandhi is Goldemberg's Gandhiji is depicted as an exploiter as well as a saint. He may have been selfless, but he is also a typical Indian husband, expecting to be obeyed, but married to a woman with no taste for obedience, a situation which allows for a bit of domestic comedy. In brief, Gandhiji is "a skeptical study of a difficult man."

Marching as to War, first presented as War, was performed by the East Village Theatre, in New York City, on May 13, 1971. Rather than being about war, the play
depicts war. A young soldier marches with many soldiers through various wars, providing a commentary upon the horror, disruption, and endlessness of war. The playwright advises that this is an audience-oriented production; it "should be played not only in front of an audience, but around them, in them." An overwhelmed audience feels compelled to echo the stunned soldier who cries bitterly, finally, in his old age, "Peace now? Now? Well . . . thank God for peace." Goldemberg employs social satire to sharpen our perception of war, of personal relationships, and even of our heroes.

Letters Home appeared under the auspices of Women's Project at American Place Theatre. Its production was made possible through an $80,000 grant for producing female plays under the Project's auspices. The director of the Women's Project, Julia Miles, has described the customary production process, which includes rehearsed readings, developmental work and studio production work. Women direct the rehearsed readings, staged before an invited audience of playwrights, directors and theatre professionals, who engage in taped discussions afterwards. Furthermore, "follow-up conferences, in which suggestions are made for script revisions are held with me, the staff, the playwright and the director." Rose Goldemberg's Letters Home, a product of that first search of the Women's Project in the spring of 1979, is
based upon the letters of poet Sylvia Plath, the posthumous recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in 1982, who committed suicide at thirty years of age in 1963. Just one month before her death, Sylvia Plath "poured out a flood of poems" that made her name.⁶⁹ Many persons wanted to charge Aurelia, Sylvia's mother, with the suicide or for "failing her daughter,"⁷⁰ and to set the record straight, Aurelia decided to publish the many letters which Sylvia wrote to her. Goldemberg constructs a plot line from the mother's book, but avoids a mere reading of letters.

The two-character drama can easily be divided into two parts. In the first, Aurelia recalls Sylvia's life and their fight together to save it. In the second, the action takes place in the present, with Aurelia telling and remembering her story. It is she, not Sylvia, who struggles for and achieves understanding: "she is alive and her brilliant child, who needed and had her love, is gone."⁷¹ In each part, the letters complement Goldemberg's style of writing and intensify the action of the play.

The play examines a profound mother-daughter relationship in order that we understand it at its various stages and levels. Often Aurelia and Sylvia are together when apart and apart when together. They range in and out of each other's space.⁷² They are wherever Aurelia remembers them or wanted them to be for the purpose of the Sylvia story, which is in Aurelia's mind. In other words,
Aurelia is the director of the play and, at the same time, the parent who shares a close relationship with her child. Furthermore, all levels of the play depend upon dialogue. Aurelia always hears Sylvia and Sylvia is always aware of Aurelia. There is a constant merging and separating of the two women throughout *Letters Home*.

Language is particularly significant in this play; the mother and daughter use words to question, argue, agree, laugh and cry, and words, of course, are the material of the letters. Aurelia and Sylvia often speak the same words, though with different meanings, as this reaction to Aurelia and Ted's mother lending money:

AURELIA: (It's so much) SYLVIA: (It's so little!)
six and a half per cent! six and a half per cent!

They can perform the same action with different meanings: "They were one and different, as all parents and children, all lovers are." Often, the dialogue overlaps: the mother can initiate a thought which the daughter completes, or the reverse is likely. Many "duets" (Aurelia and Sylvia harmonizing within the same chord or on a single idea) are offered; other times solo ideas are presented with either Aurelia or Sylvia providing accompaniment or reinforcement to that idea; and still other moments arise when Aurelia and Sylvia echo each other, overlapping an idea, as in the fashion of a musical sound.
Sylvia Plath discovered too late that she was not alone in feeling that the "normal" life of women (marriage, motherhood, cooking and assisting others to fulfill their dreams) was not enough. Stricken by the combined circumstances of a broken marriage, illness, and the coldest winter London had known, Sylvia one morning took her life. As Sylvia's poems are evidence of her strength and genius as a poet, her letters are testimony to her dreams and aspirations as a human being. As Aurelia shares these letters and her interpretation of their contents, we obtain an intimate view of Sylvia and Aurelia as individuals as well.

Once the story of Sylvia's life and death is told, we see that the real event of the play is that of Aurelia coming to terms with her daughter's suicide. Aurelia recalls her own efforts to prevent the daughter's act, and she attempts to understand the entire experience. The letters allow Aurelia to review the various stages of Sylvia's first breakdown and the development of her fatal depression: she tracks the steps with which her daughter coped with joy and disappointment, and she recalls her own response at each of the stages. Additionally, she examines her own behavior relative to similar crises in her own life, such as her love for her husband, their relationship, and his long illness ending in death. Finally, she can become more objective about her own reactions to her daughter's
struggles. Aurelia is strengthened as she learns from her own daughter's life and death. Indeed, Letters Home is as much Aurelia's play as it is Sylvia's.

As one example of her work, Goldemberg's Letters Home explores responsibility in an intense struggle between a loving mother and her artist daughter. Goldemberg analyzes mores and misinterpretations which cause relationships to collapse. Eventually the lessons learned can be taken as a promise for an optimistic future for mankind in general and families in particular. This ordinary domestic scene between mother and daughter evolves around several levels of ambiguity, mostly via adept language manipulation, to add greater texture of thought. In this and others of her plays, Goldemberg suggests that the "normal life" need not be taken for granted.

Mary Gallagher, born several years after both Drexler and Goldemberg, has produced fewer plays, but her work demonstrates a no less versatile range. A professional actress and director, as well as a writer, she was born in Van Nuys, California, on July 10, 1947. She received a B.S. from Bowling Green State University in 1969, and has published short stories in Cosmopolitan and Redbook, and two novels, Spend it Foolishly (1978) and Quicksilver (1982). Gallagher has said of her own work: "Theatre is my first and greatest love, and the writing which most absorbs me is playwriting. . . . I tend to explore more serious themes in
my plays. Writing a play is an enormous risk; it's an attempt to create an emotional structure which is strong enough to carry a whole body of people with it."


*Little Miss Fresno*, *Chocolate Cake*, and *Final Placement* make up the bill of one-acts for an Off Broadway production called *WIN/LOSE/DRAW*. Gallagher co-authored *Little Miss Fresno* with Ara Watson, a light-hearted piece about two mothers realizing sweet victory. In this play, winning is happiness. In the second play, the two character *Chocolate Cake*, Annmarie seeks happiness and greater self-esteem in a seminar called "Horizon '83: Your New Life Starts Here," but she always fears the "unknown;" she worries equally that the
price of happiness (when defined by others) is too high for her. Annmarie, a small town saleswoman, and Delia, an over-sexed ex-showgirl, are a pair of vastly different dieters trying to resist the temptation to eat, while having temporarily escaped their not-too-loving husbands. Once Annmarie learns to appreciate being her own person and the joys already filling her life, she reconciles all of her excesses. Initially, Annmarie acknowledges her own lack of will power, but simultaneously shuns Delia's self-denial tactics which may include regurgitation. Annmarie determines that the mysterious dieter's tricks can remain with Delia; the prospect of such knowledge frightens Annmarie. Like most individualists, the vulnerable Annmarie truly realizes her identity when she abides by her own choices. As the play ends, Annmarie honorably admits defeat as a dieter. Gallagher has created in Chocolate Cake a richly textured farce about fear and loneliness.

Seven dreams comprise the play, Father Dreams. In a cartoon-like, fanciful style, dreams, myths, memories and fantasies are interwoven with "real" events during one hour on a Sunday afternoon in the Hogan household. Light and sound proscribe the many dimensions of characterization attributed to Paul, the oldest son of the family. A series of waking and sleeping dreams, the play "walks a very fine line between black comedy and tragedy."78 The "real" scenes, which constitute the opening and the end of the
sixth dream, occur in the living room of the Hogan house. But the remainder of the play—the dreams—take place in the mind of Paul.

Four characters appear in the piece. Dad is seen often as a figment of Paul's imagination, and our distorted view of him continues until, in the end, we perceive, in reality, a broken, frightened old man. Mom represents stability for this family, offering love and a calm center for the others. But Paul looks upon Mom differently; he blames her for supposedly mistreating and being unappreciative of Dad. Paul withdraws, retreats into his own head (a dream world), while grappling for even a shred of self esteem. Joan, the sister, views herself as the only realist in the family; she acts and is the survivor that Paul is not.

The mother and two children are forced to respond to the fact that Dad has been institutionalized for ten years. Although the family members have not visited him during this period, his situation has permeated all family relations in his absence. We, too, react to the fictionalized Dad. Our attention focuses upon Paul's imagined "great guy" and "perfect father" version, until, finally, Paul must come to grips with the fragile, but very "real" Dad. Paul, in his own mind and heart, empathizes with his father, but in actual life, Paul cannot face the man. Like the mentally stricken Dad, a supposedly sane Paul has withdrawn. Not until the last dream does Paul visit the pathetic man. In
order that the sadness (pathos) not be sentimentalized in *Father Dreams*, Gallagher advises that the play be kept funny and imaginative.79

*Buddies* (1983), a one-act with six characters, originally commissioned by Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1981, was in the next year presented by the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York City. The characters, college students (three males, three females) from middle class, Middle Western families, offer portraits of six individuals caught up in their uniquely contrived world; otherwise, they disregard actual happenings around them. No one projects any strong aspiration; and each simply preserves a community spirit within his own group. They influence each other in habits and conversation; but a heavy cloud of disillusionment engulfs their view of society and their own future. Soon all individuality is lost in the name of friendship. In *Buddies*, as in all of her plays, Gallagher examines the griefs and joys in human relationships, especially family ties. Gallagher probes the most simple relationships and reveals in them "meaning" which has completely eluded the characters. Difficulty in facing reality looms as the major flaw with Gallagher's characters.

Like Gallagher, Tina Howe analyzes relationships, but from a different perspective, offering a satirical view of the conventions of contemporary life. Tina Howe wrote her first play, "Closing Time," a one-act about the end of the
world, while a senior at Sarah Lawrence College, where it was directed by her friend Jane Alexander, now an actress.\textsuperscript{80} Tina went on to teach high school in Maine and then in Wisconsin:

I taught English, and they were always looking for someone to run the dramatics department--I would agree to do it on the condition that I could produce my own plays. That's how I learned what worked and what didn't work--if you can keep the attention of an audience of teenagers, then, it's working. . . .\textsuperscript{81}

The Nest, her first full length play produced, was presented Off-Broadway in 1970 by Anne McIntoch, Thayer Burch and Honor Moore.\textsuperscript{82} Honor Moore described the play as "a comic surreal treatment of the lives of three archetypal female roommates whose apartment on the 150th floor of an anonymous building has 'a view of heaven'."\textsuperscript{83} According to Moore, the play was not well received by critics because it expressed a "female vision."\textsuperscript{84} Later plays by Howe include, Museum, produced in 1976 at the Los Angeles Actors' Theatre and at the Public Theatre in New York, and Birth and After Birth, first produced as a workshop play at the Gotham Art Theatre in New York City in 1974, with Howe directing. Howe said she wrote Birth and After Birth out of her own experiences and out of those of women she knew: the suburban
woman with no exit from her kitchen. Kathy Henderson summarizes Howe's struggle for critical approval:

From her first play, *The Nest* ("perfectly ghastly"), through *Museum* ("never makes much of an impression") and *The Art of Dining* ("flat as a collapsed souffle"), the critics didn't click with Ms. Howe's absurdly comic vision.83

But later, *Painting Churches* (1983), a portrait of a young artist's relationships with her aging parents and theirs with each other, won an Obie, and it also brought Howe a Rockefeller grant as playwright in residence at the Second Stage. Art and creativity are important metaphors in Howe's last three plays, which have been published as a trilogy. "I think *Painting Churches* is the most moving, *Museum* is the most beautiful, and *The Art of Dining* makes me laugh the hardest," she says.86

Howe teaches playwriting at NYU and acknowledges the influence of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pirandello upon her work. She also declares an active interest in avant-garde theatre, musical concerts and art galleries. When asked about her work, Howe replied, "Every time you go out there, you're putting yourself on the line. I don't feel I've arrived--I'm tiptoeing up to the door."87 Her collaborators have fewer doubts; both artistic director Carole Rothman of Second Stage Theatre and Joseph Papp describe Howe's strengths without hesitation: "She's an original."88
Howe seeks to examine a situation with which contemporary women can readily identify; in Birth and After Birth she chooses the American nuclear family. The play focuses upon the suburban, trapped domestic and a four-year-old son, seven feet tall. Howe determined to show the positive and the negative sides of the family coin: "As a mother, you experience moments of excruciating tenderness and love, but there is also great savagery--family life has been over-romanticized; the savagery has not been seen enough in the theatre and in the movies. . . ."89 She chose to depict this "savagery" through bold comic action wherein a typical American family (the Apples) attempt to persuade their professional friends to adopt a more conventional lifestyle.

The play opens in the kitchen-playroom of Sandy and Bill Apple's house, at dawn, on their son's fourth birthday. Nicky, the son (who is portrayed by an adult) interrupts his parents as they busily prepare presents and decorations for his birthday celebration. "Where's my present?" he yells, and tears open all of his gifts against his mother's pleas that he open his cards first. As she frantically cleans up the mess Nicky makes, Bill urges his son to create the mess for the home movie that is to be shared with the visiting friends at the birthday party later. Periodically, Sandy attends to the sand that keeps falling from her hair; the smell of the sea attracts her, although they live hundreds
of miles away from water. A preoccupied Bill continues to get shorts for the movie.

While waiting for the guests (Sandy's cousins, Jeffrey and Mia Freed), Sandy and Nicky engage in games; a typical one uses masks (one of Nicky's gifts) to enact Nicky as a baby and Sandy as the baby's mommy. Bill is annoyed that Sandy does not heed the letter which criticizes his job performance at work; he has been charged with "professional inconsistency," but she cannot deal with reality now; Nicky is too demanding. Finally, pushed to her limit, Sandy slaps Nicky, when he persists with "I want grape juice." Then both parents nearly panic when Nicky faints after getting slapped; they struggle to revive their son.

In anticipation of their guests' arrival, Sandy and Bill discuss the happiness children would bring to the Freeds, who are anthropologists concerned with the study of primitive children. During this and other discussions about their own childhood and birthday parties, Nicky repeatedly interrupts. He disgusts both of his parents by appearing before them in his mother's underwear.

In Act II, the Freeds arrive, and they share their knowledge of outstanding feats by primitive children at four years of age. Nicky attempts to match this with his accomplishments, such as writing his name and pulling his mother in his wagon. He dislikes the Freeds' birthday gift which was a projector with slides of various primitive
children. One tribe, the Whan See, was most unusual among the ones encountered by the Freeds. This gentle and beautiful tribe had only one flaw—during the childbirth ritual, the child is forced back into the mother's womb and is then born again and again, often for as many as seventeen times. Telling of the practice is an ordeal for Mia, but Sandy insists that childbirth is not to be feared.

Later, the three Apples coerce Mia into an imaginary childbirth; she faints. The husband advises that they ignore Mia, and the birthday party continues; Nicky wishes for a brother or 3, 5, 11, 37, 100 or really 600 brothers! Once Mia is revived, the Freeds leave, and the Apples enjoy their own movie. Sandy, wrapped in the joy of her own family, announces that four years ago Nicky made Bill and her the happiest parents in the world.

Howe portrays the inadequacies of the relationships in the Apple family and how those inadequacies wreak havoc upon the father, mother, and even the child. Although the Apples themselves are oblivious to any familial shortcomings, the disintegration has clearly begun: the father's behavior reveals a child-like insecurity; the mother is worn and aged before her time; and the son, undisciplined. Ironically, the play ends with the three Apples frozen "in an endless embrace." They are representative of "the happiest family in the world." Howe laughs at the Apples.
Interesting enough, Howe chooses not to emphasize the hierarchy in which men reign superior to females. Instead, the play presents a couple with child and a couple without. The Apples are associated with food, animals, and eating one's young, all of which revolve around Nicky. Sandy refers to Nicky as "a little blue trout;" his skinny arms like "French-fried potatoes." Nicky's tantrums involve food, grape juice and raisins. And games frequently have to do with animal noises or action. The Freeds, on the other hand, speak of foods favored by the primitive culture. For example, the natives like zebra pelts, treebark and mud turtles. The Whan See tribe smelled like cinnamon and the children could nurse dead goats back to life.

Failure, decay and old age pervade the play. Bill is unsuccessful at his job and at making movies; Sandy fails as a mother. She reflects, "When I looked into the mirror this morning, I saw an old lady who could only conceive once." Images of deterioration and sterility dominate throughout: Sandy shakes sand out of her hair constantly; her head is "drying up and leaking" like a worn-out doll's hair. She views herself as "an old lady. Not old old, just used up." Howe offers a disenchanted view of the family in this play, echoing Sam Shepard's vision of spiritual deprivation in the American community. Mankind has always treasured the family unit as the source and the foundation of a civilized society. The family schools the development of loving and
harmonious relationships, nurtured through order, discipline, and a mutual respect for individual dignity and worth. Its stability and its strength spring from a fulfillment of both spiritual and material needs. The Apples reflect the breakdown of the American family, with disorder, obsession with self, and the loss of cultural or spiritual values crippling all its members.

The Apples represent the suffocating oppression of those who become absorbed in a life within a kind of domestic prison; a more reasonably balanced existence is that led by the Freeds, who are detached from society as intellectual observers, as much the anthropologists of their own cultures as they are of primitive cultures. Bill, an emotionally immature and self-absorbed father, and Sandy, a prematurely aged and unattractive mother, indulge a dictatorial son, Nicky, who represents childhood tyranny at its worst. In brief, the Apples offer no resistance to their oppressive environment, the individual spirit is subordinated, even stifled in this play. Like the Whan See, the Apples are childeeaters who would keep their son a "helpless baby" in order that they may relive his birth again and again.

Although Birth and After Birth is one of Howe's most provocative plays, it was not well received, perhaps because of its radical depiction of the ludicrous. For her next play, Howe shifted to a more conventional setting and style.
Museum, produced at the Los Angeles Actors' Theater, takes for its subject, "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." Honor Moore, however, argues that the play is a good example of women's theatre since it has no single protagonist, but rather assumes a choral form; sympathies are directed toward multiple characters. The piece contributes to a growing women's theatrical collective, for which "each woman [playwright] writes herself an equal part." Specifically, like her previous work, Museum poses questions about values in society.

Critical reviews of the play called it diffuse, abstract, and shapeless; indeed one said that "it is hard to believe the play [could be] as moving as it happens to be. . ." Richard Eder condemns with faint praise; it is "sometimes interesting and sometimes funny and sometimes expressive." Edith Oliver recognized that "each successive incident builds and then dissipates, yet the play takes shapes and holds firm." Noting Howe's antic style, Clive Barnes commented that her "caricatures are certainly campily exaggerated, but many of them are rooted either in truth or the popular truisms of prejudice."

Howe's Museum is set in a municipal art museum during the last day of "The Broken Silence," a special exhibit of the Contemporary American Wing. Three totally white pieces
of canvas by a French "reductionist" born of deaf and mute parents "discovered" this form of expression. The play takes on the art form of a collage of words, characters, and action, as viewers drift in and comment on the exhibition pieces. Another equally outstanding art work seems to be a spectacular clothesline, from which dressed dummies suspend and beneath which rests a basket of clothespins. This work is followed in popularity by some cases of artifacts, mostly feathers and animal skeletons. A public announcement alerts visitors that a picture has been shot and destroyed in a Florence gallery. One viewer hypothesizes from this news that all museums will soon disappear as physical structures and people themselves will comprise the view. The art lovers respond to the display of this modernist movement in American art with a range of expressions from ecstasy to wild laughter, to tears, to open savagery at the end. Art, from the Howe perspective, has suffered at the hands of its unsophisticated public, to whom artists often cater.

The Art of Dining, another comedy, presents a young couple who have just opened a restaurant in New York. The couple, inexperienced restauranteers, naturally invite laughter in their blunders; they enjoy their own food too much. An assortment of customers contribute to the ludicrousness of the action in the many different ways they dress, drink, eat, chat, and undergo misadventures. American mores, behavior, and lifestyles are held up for
review and ridicule. The owners and customers alike succumb to obsessions with food. As with art appreciation, Americans have become obsessed, uninformed connoisseurs of life; uncontrollable ravishings replace stable, refined manners of the past.

Painting Churches, the third play in Howe's trilogy, has been called by T. C. Kalem a "radiant, loving zestfully humorous play about subjects that darken the mind with icy forebodings. It concerns growing old and getting senile, leaving a spacious ancestral home and entering the anteroom of death." The play also deals with the estrangement and reconciliation of a daughter and her parents. As in most families, each member has a proscribed role and image, and in effect, each exists in the "eye of the beholder." Moreover, one person's unique vision of another may, in one moment, suffer a rude awakening.

Mags, the artist who is about to have a one-woman show at a New York gallery, wishes to do a portrait of her parents. The parents agree to sit for the painting only if Mags helps in packing for the big move. The house has already been sold and Mags, upon arrival, sees its age, as it is bare and ruined. With pride and affection, Mags attempts to relate to her parents per usual, but she is forced to acknowledge that they, like the house, have visibly advanced in years. Her father, Gardner, a once-renowned poet, has aged more than his wife, Fanny, who has
found her comic way to cope with Gardner, who is as "deaf as an adler," absent-minded, and suffers from incontinence. Gardner, wearing an overcoat and three scarves indoors, incites the giddy, young Mags to laughter with his "Gee, it's hot in here."

While Mags paints a portrait of her parents, the Churches paint still another one for us, which reveals the darker side of family life in disintegration. Robert Brustein equates the play to "the tortured excavations of A Long Day's Journey (working out problems with parents)," but recognizes a dotty charm from You Can't Take It With You and the eccentric mannerisms found in Arsenic and Old Lace. Fanny charges Mags with a selfish failure to recognize the father's condition and/or share responsibility for it, as Linda Loman in Death of a Salesman similarly accosts sons Biff and Happy for evading responsibility to their father, Willy. Kalem maintains in Painting Churches that the atmosphere is distinctly Chekhovian: "Howe captures the same edgy surface of false hilarity, the same unutterable sadness beneath it and the indomitable valor beneath both." Howe's dramatic commentary has to do with Mags' relationship with her parents, their acceptance of Mags as their daughter, and the stability of the parents' unique relationship with one another, rather than any preoccupation with the mood which might be interpreted to symbolize a bleak future for the parents.
The subtlety and complexity of *Painting Churches* represent the apex of growth for Howe as a playwright. Levels of meaning in this play transcend *Birth and After Birth*: characters provide enriching ambiguity to the texture of the play. *Painting Churches* permits multiple interpretations while *Birth and After Birth* makes an obvious statement. Howe admits that she deliberately made her dramatic ideas more palatable in this piece through the development of a more realistic setting and action than in previous plays. Gallagher, Goldemberg and Drexler, too, have demonstrated continuous growth in their art, and they share her sense of the comic; Drexler, however, depicts the absurdist elements more blatantly. In *Painting Churches*, the sympathy shifts among the three characters as the play progresses. Drexler's characters, bordering on caricature, seldom invite sympathy.

A painting, like a photograph, can only capture visual appearances at a single instance. The Churches had ambiguous and profound relationships with each other that a painting can merely suggest. Fortitude, which measures the strength of the Churches, does not necessarily project in a photograph. Yet, the playwright paints a remarkable picture of would-be societal victims, the elderly Churches, assuming full responsibility for their own lives. Despite the prevailing emphasis upon youth, some among the elderly refuse to be displaced, discarded or dismissed. There are
some older persons who can and will choose the terms by which to live out their "winter years;" the Churches and other resilient senior citizens like them, are our new heroes. Akin to Drexler in this regard, Howe cuts through some of the modern cliches which govern human relationships, particularly familial relations, to expose new substance behind these cliches.

Like Howe, Gallagher and Goldemberg paint portraits of "normal" and familiar relationships; often a portrait is drawn of a female artist. Goldemberg presents the many dimensions in a mother-artist daughter relationship in the anatomy of a suicide. In her short plays, Gallagher, like Howe, treats serious subjects with humor. Drexler's humor is bolder and more radical; her "zany" approach allows the humor to border on the style linked with the Ridiculous.

All four playwrights depict actions by responsible individuals who have defined their own values, faced reality, and emerged naturally as survivors in (sometimes in spite of) a decadent environment. No absolute foundations exist to regulate everyone's behavior; therefore, each person must account for him/her own system of conduct. Often the female serves as catalyst for the four playwrights' artistic statements represented in this chapter. Historically, the female has been the classic example of a victim; she, especially, needs to be assertive. Ultimately,
the four playwrights advocate healthier human relationships, particularly familial relationships.

Drexler, Goldemberg, Gallagher and Howe establish a link with the decade of female playwrights prior to 1973. Drexler, for example, began to pen her plays in the preceding decade. Goldemberg, Gallagher and Howe inherited Drexler's penchant for the political and social stirrings of the 1960's; and each of the four playwrights has commented, in a distinctly different but satirical voice, upon the mores and/or values of modern America. Further, the playwrights have exhibited virtuosity as well as further potential as writers. With few exceptions, their subjects have varied as much as their writing styles and their dramatic visions. As might be expected, each playwright has committed herself to examining the role of the female, but the viewpoints distinguish the individual writers. Indeed, each has contributed to the mainstream of contemporary female playwrights, and each is an original in her own right.
ENDNOTES: CHAPTER ONE


6 Sayre 13.


9 "Who Erased the 70s?" *Esquire* (December 1977): 152-155.


11 Chafe 148.


13 Goulianos 266.


15 Brown 23.

16 Brown 23.
Drexler's sense of humor imbues not only her plays and novels, but her public presentation of herself as well. Asked by the *New York Times* where the woman playwrights are today, she replied:

They are deployed about the city waiting to make their move. They have already learned how to take apart and put together their typewriters in a matter of minutes, and how to keep them clean and well lubricated. At a signal, which may be the clapping of one hand, all women playwrights will shoot the vapors and proceed to a secret rendezvous where a hidden store of explosive topics are waiting to be used. With proper handling, each sentence will find its marks.

In the spring of 1985, Drexler spoke at Louisiana State University, for "The Gathering of Poets," a conference sponsored by the Department of English. Quick and witty, she demonstrated her unique skill in word-play prior to her performance of her own work. "Can humor be used on a serious subject?" asked an LSU student. Drexler replied, "Last night I died, but wait, I lied."

---


19 Lyons 17.


22 Marranca 209.

23 Marranca 209.

24 Marranca 209.

25 Marranca 209.

26 Marranca 209.

27 Marranca 210.

28 Marranca 210.
29 Marranca 210.

30 Marranca 214.

31 Marranca 214.


34 Marranca 215.

35 Marranca 216.

36 Marranca 217.

37 Brown 24.

38 Brown 24.


41 Brockett 714.

42 Brockett 714.

43 Brockett 714.

44 Brockett 714.


48 Feingold 4.

Drexler, *Vulgar Lives* (II, 2, 22 in Manuscript).

Drexler, *Vulgar Lives* (II, 2, 22 in Manuscript).

Drexler, *Graven Image* (I, 2, 34 in Manuscript).


Kroll vii.

Marranca 217.

Miles 12.

Resume of Rose Leiman Goldemberg, sent to the author, 8 March 1984.

Resume of Goldemberg.

Letters Home has been staged at the Theater at New End in London (June 1980), the Playbox Theater in Melbourne (June 1981), the Dublin Festival (September 1982), TelAviv and Paris (1984), and at the Century City Playhouse in Los Angeles (June 1983).

Later stagings came in 1977 at the Back Alley Theater in Washington, D.C. Then, in 1982, a production of the same play by Los Angeles Actors' Theater brought new interest in the play; it was published in *Burns Mantle Best Plays of 1982-83*.


Guernsey 62.

Possibly the piece was written to reflect the disenchchantment with the Vietnam War.


68 Miles 10.


70 Wandor 2:73.

71 Wandor 2:73.

72 Wandor 2:73.


74 Wandor 2:74.

75 Her awards include grants from the Office for Advanced Drama Research, the Alaska State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities (through the University of Wisconsin at LaCrosse), and the Heideman Award with Actors Theatre of Louisville. In addition, she was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship for Playwriting and the position of Playwright-in-Residence at Smith College.


79 Gallagher 6.

81 Moore 101.

82 Moore 101.

83 Moore 101.

84 Moore 101.


86 Showbill 7.

87 Showbill 8.

88 Showbill 8.

89 Moore 101.


91 Moore, "Theater Will Never be the Same," 74.


98 Kalem 74.
CHAPTER II: THREE VARIED VISIONS OF THE PRESENT IMPULSE:

Lavonne Mueller, Adele Shank and Wendy Wasserstein

Women's Project Director Julia Miles states that as a result of a traditional discrimination in the arts, "women, unaccustomed to putting themselves forward, have been reluctant to approach the theatre as a forum for their work." But in the last decade, the Women's Project at American Place Theatre in New York City, the Actors Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky, the Magic Theatre in San Francisco and the Playwrights Horizons in New York City have emerged as houses supportive of new and developing women playwrights.

At the American Place Theatre, Julia Miles has since 1978 created "a special environment that [welcomes] women in a professional embrace." Here, the playwright has the opportunity to develop her work through revisions after reactions from director, actors, designers, and audience. In one playwright's words, "the Project provided a place that had . . . a community, a family for my art." Joan Vail Thorne, playwright and director, said:

The Women's Project gives to me and all its writers and directors a place to raise their voices without apology--not to be heard above anyone else, but to be heard! And I think that more and more, with the time and encouragement the
Project offers, [we] will learn to use those voices to explore and evangelize the beautiful and the true, and even the bestial visions to which the feminine principle is heir. Many female playwrights share playwright Lavonne Mueller's view that "certainly Julia Miles and her Women's Project at the American Place Theatre has done more to help women dramatists, myself included, than any single person or theatre in the country." 

Jon Jory, artistic director of the Actors Theatre of Louisville since 1969, has made the production of new plays a significant strength of his operation. Jory, who not only fostered strong community support but promoted his regional theatre to national prominence, has created "something of a bright star in the cloudy theatrical skies of the American south." Jory established in 1977 the Festival of New American Plays, which has brought his theatre critical distinction and at least two awards, the Shubert Foundation's James N. Vaughn Award and the Margo Jones Award. Jory's Louisville theatre has shown no partiality to male or female writers; talent is the discriminating factor.

Another operation, New York's renowned Playwrights Horizons, is "dedicated to the development of American playwrights through the production of their work in readings, workshops and full scale production." Since its
origins in 1971, under the auspices of the West Side YWCA in New York City, more than seventy talented playwrights have been assisted with their new scripts by over 800 actors, directors, designers and technicians. For these artists, and those yet to come, Playwrights Horizons provides "a professional home base from which they can draw whatever support, assistance, advice and guidance they need."9 Budding playwrights have the advantage of extensive accommodations for "full productions" which may run eleven performances at one smaller experimental Manhattan theatre branch before moving to the Queens facility for eight additional performances, and then finally to workshop productions that might last four performances at Playwrights Horizons.

Other theatres, such as the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, have gambled on new playwrights, many of whom are female. Founded as "an alternative to mainstream theatre," the Magic Theatre began as a project in dadaism, surrealism, futurism and expressionism at the University of California at Berkeley.10 During its first year, the group produced plays by Ionesco, Tristan Tzara and Alfred Jarry; but in its second year, the group initiated a playwright-in-residence program, which concentrated upon producing new works. Among its alumni have been Sam Shepard, Terrence McNally, Lanford Wilson, LeRoi Jones, Jean-Claude van Itallie and Michael McClure. The playwright's presence during rehearsal permits
"the putting together of a dramatic event through a subtle interplay of all elements of the production."11 This chapter examines three of the many playwrights who have received nourishment from outlets such as these. Lavonne Mueller has worked closely with the Women's Project; Adele Edeling Shank has not only worked with the Women's Project and had work produced by Actors Theatre of Louisville, but has also found a theatrical home for her unique pieces with the Magic Theatre. Finally, Wendy Wasserstein has found at Playwrights Horizons a sympathetic stage for her work.

Lavonne Mueller, who has amassed an abundant body of work, began writing poetry in boarding school, and thereafter published her poetic work in a wide variety of publications. As a teacher, she has published scholarly articles on creative writing, language as art, poetry, film, and playwriting; she has published a textbook (Creative Writing for High School Students, 1977), and was named in 1975 Illinois Teacher of the Year. Mueller became interested in playwriting at the University of Iowa, where she earned the M.F.A. Degree. Subsequently, she has had eight plays produced, four published and ten presented as staged readings. Her produced plays include Isolates (1970), Oyster Crackers, Undershirts, and Mauve Lemonade (1975), Warriors from a Long Childhood (1979), Crimes and Dreams (1980), Killings on the Last Line (1980), Little Victories (1983), and The Only Woman General (1984). She
created two movie scripts, Pair of Jacks (1932) and Lost Parallel (1974). Mueller says that she "first started writing the way many women do." That is, she scribbled a poem while her daughter was away at nursery school and created a short story after husband and child were in bed at night. There was, she felt, a comfort in solitude akin to "the Emily Dickinson Syndrome"; she identified with the woman writer as a recluse. Her first play, meant "to impress her child," was a children's musical, Oyster Crackers, Undershirts, and Mauve Lemonade. A teacher friend read the play and persuaded Mueller to allow his class to perform it for the community; it became "a volunteer showcase for a room full of wonderful noisy kids." Encouraged by the success of this event, Mueller sent Oyster Crackers to Baker's Publishers and became a published playwright.

Oyster Crackers, Undershirts, and Mauve Lemonade, a play in two acts, has been widely produced, since 1975, by various community theatres across the United States. Mueller's book and lyrics were set to music by Larry Dwyer. The story, as told by L. A. Punt, a down-and-out actor elephant, is about Pearl Diamondfudge, a selfish, rich little girl. The mean Pearl screams so loudly that her mother has to use a megahorn when entering the daughter's bedroom. Pearl loves to sit on her fancy bed and eat oyster crackers and drink mauve lemonade.
The doctor advises a sick Pearl to wear undershirts, but she abhors the idea; she orders "designer undershirts," although she does not wear them. When her meanness gets out-of-hand, two "today" angels, Ms. Baddy and Ms. Goody, appear. The bad angel promises bad thoughts and bad dreams in return for Pearl's bad ways. The good angel promises good thoughts and good dreams, if Pearl reforms. Pearl does not heed the warnings, and, of course, Ms. Baddy's hand is forced.

Pearl's couch, doorknob and cat all retaliate. Godot, the cat, sprinkles pepper over Pearl's oyster crackers and in her lemonade. An "oyster cloister" appears to demand that Pearl return the oyster crackers to the oysters. Eventually, Pearl reforms and learns the valuable lesson of how to treat others.

Mueller's musical piece allows for much interaction among its ten characters. The dividing line between the good and bad characters is clear, and the inanimate objects which come alive appeal to a child's imagination. Even more importantly, the language is credible for children and serves to keep the plot moving as well as provide the message of the play. Musical numbers often involve more than one character and invite audience participation. A little girl's room that comes alive with a couch, stuffed cat, doorknob and little aliens provides an apt setting for a children's piece.
"On Becoming a Woman Playwright," an essay or manifesto by Mueller, tells of her evolution as a playwright. After Oyster Crackers, Mueller wrote earnestly and rapidly, creating nine full-length plays over a period of two years. She sent the scripts to several theatres and received numerous rejections:

On manuscripts in which I had typed my name as only L. Mueller, readers assumed for some reason that I was a man and thus I found the rejections were professional, detailed, encouraging. On manuscripts in which I was Mrs. Mueller or Lavonne Mueller, the letters were chatty, telegraphic and less encouraging, as if I were involved in an honest hobby. Even the writing paper itself was indicative. As a woman, I received torn half sheets, scribbled notes on the title page of my play; and once even musings on a paper dinner napkin (I can only assume the reader was eating lunch at the time.)

When responding to Mueller as a "man," publishers used formal theatre stationery. She learned that rather than "send" a play to the theatre, "one confronts the theatre--bombards the administration and tries to enlist the aid of a talented director or designer in the assault." Usually though, "such aggressive behavior is alien to most women."
Two years of rejections moved Mueller to action; she decided to go to New York City.

New York City pulled Mueller from her isolated corner, which she describes as being "often the materia prima of a woman's imagination." New York City pulled Mueller from her isolated corner, which she describes as being "often the materia prima of a woman's imagination." A "woman's corner," the primitive haven that fosters passivity, is the bottom shelf, the inner wall, the half door. "The Corner," she adds, "is immobility triumphing over the artist and public authority." Away from her corner, Mueller absorbed the New York City environs, its theatres, its eateries, its critics (namely the Village Voice), its Central Park, and its plays.

A proverbial lucky break came during a chance encounter with an actor who read and liked one of Mueller's plays. He passed the play on to his acting teacher at the American Place Theatre. "And it just so happened," Mueller recalls, "that the American Place Theatre, under the direction of Julia Miles, had received a grant to foster women's plays." The play which Ms. Miles chose was Warriors From a Long Childhood. Even Mueller recognized the irony of Warriors as a choice for the Women's Project, since the play is about four men in a Korean concentration camp. She thought at the time that it was a daring venture on the part of the Project.

Mueller's recollections of her experiences with Warriors reveal the method employed by the Women's Project in developing scripts and playwrights. At the Project, the
"playwright is only one of many people on a creative team, a production-team consisting of producer, director, designers, actors, press agents, and so on." Creative collaboration, as a process in the shaping of a script, originated with the Open Theatre and the experimental work of Megan Terry and others in the 1960's, and was successfully adopted by the Women's Project in carrying out its program of nurturing new female playwrights. Mueller confessed that she had to adjust to the collaborative process: "I had little experience as a team member. And so it is with many women. When I was going to school in the sixties, team sports for girls were relatively few. . . . Most studies done recently have declared that 'team experience' is the one area in which women feel most deprived." 

A female director and an all male cast added to the uniqueness of Warriors as a production. Here was a play about men, written, directed, and produced by women. Mueller noted that the actors seemed insecure in this environment. They questioned, "Could a woman writer and director understand male emotions more accurately than they?" Both the director and Mueller were besieged with challenges on dialogue, blocking, and interpretation. Mueller learned that she had to fight for her own artistic vision.

Mueller continued her collaborative efforts with the production of her next play, Crimes and Dreams (1981). She
still struggled to become an integrated part of the team; she had not yet become assertive enough. This time, she felt inhibited by the male producer and male director. The reviews in The New York Times and the Village Voice "mourned that the production did not serve the play," a fact which Mueller already knew. Haunted by her own passiveness, she accepted New York Times critic Frank Rich's assessment: "If Miss Mueller finds an artistic collaborator who can ignite her perverse portrait of human nature, a brilliant theatrical apocalypse could soon be at hand."

A factor operating against Mueller, as she saw it, was her feminine self. She studied other writers. Mallarme, for example, envisioned "his work as emerging from nothingness, out of the empty white universe of silence, reintegrated into literature by music, and everything collaborating toward the total rhythm. For the sources of his poetic language, he looked to pre-history, history, and "all the battles which mankind had already won." On the other hand, a female artist, "primarily outside of history, has nothing to rewin," Mueller asserts, since she "lacks the security which comes from a cultural heritage . . . thus she is sui generis a romantic who often turns to private reveries." In short, the female artist cannot draw from a heritage from which she has been traditionally excluded. With the passive side of the female artist's imagination in seeming revolt against the male aggressiveness, "she finds
solace in the intimate and the small."\(^{30}\) It is unfortunate, Mueller says, that most women playwrights limit themselves to writing only about women and their private worlds.

In Mueller's development as a woman playwright, living with the trauma of critical response became another challenge. She was totally unprepared for the reaction to *Warriors*; unlike any other artist, "the playwright is suddenly immersed in a cacophony of judgment." Mueller recalls the tension of the opening night of *Warriors*, including the press with clipboards and flashlights: "the first two rows were writing rows, with terrifying pointillistic dots of light."\(^{31}\) Two important reviews of *Warriors* were contradictory; a good one in the *New York Times* and a less favorable one in the *New York Post*, to which she reacted emotionally: she loved all persons reading the *Times* on the bus and hated all those reading the *Post*. An artist's vulnerability to critical judgment transcends age, sex, and nationality. Naturally, some critics thought it remarkable that a female playwright had written about men, one stating that if one did not know, he would assume the author was male. But Mueller could retort, when *Vanities* opened (a play about women written by a man), no critic responded that if one didn't know, he would assume the author was female.

Mueller found the critical reception of *Warriors* perplexing: "I was praised for capturing male speech and
damned for not writing the way a man talks. I was lauded for being able to put myself inside the mind of a man, and I was rebuked for venturing into alien territory."\(^3\) The mixed reactions to Mueller's work persisted. Some critics disliked the crass language of *Killings on the Last Line*, which followed *Warriors* at American Place Theatre. The character, Mrs. Starkey, for example, strikes a very male posture, "unlike the way women are perceived to express themselves."

**MRS. STARKEY**

I was a kid . . . I walked these two big dogs fer old lady. Legs went on her, 'n she give me a nice piece of change run 'em to the park.

(PAUSE)

They was pals, them two dogs. Brang up together from pups.

(PAUSE)

A bitch would come by, and they'd do in heat. Well, their peckers would start ta grow . . . slow 'n lazy like. Bigger. Bigger. I swear ta God, they both swelled up like exactly together.

(PAUSE)

I can't ferget it.

(PAUSE)

I'd like me somebody ta my side who'd feel all the heat I was feelin . . . jist when I was feelin it.\(^3\)

Fantasies, such as those of the character ABC in *Warriors*, were admired as unique for a female writer. But for Mueller, no essential difference exists between male and female artists. She suggests that women choose from a wider range of themes so as to expand the female sensibilities. One such significant theme is war, which Mueller took up in
a talk to a group attending a midwest playwriting conference:

It is ironic that in the 80's more than any other time, women can confidently write about war—a theme heretofore exclusive to men. Most male artists opted not to go into service in Vietnam, so we have for the first time a significantly large coterie of male writers who have virtually no first-hand knowledge of combat. Women, however, are wives of soldiers, mothers of soldiers, and have probably as much if not more emotional experience of war today than many contemporary authors.³⁴

Furthermore, she pointed out that female playwrights have always had one of the greatest generals in the world as a role model (Joan of Arc), but few writers seem to have looked to this "female general" for inspiration. Consequently, Mueller wrote about Joan in *Little Victories*, a play about the heroine as soldier, not as saint.

In addition to war, Mueller suggested in her talk, the female playwright might invade the privileged male turf and use the brothel as subject, so as to "demythize a certain rigid male reality."³⁵ The future of "'audacious feminine imagination' depends," Mueller insists, upon the playwright's bold choice of subject."³⁶ Her play, *Longings Against the Death of Madame Bovary*, in progress for several
years, is designed to illustrate her concerns about unexplored topics and themes for female writers. The play depicts a woman visiting male prostitutes in a brothel for women. Clearly, Mueller warns, the key to the play's significance lies not in symbolizing liberation for all women or even transcendence for "an omniscient" female playwright, but rather that a house of prostitution is made available to the woman character to experience all of her sexual fantasies. Usually the male seeks female prostitutes; women do not patronize houses of male prostitution.

Mueller acknowledges the influences of Julia Miles and her Women's Project at American Place Theatre, and Howard Stein, "a brilliant professor of playwriting at Columbia University," who has guided her work and that of other women playwrights "with a demanding eye toward craft and originality--regardless of gender." Also helpful have been foundations, such as the Ford, Guggenheim, Rockefeller, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Arts Council. Yet, Mueller claims that she entered playwriting "posthumously," that is, after misgivings about her not being male had died; she has become a "woman playwright," not a "playwright." She encourages tenacity for herself, as well as other female playwrights when she says, in words of one woman character to her fellow workers, at the end of Killings on the Last Line: "Now you just think about
everything outside the ground pushing up—flowers and grass—getting themselves born hard and hurting, like all life."39

Admiring Garcia Lorca's definition of drama being "weeping and laughing," Mueller wisely adds that the "weeping and laughing" is not gratuitous but the result of skillful playwriting."40 Since she has been seriously writing plays for some time, Mueller has come to believe in careful planning. In an essay entitled "Before You Write Your Play," she advises an eight-point, step by step outline "to plot all emotions on a definite journey—a journey that follows a very clear course toward a destination."41 Her steps are these: (1) the Germ; (2) Preparation; (3) Dramatic Question; (4) Rising Action; (5) Turning Point; (6) Falling Action; (7) Dramatic Question answered; and (8) Wrap-up.42

The Germ. Henry James, according to Mueller, termed the first idea for a creative work as "the germ;" he once received "the germ" for a novel from the casual remark at a dinner table.43 A germ can be a mere word, phrase, sound, or sight which attracts the writer enough to be considered in an artistic framework. Mueller's germ for Warriors came from a story she heard as child growing up on an Army post. The tale centered around four American GI's who were prisoners of war during the Korean conflict. At the end of the war, the men, afraid to leave one another, had become so attached that the military police had to carry literally each one home.44 Mueller wanted to explore the bonding that
made this attachment possible. She decided that they had created a family unit constituting roles of father, mother, brother and infant.

The "germ" for Little Victoria sprang from her own casual suggestion at a playwriting conference that women writers should make use of one of the world's greatest generals; Mueller, herself, then decided to write about Joan of Arc as soldier on the battlefield. A patch of dogtooth violets in a field of weeds provided the "germ" for Killings on the Last Line. The violets suggested a poetic loneliness that reminded the playwright of displacement. Mueller further contemplated: "What if a farm woman, out of necessity, finds herself working in a factory? What kind of emotions and problems would this entail?" It is imperative, Mueller says, that the writer remain receptive to even the most unlikely "germs." Furthermore, the source of the germ should be recorded, since the "germ" is often "the true core" of what the playwright hopes to capture in the drama; the more informed "the core," the better.

Preparation. At the beginning, the playwright should concentrate on introducing the characters to the audience. Mueller had problems with the eight women who come onstage immediately in Killings on the Last Line. The first draft of the play proved confusing; one could not sort out all of the different personalities. Her solution was to bring the characters out in three groups: a woman and a daughter; and
after several short speeches, three more women. When the
five were integrated with several pages of dialogue, the
remaining three were introduced in a chemical factory; they
are elated that it is a "half day," one of the few granted
after the Union's appeal. Actually, the women dread the
work and fear contamination from the chemicals; however,
since they need the job, they have repressed the fear. One
worker, unable to afford a sitter, hides her baby in the
washroom of the factory.

Dramatic Question. The dramatic question refers to the
central tension of the play. One character (or more)
clearly knows his/her/their predicament, which is voiced to
other characters, thus informing the audience. The question
is presented early in the action and answered at the end of
the play. In Killings on the Last Line, one worker warns
the others that the discovery of the hidden baby could mean
the end of everyone's job. Question: What can we do about
the baby? (Mueller does not choose to handle the more
likely question of contamination for the workers, at this
point.)

Rising Action. A series of complications result from
the dramatic question. Characters begin to try to solve the
problems, creating suspense for the audience. In Killings,
the mother of the hidden baby tries to calm the fears of the
other workers:
Ellis: I give him phenobarbital to sleep.
It's a good little thing. Out like a light all the time.48

When the mother leaves the machine to check on the baby, other workers remind her that the machine records every second of work-time lost. Tension is heightened when a supervisor nearly discovers the hidden child. In *Little Victories*, Joan of Arc, in the face of possible defeat, must cope with the complications that many of her captains are refusing to follow her; some are deserting and one officer wants to kill her.

**Turning point.** This is the crisis of the play; at this moment, characters are forced to resolve a dilemma. In *Killings*, a minor supervisor senses that something is hidden in the washroom; the mother nervously responds, while the other workers watch, silently irritated:

MAVIS: (Supervisor) I don't know what is hid in here . . . dog . . . cat . . . I don't wanna know. But you git it gone tomorrow.

ELLIS: Mavis, you put your own little Royce to yer car in parking lot . . . when he had hiself a cold 'n couldn't go ta school.

MAVIS: That was a long time ago.

ELLIS: Before you was supervisor.

MAVIS: Git it gone. Tomorrow. Ok? Now I ain't seen me nothin. Ok? (Pause) You git yerself back to work.49

The rising action has built to this point; the workers must make a decision. Next, in the absence of the supervisor, the mother tries to convince the other workers that she will
find another hiding place. One woman insists that the baby cannot stay, for the good of everyone's job. A fight ensues, which is even more damaging to their jobs.

In *Warriors from a long Childhood*, the prisoners, who have deteriorated mentally and physically, live in a make-shift hut after the war. Grossly humiliated that one of the men would beg from the village child, the father figure decides it is time to go home:

CHRIS: Look at us. We're bums . . . bums!
(He turns away from the man. After a pause:)
There's a special army train going through here tonight. For Seoul. We're getting on.

TONY: Whattaya mean . . . we're getting on?

CHRIS: Leaving!!!

TONY: Breaking up? The members cannot fathom breaking up their family; yet, the parent analyzes their unhealthy situation and forces a move.

_Falling action._ In Mueller's scheme of playwriting, "everything begins to 'comedown' from the turning point." For example, in *Killings*, a workers' union releases a bulletin that some towels and uniforms in the factory are possibly contaminated. The baby has been wrapped in these contaminated materials; everyone could be affected. They must all band together now, as indicated by the once antagonistic Hidelman:
HIDELMAN

Ellis, you go home tonight and burn all them old uniforms and towels you took. Hear me! You git them off that kid . . . and don't feed him no more creamers from the cafeteria.

(Pause)

Ellis . . . if you don't I'm coming over there and burn 'em myself.

The women conclude that they must talk to the officials about the "spills" which are at a dangerous level.

HIDELMAN: Look at my fingernails!

ELMHURST (Factory supervisor): They're dirty.

HIDELMAN: Look again. That ain't dirt. (Pause) Skin under there's dark blue. From exposure to aldrin spills.

ELMHURST: You show me one monitor that has registered spills. (Pause) Didn't I get your people safety showers?

HIDELMAN: It's not enough. That crap goes through unbroken skin.

The matter becomes urgent enough to force the workers to act on their problem.

The Dramatic Question answered. Technically, this is the denouement or the untying. A solution is reached. In Killings, the workers want the baby revealed and the management confronted. Finally, the workers can acknowledge their fears and demand that the management deal with the workers' problems. In Warriors, the men are uncertain about their future, but they have determined that the umbilical cord must be severed. Such is the point when the characters decide how to solve their own problems.
Wrap-up. Here the characters adjust to the solution. Bringing the play to a psychological close, the writer prepares the audience for the final curtain. In Killings, the women slowly leave and we hear:

ELLIS: My baby . . . he's gonna be alright, ain't he?

QUASHIE: Yes, darlin. Now you just think about everything outside the ground pushin up flowers and grass--gettin' themselves born hard and hurtin, like all life.38

Mueller wishes to show "that the women will struggle; that is the life force. It is the eternal hope of human beings."36 She seeks ways to allow her characters an effective exit, and she believes that a good last line is imperative.

Julia Miles, director of the Women's Project at the American Place Theatre, says that Mueller writes "mostly about men;" in fact, she wants to write the male version of Madame Bovary.57 Warriors came from her own experience in a male dominated environment. Mueller says that she has always prided herself "on independence. I grew up on an army post. I have traveled a good deal, been by myself in strange places a good deal."58 It is not surprising, then, that Mueller should write about four surviving, suffering prisoners of the Korean war, who desperately cling to one another in a family unit of their own design. She says, "when I was asked, as I always was, just who those four men
were, I would parrot Flaubert's 'I am Madame Bovary.' I am those four men in *Warriors.*

Mel Gussow says that "from a male point of view the play *Warriors* would be considered unfeminine since it presents a rough graphic portrait of four soldiers confined in a prison camp." In truth, the characters, bound not in battle, but to each other in shared isolation, paint a genderless condition. The men could be stranded anywhere, even on a desert island. The portrait merely reveals that the confined "quartet desperately grasps threads of honor and of civilized behavior."

Mueller carefully individualizes her characters through the creation of a family unit, with a leader and father figure in the captain (Chris), an intellectual who provides leadership for the entire quartet. The farm boy Tony, a pragmatist and mother figure, keeps his sanity by toying with an abacus made from pebbles; he tries to shelter the "children." A camp clown, ABC, inventive with critiques of imaginary erotic movies, represents the adolescent brother. And Buddy, the baby, is the sick and nearly insane soldier, whose care becomes the primary mission of his companions.

Sex, food, and survival dominate the minds and conversations of these men. They eat rotten vegetables, cough up 14-inch tape worms and lie in their own excrement. They talk and dream about sex. The captain suggests one of the play's ideas, if not a dominant one, when he says, "The
line between masculinity and femininity is not always clearcut."

The setting, a prison camp in the first act and a deserted railroad station in the second act, marks the boundaries of the play's action: from a group of men who survive in a mutually constructed family unity to the imminent breaking of their bonds. Credibility, however, is strained by the indeterminate time differential between the prison endurance and the sphere of activity at the train station, by the undisclosed nature of the sick man's illness, and by the sheer absence of other soldiers. A train, the play's deus ex machina, arrives, but it is questionable as the only means of escape. Among all the uncertainties, time presents the greatest problem. Several critics, including William Raidy of the Newark Time Ledger found "long childhood" (in the full title Warriors of a Long Childhood) baffling, whereas I believe it to be essential to a complete understanding of the play. "Long Childhood" connotes the conventional family ties which have been extended and transplanted into a most unusual atmosphere. Home for the quartet takes on a new meaning. Perhaps, Buddy means that they are caught in a time warp when he says, "The past is a bucket of ashes" and "there's nothing left in the world but an ocean of tomorrows.""

After Warriors, at the request of Julia Miles, Mueller wrote a play about women, called Killings on the Last Line
(1979), which won a Rockefeller Foundation Playwright in Residence Grant.\(^6\) In plot, the play "focuses on the lives of nine working women in a Chicago reactor parts factory, their fight for survival in 1979, the Year of the Child, and their hopes for the 80s."\(^6\) Mueller uses a quote from Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* in a prefatory note to her play and to further characterize the predicament of these factory workers:

> If it were desired to reduce a man to nothing—to punish him atrociously, to crush him in such a manner that the most hardened murderer would tremble before such punishment—it would be necessary only to give his work a character of complete uselessness. . . . Let him be constrained to pour water from one vessel into another, or to carry earth from one place to another and back again, then I am persuaded that at the end of a few days the prisoner would strangle himself or commit a thousand crimes punishable with death, rather than live in such an abject condition and endure such torments.\(^6\)

Reviewing the play for *Variety Magazine*, Morna Murphy called *Killings* "a slice of some very bleak lives, relieved somewhat by sexually raucous humor, that shows the stunted promises of poverty-oppressed women."\(^7\) Lacking the courage to fight for themselves, they fight among themselves and use
ri bald sex as escape. Furthermore, "they are trapped into caring for helpless children or dependent parents or are grimly surviving for yet one more day."71 As I noted earlier, their involvement is heightened when one worker hides her baby and jeopardizes everyone's job. Upon learning that the baby, as well as all the workers, are threatened by chemical contamination, the workers respond according to their individual circumstances.

The characters range in age from nineteen to seventy-five: Hidelman is a sex-crazed divorcee; Ellis, a mother "forced" by economic circumstances to hide her drugged baby in the trash can of the washroom; Betty feels "consumed" by her 90-year old mother; Mrs. Starkey and her nineteen year daughter, Starkey, work side by side. Quashie and Juba, the two Bahamians, not only add comic relief in manner and dialect but also impart another dimension to the play's thought. As our newest "citizens," the Bahamians share equally in our country's oppression. Ironically, most immigrants expect to share only the country's wealth, but they must eventually face a grim reality. In addition, Day-Tripper, a 75 year old part-time worker, and Mavis, the union representative, indicate that the job does not get better a few levels up the ladder. All of the workers seem to hate their jobs, but they are glad for this half day and the few others mandated by the workers' union. They absorb themselves in taunting and teasing each other about looks,
sex, and lay-offs; they curse each other and the machines, which noisily overpower or interrupt the women from time to time.

Spectacle and sound are very much a part of this play. A Voice periodically announces various bulletins over the intercom; and the "Clock" constantly reminds of the work time recorded by the machines, which make noise and frequently break down. Further, Mueller's language credibly reflects the low class of the workers and the Bahamian dialect.

The women have resigned themselves to unfavorable conditions, since they truly need this job:

QUASHIE: A "swamp place"--that's what this floor [last line] is. Folks back home call this a "fever hole" . . . white man's grave.

MRS. STARKEY: Sweat box city.72

Initially, the women would rather argue over rumors about layoffs or promotions than demand a change of conditions or more security. They scorn Ellis for bringing her baby to the factory, until they realize they are all dying a slow death on the job in the midst of chemical contamination. Ironically, news comes that Betty is wanted for possibly killing her aged mother. Did the "consumption" finally break her spirit? Subjected to such "abject" working conditions, what workers would not be broken? But, fortunately, the women workers, in acting to save the child
and themselves, find the strength to demand that their grievances as workers be heard and met.

*Crimes and Dreams* (1980), called by one critic "brilliant and gripping theatre," is somewhat suggestive of Lanford Wilson's *The Rhimers of Eldrich.* The play is set on the Illinois farm of Cy and Lucy Imboden, on the day of the annual meeting of the Mothers and Fathers of Murdered Children. The Imbodens, who sometime ago lost their daughter to a murderer (never identified) are hosting this meeting. A television reporter, Shelt Taylor, who has had assignments in Germany, Korea, and Vietnam, now covers this child-murder beat; and a young woman, with guitar, balloons and a roadside stand, creates and sings ballads about local murders. They both busily prepare for the camera throughout the play. Other characters include three farmhands (one a rehabilitated convict, the second a drunk, and the third a hot-tempered Vietnam war veteran) and a paperboy, son of one of the neighbors.

Edith Oliver describes the play as "a deft, grim satire." Mueller presents the festive preparations for this annual meeting with a scornful relish. Shelt, the poet's version of "a Walter Cronkite-type" reporter, plans to sensationalize the whole affair for television viewers; Lady, the instant balladeer, romanticizes the event; and Mrs. Imboden, fastidiously engrossed in plans for the festival, seems naive about her lazy "hired-ons," R.C. and
Frazer. R.C., a veteran, seeking an outlet for his anger and with a thirst for blood, marks Justin, a mute, as an easy target, since the latter is an ex-convict. Justin becomes the scapegoat, with all blaming him for the death of the Imboden's little girl; Justin clearly is a menace to society.

The murder of the Imboden girl is never solved, despite the suspicion of Justin as the likely killer. Justin's only friend, Casey, is a playful ten year old paperboy, who, teasing once too often, meets his own death, with R.C.'s assistance. Since the dormant suspicions about Justin can be easily stirred, R.C. rationalizes lynching the "known killer" and coerces Frazer into this mad act as an accomplice in order to rid the community of its "unsavory" kind. Complications continue to mount; Casey's mother holds the Imbodens responsible for Casey's death, because they dared hire an ex-convict. Cy Imboden, already a heart-broken man, never adjusted to his daughter's death, and his wife, Lucy, found that quoting Scriptures and discussing Heaven were not as therapeutic as she had imagined. In the end, as plans for the meeting collapse, she, too, is inconsolably crushed; finally, a telegram arrives to announce officially that the party is off.

All of the characters who reside in the tiny Illinois town share a peculiar dialect. Poor grammar is commonplace,
such as Lucy's "have you saw his Forsythia?" and everyone uses "ta" awkwardly as preposition:

"It ain't what is got ta [in] stores"
"... havin' somebody like Mr. Taylor ta ['on or 'around'] the place"
"I did ta that one." [I went to that one.]

Many sounds which should create a festive air necessary for a meeting or party eventually intensify the tragedies which disrupt the Imbodens' dreams. The noisy curiosity-seekers, the singer, the reporter and his bull horn, sirens, banners, balloons and party trimmings provide dimensions of spectacle. Behind all of the gaiety, Mueller implies that pleasant and peaceful moments are limited in stark reality; there is no time to dream.

Mueller takes as much care with mood as she does characterization in Crime and Dreams. As horrors slowly and chillingly unfold, details methodically accumulate, revealing these simple God-fearing country folk. Normal Charles describes Mueller's skill in musical terms: "At the play's awesome start, the action slowly but surely breaks forth like a truly unique and borning symphony of the loftiest heights." Edith Oliver compared Mueller's dark comic imagination to Joe Orton, "but her way," she added, "is very much her own." Norman Charles further notes that the orchestrated horror establishes mood and undergirds the dramatic action, from start to finish. Charles says that the play's ending is disconcerting, seeming "more philosophically clad than emotionally riveting." Perhaps
Mueller felt it necessary to be pedantic about what she views a most disturbing situation; the message must be clearly stated, not just poignant. Possibly Mueller preferred to emphasize that the human dilemma surrounding the "nature and destiny of man is a never ceasing challenge and, indeed, a wonder to human history." The reporter says over the bullhorn in the ending of the play:

SHELT: Here to the Imboden farm, we find history . . . not unlike the mobs from the ancient past who witnessed lynchings and executions . . . not unlike the crowds who rallied Christians to the lions.78

Little Victories (1983) united Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony in an unusual plot interweaving the lives of the 14th century French Joan and the 19th century American Susan. Critic Leslie Bennetts noted that "the play explores the parallels between Joan's struggle to win the respect of the army of men she commanded and Miss Anthony's solitary crusade through the still-wild West to solicit support for woman suffrage among hostile cowboys."79 Mueller explains her inspiration:

I had wanted to do this for a long time, because I felt very unhappy about the way courageous women are portrayed. I felt we really hadn't seen women as heroes. I think most women don't think that's possible, for themselves or for other women. I wanted women to have a kind of heritage of courage, to take chances and understand that women
can do whatever they want to do if they have the courage, whether it's leading armies or traveling along to find some kind of destiny.\textsuperscript{80}

As in the first scene of Caryl Churchill's \textit{Top Girls} wherein famous women of art and history exchange ideas, in \textit{Little Victories} Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony meet and discuss women's rights, women's suffering, and their own relationship with men. In the play, the women not only actively contest male domination but win. The two women characters become credible human beings, without sermons, manipulated speeches, or extensive extracts from history. Instead of putting Susan Anthony on the stump, or Joan in battle, Mueller attempts to humanize them through avoiding the traditional heroic lore, which permits by the end of the play "a fresh understanding of their achievements in conquering an Everest of skepticism."\textsuperscript{81} The two female pioneers were well ahead of their time; they challenged the status quo. A woman's place was "at the washboard," and Mueller provides "numerous evocative images," of the prevailing attitudes toward women, such as "the wife who is carried into the kitchen on her sick bed so that she can fulfill her domestic duties."\textsuperscript{82}

Mueller skillfully reconstructs time according to her own needs. Of the two characters, Anthony is more fully developed and juxtaposed against the familiar image of Joan. Although "the 19th Century and the Middle Ages meet each
"other daily on the Prairie" in the play, "the stories are sharpest when they are separate."83 In each story, Mueller maintains that the small victories make up for some of the big losses. Susan Anthony's story reiterates the point; she can rejoice in even the slightest victory:

I've over 10,000 names now. A woman on crutches clomped her way up a muddy street to be the first person in this state to sign up. In one town, a husband beat his wife for signing this. Not just women's names. Men too. They say the legislature isn't laughing at me any more. They say Washington D. C. might be afraid of Susan B. Anthony.84

In one of her conversations with Joan, Anthony reveals other sensibilities:

JOAN: What about that artist land-surveyor who sketches?
SUSAN: Oh, he's different. He reads poetry to me ... sits close. Oh, I love a man's smell: train smoke, sweat, horses, sunshine. (PAUSE) Sometimes I think ... stay with him. Don't go to California. Take his warmth. (PAUSE) Then I think of all the people who sign my petition. They depend on me. (PAUSE) And there are the women waiting to sign my petition. And I know
there's a truth stronger than the single pulse of my life! (PAUSE)\textsuperscript{85}

Then, on a clear feminist note, she challenges the men:

Do you know what baseball is? (PAUSE)

My brothers were allowed to play baseball! But not me! Because I was a girl and baseball is not polite. (PAUSE) So you know what I did? . . . And I learned to play the game as I should be. And I ran the bases hard. And sometimes we won and sometimes we lost. But we all played, that's the American way.\textsuperscript{86}

As Gussow points out, "the characters are women first, symbols second."\textsuperscript{87} They speak of their causes, but they also discuss the absence of romance in their lives. Singularity, each woman exhorts strength of purpose and heroic individualism; and each complements the other. Joan supports Susan's failing spirits and Susan is a good listener for Joan. Mueller omits the obvious and more familiar details from history, concentrating upon the visionary strength of two exceptional leaders who are also women.

Mueller chose an impressionistic style, invoking mood through quick visual associations. Her plot utilizes the literary motif of the archetypal journey; the characters travel through various parts of America and France. Both literally and figuratively, the characters journey toward a
specific mission, in search of a purpose in life. Mueller brings together environments of two separate time periods without a decisive beginning or ending. She develops the heroines in her complex plot through suggestions of mood, hints of desires and/or impulses, and fragments of action. These impressionistic elements combine to present a compassionate picture of two women struggling against their baffling worlds; and these women definitely overcome.

In summary, Mueller altered history to weave a credible plot. Joan of Arc and Susan Anthony journey through their separate frames to key victories early in their careers, then confer with each other. Joan the leader readies her men for the Battle of Orleans in 1429; and Susan struggles along an arduous trek across country to solicit supporters for her political cause in the 1870's. "You a bigamist?" a curious stranger inquires of Anthony who has broken the law. "No, I'm a voter," she replies of her offense. She is determined to decriminalize woman's suffrage. Striking out for California on the Miles Deadwood Stagecoach, she campaigns for equal rights, approaching various natives (innkeepers and tramps, for example). In these scenes, Mueller captures the regionalism of American speech and picturesque images of geographical locales. The emphasis of the play centers upon defying extreme odds in order to achieve the small victories. Throughout Little Victories,
Goethe's words (which Mueller uses as a preface) hover over the heroism:

> Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it,
> Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.\(^8\)

**The Only Women General** (1984), Mueller's most recent play, features General Oliver Wiggins, who must measure up to the philosophy embedded in the preface, the words of Colonel T. E. Lawrence:

> Nine-tenths of tactics were certain enough to be teachable in schools; but the irrational tenth was like the kingfisher flashing across the pool, and in it lay the test of the generals.\(^9\)

At the rise of the curtain, the audience views a slide with this quote, while Wiggins is being paged by her superior, a mechanical voice ("Voice").

Strangely enough, Wiggins, the only soldier around, feels that this isolation is some type of punishment, but the Voice advises that it is normal. Her assignment of combat duty calls for "PATROL MINUS COMPANY." The play proceeds through several of Wiggins' memory stations, as a Second Lieutenant (training combat dogs), Field grade officer (running a rumor hotline for GI's), child with her father, Medical Public Relations officer, Colonel (working with General Stack), and countless trials to become a superstar general. The ultimate honor comes in being selected to accompany Plutonium 239 in isolation from the environment for more than 250,000 years; the plutonium has been stored
aboard the Cruise Ship I with General Wiggins. The Voice applauds her:


The plaudits continue. That she has been mentioned to the Pope, who is granting 250,000 years off her purgatory, also enhances General Wiggins' honorable service. Further, J. C. Penney's and Sears are making Wiggins Deck Chairs, such as the one she is presently using. The Voice explains that her every request is granted while she is 250,000 years in orbit. Wiggins, being a "red-blooded American woman," reluctantly asks for a male caller "with a little heavy breathing." The Voice processes the request and informs Wiggins of the results:

. . . well . . . something can be arranged. Nothing extreme. A few chosen breaths here and there. Data has stored just the man. (PAUSE) Nothing flashy. Two years of junior college. Divorced. Mobile home. (PAUSE) Rock Bighaber.  

Wiggins, overcome emotionally, reverently accepts Rock, "a stud," who appears on a screen for the audience. And we are left to wonder about the fate and the vulnerability of the only woman general. Will sexuality break the spirit of the female? But despite her outrageous tasks or assignments, she excelled through the ranks; then no one knew how to utilize the skills of a woman general. Mueller
intends to strike an American nerve regarding the proscribed role of the female.

Mueller's plays deal "with radically disparate subjects:" four men in a concentration camp; a group of women factory workers; the hidden aspects of crime in a small Midwestern town; and the small victories, not those traditionally linked with legendary heroines like Joan of Arc, Susan B. Anthony, and the only woman general. Furthermore, she has in progress a play examining the "military mind," another, dealing with the diamond mines of Africa, and a musical about John Philip Sousa. Mueller says about her work:

I want to explore as many different subjects as I can. I never want to get into a pattern. I could easily get hung up on the military mind, which fascinates me, but I am trying to develop as many different areas to write about as I can. I feel that I'm still exploring my own mind—and I keep finding out different things about myself in the process.

Since her mother died quite young, Mueller's father, a career Army officer, reared her, and her male/military background played a major role in her artistic inspiration: I grew up on an Army base, where I had an adjutant assigned me the way some kids would have a housekeeper. I found myself totally immersed in a
landscape of men, like these characters in *Little Victories* and I just used my imagination to see how they dealt with it.⁹⁶

Repeatedly, Mueller attempts to discredit preconceived notions about the female and the female playwright. One resounding thematic note in her work "is that we have to make our own families."⁹⁷ Often these families may have to be created in a strange and even hostile environment. Familial bonds benefit all-male, all-female or heterosexual relationships equally; however, Mueller does believe that the female deserves special attention and redefinition. Although women are cast in a world of frustration, rampant crime, and cold oppression, some few heroines and a few small victories do emerge.⁹⁸ Mueller does not leave the controlling philosophical thought to chance, rather she states it explicitly either in the preface or epilogue.

As a playwright, Mueller commits herself to being explorative, invading subject areas generally shunned by female playwrights, such as military and other unconventional experiences. The journey, a familiar motif in Mueller's work, may be significant of the playwright's own quest for full expression of her talents. She creates images and impressions with adroitness; and her language complements the unique environments. Above all, Mueller means to challenge any restraints, philosophical, stylistic or otherwise, imposed upon the "woman playwright." In
addition to her plays, she has written several professional articles on playwriting, the art of silence, and the use of the "PAUSE" to establish mood and tempo in plays.

Besides Mueller and Rose Goldemberg, several other playwrights have had some association with the Women's Project at the American Place Theatre. During the 1979-80 season, a rehearsed reading of Winterplay by Adele Edeling Shank was featured. Although she had had other plays produced elsewhere, she became especially interested in the new surge of female talent being recognized and promoted at the Women's Project.

Born in Minnesota, Shank has resided in California since 1954. She holds a M.A. in playwriting from the University of San Diego. She wrote her first play in 1966, but was dissatisfied with it, as well as with the four which followed. Later, she authored a contemporary version of Ben Jonson's Volpone, called Fox and Co. (1977), and with Everard d'Harnoncourt, translated Fernando Arrabal's The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria (1969), which has been produced by the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, La Mama in New York, and the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut. Two short plays, Dry Smoke (1981) and Innocence Abroad (1983) were commissioned by the Actors Theatre of Louisville. One of her major projects, a series of plays about different aspects of California suburban life, resulted in Sunset/Sunrise (1979),
Winterplay (1979), Stuck: A Freeway Comedy (1980), Sand Castles (1981), and Grass House (1982). War Horses, her most recent work, represents a departure from the series; its subject is the great feud between nineteenth century actors Edwin Forrest and William Charles Macready.99

Shank's sequence of plays on California suburban living demonstrates "hyperrealistic comedy," a style of particular significance to Shank. She calls her writing, especially in the early stages "a kind of cross between Giraudoux and Pinter, although no one in the U.S. . . . had heard of Pinter at the time.100 Although the Pinter element grew stronger as she continued to write, Shank remained dissatisfied:

It was 1966 and theatre felt irrelevant, at least the kind of theatre I could write. I kept thinking that one should be able to make an explosion onstage, a theatrical event so extraordinary that it would shake all of the world's idiocy and cruelty into common sense and compassion. Needless to say, I wasn't quite up to the task, so I stopped writing.101

After travel and work in theatre collectives over a ten-year period, Shank felt ready to begin writing plays again. She had acquired a keener sense of the importance of planning and design in writing, and of the use of the visual arts as a dominant expressive element. For her evolving
dramatic vision, Shank acknowledges the influence of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson and John Fox, in addition to Bertolt Brecht and Anton Chekhov.¹⁰²

Shank's unique style is difficult to characterize; critics disagree about definitions for Hyperrealism, which is sometimes also called Super Realism, or Photo Realism. Edward Lucie-Smith's study, Super Realism (1979), notes four views of the style, as follows.¹⁰³

Cindy Nemser: "With their magnified close-up visions of the exquisite realities of both the natural and the man made, Super Realist artists are reminding us of the beautiful gifts we are negligently squandering."

H. R. Raymond: "These New--or Newer--Realists depict a fallen world with a fallen technique. They offer a universe of phenomena from which all traces of the (luminous?) have drained."

Lucie-Smith: "The central concern of the Photo Realist is not the displaced and alienated man, but to clarify an image of all that is not man."

Gerrit Henry: "In Photo Realism, reality is made to look so overpoweringly real as to make it pure illusion: through the basically magical means of point-for-point precisionist rendering, the actual is portrayed as being so real that it doesn't exist."

Super Realism, as an innovative style in the visual arts, began to gain recognition in the late sixties and
early seventies. At first, it triumphed more with collectors than with critics. Exhibitions were held in the United States, England, France, Germany, Canada and Australia, and critical reactions to the style emerged in many articles and full length studies. Despite this documentation, "real, reality and realism are meanings somewhat difficult to pinpoint historically and semantically."¹⁰⁴ No clear line of division seems to exist between Super Realism and its immediate predecessor (of the early and middle sixties), which tried "to create high art out of values, attitudes and characteristic artifacts of mass culture and consumer society."¹⁰⁵ Advertising signs, shopfronts, automobiles, and pictures from travel brochures are typical subjects for both Pop Art and Super Realism. American Super Realism does recognize both the uneasy consciousness of the contemporary urban environment (which simultaneously attracts the artist and arouses his disgust) and the equally uneasy recognition of art's minority status, however much it may "truckle to the mob."¹⁰⁶

Artists have been haunted by an ambition to outdo the photograph since its invention, and Super Realism has developed a new system out of this aspiration. Instead of a personalized transformation of objects and phenomena as they exist extended in space and directly experienced, the Super/Photo/Hyper Realists "utilize mechanical intermediary images already two dimensional: slides, photographs,
projections or printed material." In brief, the American Super Realist painters search for subject matter to emblematically express conscious Americanism and directly communicate with a broad American public (the average person), while denying free play of the emotions. The emphasis centers upon "pure recognition" of Americana. Though American in origin, the movement now has international boundaries.

Shank's husband, Theodore Shank, suggested "hyperrealism" as a style for his wife's new play (Sunset/Sunrise); she had in mind the setting (a suburban California home with swimming pool, barbecue and patio) and the characters, a typical California family who lived in such a home and their neighbors. Interested in the hyperrealistic painters since the late sixties, the Shanks were attempting to adapt a theatrical equivalent; they were not trying to imitate the hyperrealistic painters, however. "You can't duplicate one medium in another," Ms. Shank explains, "any theatrical hyperrealism would be as different from hyperrealism in painting as theatrical expressionism from expressionism painting." Ms. Shank's tenets for hyperrealism, developed from studying paintings, are revealed in her early notes:

No exposition. What you see is what there is.

Focus on the surface, don't let the audience
project themselves into the situation; no emotional involvement. Treating details that are usually ignored creates a kind of barrier which does not let the audience go below the surface. They will notice what they usually don't see.Deal with mundane, everyday situations and people, as the paintings deal with car bumpers and diners. When they leave this material and deal with the victim of a motorcycle accident (Duane Hensen's work), they let in emotion.¹⁰⁹

The Shanks went on to demonstrate their concept of hyperrealism in a series of plays. The result, Ms. Shank says, involves a "somewhat distanced audience perspective:"¹¹⁰ The audience tends to view the events onstage as if looking at them through a window or a hole in a fence. This voyeuristic attitude allows the audience to project onto the characters and events. In this way, 'meaning' comes to the audience with the joy of discovery.¹¹¹

Dan Sullivan of the Los Angeles Times believes "hyperreal" means "candid, unedited--as if a video camera were to record everything that had gone in a given space over a given few hours."¹¹² This strikes a similar note to
director Lindsay Anderson's description of David Storey's plays, *Home* (1970) and *The Changing Room* (1971): "their realism, uncluttered by naturalism, their elegance 'without extravagance,'" and "their vision of society untouched by propaganda" make them truly unique.¹¹³ Dan Sullivan suggests that even Chekhov's plays probably struck early audiences as "hyperreal."

*Sunset/Sunrise* (1979), the first of the hyperrealistic comedies by Ms. Shank, had its premiere at the University of California, Davis, directed by her husband. In the next year, the play was produced at the Actors Theatre of Louisville during the New Playwrights Festival, and at the Los Angeles Free Public Theatre. Cited as one of the outstanding new plays by the American Theatre Critics Association, the play was included in the *Burns Mantle Theatre Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1979-80*.¹¹⁴

Ms. Shank intended that *Sunset/Sunrise* realize in practice her theories of hyperrealism: the focus must be on the present moment, with no projection into the future, and virtually no past or exposition revealed.¹¹⁵ The absence of exposition evokes suspense and encourages a more diligent and expectant audience.¹¹⁶ This theory springs from Martin Esslin's observation "that audiences raised on television commercials are much faster at making assumptions and deducing information than most playwrights give them credit for."¹¹⁷ "Most exposition is unnecessary," the playwright
claims, because "an audience can figure from simple verbal or action clues very fast what a given situation is between two people psychologically, economically and culturally."\(^{118}\) Without emotional involvement, the audience discovers new details normally dismissed. This does not result in indifference toward the characters; rather there is audience recognition of the characters, uncluttered of emotional identification.

Certain generalized circumstances, normally disregarded, but typical of suburbia, become outstanding, as with a recognition laugh or a sound effect, or a particular type of home. The audience consciously attends to that which in more conventional drama, they would have "taken for granted." Comedy generates from the recognition of familiar psychological elements and physical circumstances. Shank explains:

> At one moment, the audience sees something, or an event or a relationship, from the point of view of the character and they sympathize or at least understand. At another moment they see the same event from the perspective of another character or from their own objective point of view and it is quite ridiculous.\(^{119}\)

From the outset, Ms. Shank chose to create *Sunset/Sunrise* to demonstrate her theories of hyperrealism. Once she had established the cast of characters, she
determined actual, living role models for these characters, then developed the plot and dialogue. She admits that the "role models were usually quite different from the characters in the details of their lives, but I used them for their way of speaking, energy level, and their personalities." Since the role models lived in her own California environment, they were invited to meet the cast of actors at an early rehearsal/party held in the playwright's home. The role models had been informed of the purpose of their selection and were urged to become acquainted with the actors who would portray them. The actors could observe the role models closely, and everyone could enjoy matching characters to role models. It turned out that the guessing was easy; not only did the role models and actors have similar mannerisms, they often looked alike.

Observation of individuals stimulated the actors' imaginations, which in recent times, according to Theodore Shank have suffered:

... imagination has become less reliable ... because now such a large portion of our experience comes from watching television or listening to records, or seeing films. The information has already been processed at least once, and if we rely entirely on our imaginations we are likely to come up with an idea influenced by TV or film rather than ... actual observation.
Ms. Shank envisioned a house in her own block for *Sunset/Sunrise* and began her writing sessions with a walk around that block. To serve further the hyperrealistic style, actors were encouraged to visit and interview in the community. The set designer, Darrell Winn, observed houses in the area in order to construct a "composite." To carry out the hyperrealistic style, the house should look as if it were built by a local contractor of the particular community where the play is actually set.

To encourage an intellectual rather than emotional response from the audience, Adele Shank wished to create a simple, spare plot, and to restrict the length of the play to an hour and a half; thus, the audience's concentration would not be unduly taxed. Further, at a given point, the audience may think they have a full understanding of character, but suddenly the playwright provides another twist to discourage the conventional expectation and to keep the audience actively participating. "Hyperrealism," however, "is not at all the same thing as documentation," but an artistic fabrication derived from life: *Sunset/Sunrise* is not a blow-by-minute account of family life in Davis, California. It is a contrived and structured play presenting an illusion of reality based on observations. I have attempted . . . to make the spectator perceive
acutely, not become involved in the psychology or emotions of the characters.\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{Sunset/Sunrise} studies a family at a backyard barbecue. Louis and James have invited several guests: the next door neighbors, a divorced Diane and her daughter Christina, whose father Charles escorts his new girlfriend, Linnea; Gem, James' sister, who brings her new husband Danny; Christina's friend Sarah; and Gem's son by her first marriage, Gideon, who brings Colleen, his housemate and the mother of his baby. Annie, daughter of James and Louise, lives with her parents; Josh, the son of James and Louise, lives on the premises, inside his car. Within an ordinary setting, the characters reveal themselves as extraordinarily complex. Louise enjoys all the company and attends to everyone just as she attends to James, although she knows James is unfaithful. She would be content to know just who the current "other women" is. James has never mixed a drink in his life, but he likes pretending to be the host; he openly flirts with other females, including teenager Sarah, who is kept in check by her wise friend Christina. And so continue the intricate relationships of the characters.

As the characters interact, Shank builds characterization and plot. In a typical setting, typical characters become more atypical than ever suspected. Ambiguity pervades the whole piece. The young bright daughter, Annie, has allergies and must appear not in person
but on a video monitor, a device that has been cited as a bizarre element in *Sunset/Sunrise*. Ms. Shank does not view it as a particularly grotesque element:

It is certainly unusual and interesting, but it seems quite natural that liberal California parents with an attitude of never forcing anything, would accept whatever their children do and attempt to deal with it as if it were normal. If your daughter refuses to leave her room you find a way of integrating her into family life in as normal a way as possible. I think their solution is pretty realistic.124

Other hyperrealistic elements comprise the setting; the audience recognizes the familiar backyard of a suburban California home: concrete and wood patio, shrubbery, pool with diving board (which may be excluded, with minor rewriting), real house with functional windows, and glass sliding doors. Neighborhood sounds add to the hyperrealistic style: dogs barking, birds singing, lawnmower, and car starting/stalling. The sounds are necessarily subordinate and muted, but of equal importance to the dramatic action. Unlike a traditional realistic setting, the hyperrealist insists on "exact recognition" of a "particular" setting, not a mere suggestion of a generalized, facsimile of reality. Shank's play takes place in a specific suburb (Davis, California), not in "Suburbia,
USA." Hyperrealism assumes more specificity than realism and does not define, interpret or rationalize its features as in naturalism; hyperrealism deals with the "actual" without offering commentary.

In hyperrealism, character and plot combine with a significant visual-arts focus. As implied earlier, character and plot are not employed in a causal relationship. Amid the most commonplace remarks, the playwright may disclose some philosophical thought. Frequently, the playwright is purposefully enigmatic. For example, Gem ambiguously describes her trip with words colored first with romance, then with boredom: "Yes, it was wonderful. Sun and sand and blue sky! But after a week of that it becomes sun and sand and blue sky." Throughout the play, characters speak with double-meaning.

For Shank, the plot raises questions about human relationships. First, there are the usual relationships between parent and child: father-son, mother-son, mother-daughter; and then male-female; husband-wife, girlfriend-boyfriend. None of these relationships are predictable and few are even consistent. Housemates Gideon and Colleen have a baby in common but little else. While Colleen flirts with James and later slips away with James' son, an embarrassed (and dejected) Gideon "sobs in the night." Although everyone had adjusted to Annie's appearance via the video monitor, the guests are frightened when, dressed in her
plastic outfit, she comes out to join them. And so the play continues, allowing the audience to venture in and out of various perspectives with the characters.

Louise, wife and mother, bears a closer look. Has her marriage completely disintegrated? Is she bitter enough to murder James? Charles, the friend, thinks so, as he observes her preparing James a "strange" concoction. When James accidentally falls in the pool and is rescued by Gideon, Louise ridiculously insists, "He's had a heart attack," while others tell her differently. In one respect, Louise seems to be over-reacting. Then, she says to James, "You're not dead." Suddenly "the sun rises" for James; he has a revelation:

JAMES: It's funny. You go along, oh, for years and years and things just pass by and seem ordinary and normal. And then something hits you, right between the old eyeballs. . . . You don't love me, Louise.\(^{126}\)

Louise brushes it off, but James continues to see the light:

JAMES: I don't know. I don't know anything. All those things I thought were kindness turn out to be something else. So maybe you give me things because you hate me. You give me booze to make me drunk and food to make me fat. You assumed, yes, assumed, I was having a heart attack. And you didn't care! Oh, my God! Do you really hate me that much!\(^{127}\)
Desperately trying to save his marriage, James confesses that he has not had a real affair for thirteen years; he flirts because it is expected of men. He cannot believe Louise really hates him and she agrees that he might attribute the ridiculous thought to alcohol. Things seem to be back to normal as Louise and James retire, but Louise decides to take the phone off the hook (no more calls from James' females?) and dejected Annie runs away.

Is everything going to be all right in the morning? As the character James discovers (and Shank shows us), "our perception of the real world is muddy and diffused--there's too much of it." The monotonous routine of contemporary living erodes both family and marriage. The form and thought of Sunset/Sunrise depict a microscopic close-up of manners and morals, revealing a vacuous, hollow society, preoccupied with self and indulgent, sensual-passionate pursuits. Spiritual values are absent; materialistic (self-gain) pursuits dominate behavior.

Winterplay (1979), the second in Shank's series of hyperrealistic comedies, premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, after receiving a staged reading at the American Place Theatre. Nominated for six awards by the Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle in 1981, it was also cited as one of the ten outstanding new plays by the American Theatre Critics Association and included in The Burns Mantle Theatre Yearbook: The Best Plays of 1980-81. The family in
**Sunset/Sunrise** appears in *Winterplay*, but this time the occasion is that of Christmas dinner and the accompanying events of the holiday: cooking, carving a real turkey, eating, drinking, and sharing gifts. Louise, James, Josh, Anne and Gem are joined for this day by the older son Jonathan who has brought Michael, his lover; and Jenny, a high school sweetheart of Jonathan, who has been invited by Louise and James. Again, Anne is on a video monitor, except when she dons a special plastic "spacelike" suit to come to dinner, a rarity for Anne. Again, the setting is a functional suburban home, actually, the same house as that in *Sunset/Sunrise*. For the premiere production of *Winterplay*, John Ammirati designed a detailed interior/exterior setting, family-room, dining room, and kitchen with redwood beams and a view of the patio through a sliding glass door.

This family has fragmented to the point that each character lives in his/her separate world. Young Anne, the saint, worries that the other family members might not go to heaven. Josh, the next sibling, resents being treated like a kid, and taking his brother's advice, Josh chooses to assert his independence by moving out of the house, into his car. The eldest, Jonathan, does not come home often; therefore, everyone is happy to see him, but curious about his new life as a homosexual. The presence of Michael, Jonathan's lover, causes several awkward moments. Louise is
still the dutiful mother and housewife, but she has more to worry about than getting the Christmas meal just right. She has reason to be suspicious of James, who receives and makes mysterious phone calls; and her own sick mother is fading fast, even on this very day. James, a lawyer, is finding it most difficult to accept his son's new lifestyle; James even stops flirting with Jenny to inquire if she had knowledge of Jonathan's preference for males, when she and Jonathan were sweethearts.

As in the previous play, Shank examines mores of contemporary America, but this time she limits the number of individuals. We see a suburban family dealing with relationships affected by divorce, the "liberated woman," and the "older woman-younger man" syndrome. Our understanding of the principal family members is expanded, since the characters are fewer than those in Sunset/Sunrise. The older Gem, for example, becomes a fuller character study and a parallel to the younger Jenny; they are both liberated but frustrated females.

As in the previously discussed play, Shank raises questions about contemporary parenting. Both parents agonize over their son's new lifestyle, blame themselves, and attempt to dissuade Jonathan. Michael, truly "a nice guy," does much to open lines of communication in this family and to destroy some of the misconceptions held about homosexuality. James worries about the absence of children
or no permanence in Jonathan's new relationship; he warns Jonathan against any financial commitment with Michael. Later, when Michael, who has been married, explains that he and Jonathan have begun plans to file for custody of Michael's three year old child, James cannot fathom the "marriage arrangement." Shank seems to explore the idea that the family has changed with the times. The family of yesteryears shows signs of disintegration and its values are being altered in the process.

Repeatedly, we see how ill at ease this family can be and also how disillusioned. Los Angeles Times critic Dan Sullivan suggested that the characters "seem to be looking for something on which to base their lives." Gaining weight has become an anathema for James, but it hardly explains his infidelity; he does not quickly adjust to changes within his family. Jonathan knew the task would not be an easy one; yet he and Michael do an admirable job of educating the family. Perhaps Anne handles the situation best; she candidly questions and observes. Initially, she uses the Scriptures to denounce all homosexuals, except her own brother; then she notices that even Michael "looks ... normal." She boldly interrogates her brother, begins to read the book he gave her on the subject and finally accepts Michael. Her problem now may be that she will have to stop praying:

Because I don't know what I believe any more. I thought Michael would be ... that the sin would
somehow show. But he's so nice and . . . normal. But the church says you're going to burn in hell because you sleep with Michael. And that just can't be true. I don't know. I'm tired. All I know is I love you, and anybody who says you're dirty and bad is wrong.130

At the matrix of the typical family is the mother, and Winterplay offers the insecure and unhappy Louise. She feels threatened as an unloved wife, an unneeded mother, and an unappreciated housewife; and of late she feels victimized by her ailing mother. Concerned, James has arranged for a cleaning girl, but he tells Louise: "You need time to do things you want to do."131 Also, guided by compassion for Louise and noting the humdrum of housework, Jonathan presents as a Christmas gift a ticket to Mexico; baffled when Louise declines his offer, Gem explains: "Everyone's life is depressing from someone else's point of view."132 Like her own ailing mother before her, Louise immerses herself in homemaking. She prepares the customary Christmas dinner while her mother's health deteriorates because there is nothing Louise can do for her mother, except wait for the inevitable; at home the family needs a Christmas dinner (they need her). Gem analyzes Louise's feelings:

She doesn't need a rest. And she doesn't know how to spend time doing anything but running the house. It's her profession. If she thought she wasn't needed, well it would remove the point of her whole life.133

Total depression never takes control in the lives of Shank's characters, for there is always some stability within a sheer commitment to "family," which reflects the
playwright's positive view of "family." Yet, Shank avoids any sentimentalizing, and, in fact, interrupts emotional responses that display sentimental tendencies. Louise provides an example: she sentimentally recalls her mother working so hard to make Christmas special, then she remembers the mother's illness, but breaks the thought and speaks of the turkey. The playwright intentionally prevents us from becoming too involved. Once we are temporarily pulled into a subjective relationship with a character, we are immediately faced with an ironic shift of perspective. Theodore Shank clarifies his wife's writing technique:

Rarely do characters express their feelings or otherwise reveal their emotion, but the audience deduces what the characters feel. Character A says something we expect to have an impact on Character B. We look at Character B and, even though we see no reaction, we know how Character B feels.134

Throughout the play, we are held at a distance emotionally. Emotional detachment encourages the audience's recognition and appreciation for the humor. As the characters leap from one topic to another while assuming the posture of a normal conversation, the results are comic. Josh, for instance, sounds as if in following his brother's example he means to become a homosexual himself; the parents sigh in relief once the confusion is cleared. Often, conversations overlap or are "out of focus." A note of explanation appears in the script:

When a conversation is indicated as being out-of-focus the audience should be able to hear
realistic conversation. Stage whispering or other 'cheating' should not be used. The content should be improvised in rehearsal but precisely set before performance.\textsuperscript{135}

Unlike the cynical view of materialism in previous plays, in \textit{Winterplay}, the author celebrates family ties as special and nurturing relationships.

\textit{Stuck: A Freeway Comedy} (1980) received a staged reading at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in 1980, premiered there the next year, and received the Los Angeles Dramalogue citation for outstanding achievement in playwriting in 1981. It is the third in the series of hyperrealistic comedies; Jenny is the only character who travels from \textit{Winterplay} to \textit{Stuck}.

Five real cars and a facsimile of a particular freeway were purposefully selected by the playwright as the dominant hyperrealistic visual elements in this play. When the play was first presented as a staged reading on a proscenium stage, the cars faced the audience on a three-lane freeway. But Theodore Shank decided the best perspective for the audience would be from above, which presented the problem of finding an existing facility for this spectator-stage relationship, or building one. A warehouse became available and was converted to meet the needs of the play. On either side of the freeway, seating platforms, forty inches wide, supported ninety-nine theatre seats arranged in three rows, three inches above each other. Such a steep viewing angle allowed the cars, highway, and concrete embankments to
become a background against which the action could be seen. The five cars (except one) belonged to the actors and directors; they were highly polished to reflect, as in a showroom. The roadway (designed according to specifications from the California Department of Transportation) and its two lanes were delineated by a row of pavement markers purchased from the same company which serves the State. Embankments were constructed to the specified dimensions.\textsuperscript{136} Lighting by Patty Farrell suggested time and conditions of the day as required in the script. For Act One, the early morning traffic jam occurs on a foggy spring morning; the fog clears during the day. The traffic of Act Two occurs in the fall, just after a rain. The play ends at night, and the only sources of light are the interior lights of the cars, a reading light in one car, and a flashlight. Finally, in the last scene of the play, the cars are started and headlights/tail lights are turned on.\textsuperscript{137}

Sound effects, devised by Al Agius-Sincerco, effectively used as overture for each act a two-track stereo tape recording of cars passing on a freeway going from West to East in Act One, and from East to West on wet pavement in Act Two. These two channels were fed into "two Bose 800 speakers," placed at the two ends of the performance enclosure.\textsuperscript{138} Shank describes the total effect: "At first the cars travel at highway speeds past the audience, then they slow down, gradually come to a stop with engines
idling, horns honking, and engines are turned off. At the end of each act, cars are heard starting and finally the cars on stage are started by the actors." The remaining sound effects were provided by (1) a public address system which was installed in the car of one character, a paranoid corporation president, and (2) portable tape recorders which were operated by actors, from within three cars, to create a baby's cry and the dialing of radio stations.

Still another technique effectively distinguished the acting in Stuck and other of Shank's hyperrealistic plays. Ted Shank clarifies the process, which was perfected in rehearsals, wherein each actor "focuses" only on the specific interest of his/her own character at each moment, instead of any single center of interest common to a group of characters: "Sometimes these focuses coincide, but often they are different making for several simultaneous centers of interest; thus creating an impression of complexity and the absence of dramatic contrivance." Taken together, the use of meticulous detail, multiple focus, and simultaneous conversations and actions define Shank's hyperrealistic style. The audience or distanced observers are encouraged to make discoveries independently, similar to one's day-to-day personal discovery of details in reality.

A combination of unexpected, plausible, trivial and important details inform the play, Stuck. Further, the setting--cars, sound, use of car lights and the unusual
perspective, a steep viewing angle, from which the audience viewed the performance—created a "theatricality which led the audience to perceive the commonplace objects as well as the characters and events in a fresh more acute way." Ted Shank made sure that even the location of the performance space created a sense of adventure: "to enter the warehouse it was necessary for the audience to walk out on the pier for nearly six hundred feet with San Francisco Bay beneath them and the Golden Gate bridge in the distance." In this play, the freeway represents one of contemporary America's many icons; and the extended metaphor is Shank's statement about man's relation to his environment.

We have many man-made products that were meant to enhance our existence, but invariably the artifacts control us. The irony is that we alter our lives and our schedules to accommodate new but untested modifications. We expect convenience, expediency and efficiency. Contrarily, as with the freeway, we are inconvenienced or "stuck." To be stuck in contemporary America might mean mental immobility, physical immobility, social immobility and/or spiritual immobility. In short, we allow our environment to enslave us.

Playwrights Festival) in 1983. The setting has two levels, a southern California beach with a retaining wall, above which runs a large park area containing a trash can, park bench, a street lamp, and telephone booth. The audience is seated where the ocean (a taped sound of it is heard throughout) would be located.

An assortment of characters inhabit this beach. Stephen, a medical doctor and his soon to be ex-wife Carol are vacationing this last time together, for the sake of the children. Glen and Ginger, another couple, have brought their daughter along for this holiday. The daughter, Kim, is attracted to Andy, who is trying to avoid a surfer and ex-hippy known as "the Aussie." Anemone, a mature 18-year old realist, is business manager and monitor for her mother, Linda Blue, a prostitute. Iris, a friend of Anemone and Linda, is a beautiful twenty-nine year old invalid. Anemone and Paul, an addict and poet, are attracted to one another. Other lesser characters make brief appearances.

Both Stephen and Carol remain fond of each other; he's willing to try the marriage again, but she is not because she has been jealous of Stephen with other women. Carol is annoyed that Ginger seemingly was more than Stephen's patient; moreover, Stephen has been paying attention to Iris. When Carol discovers Iris is an invalid, she does not understand the attraction. Ginger feels manipulated by her husband; her joy is an escape from her family, but finally
she understands that Glen loves, respects and admires her, wife and business woman that she is. Kim is young and naive, but in love with Andy enough to help him out of his dilemma with the Aussie and to become sexually involved for the first time. The Aussie is a mystery and a menace to the vacationers; only the beachwise persons like Anemone, understand him.

Once a surfer, the Aussie is somewhat unbalanced; he often forgets where he is; at other times he can remember that Andy owes him money for drugs. Kim sees the Aussie as one who adds unnecessarily to the beach population: "Things are getting crowded. . . ." The rats' solution, as she sees it, is best: "When the population density reaches a certain level the rats start to eat each other--even if they have all the food they need." Kim phones the police on the Aussie, to be rid of him and to help Andy. Paul and Anemone have to come to the Aussie's rescue, because he is a part of the beach; he belongs here. Anemone, too, belongs in this environment; she has accepted her mother's choice of profession and she helps, using the walkie-talkie, with customers and the police. To the vacationers, most of the beach people are enigmas, but the beach people are in their own haven.

As in the previous plays, Shank emphasizes through hyperrealistic elements the ability or inability to adapt to particular environments and to establish wholesome
relationships. Interestingly enough, the regulars at the beach have acclimatized. They are at peace and have established cohesive familial bonds; whereas, the conventional urbanites stereotype the beach people as societal outcasts. Shank seems to criticize America for not being receptive to new values, even when the more traditional ones have failed or begun to dissipate. Anemone, the survivor, represents the hope of a brighter future.

The fifth play in the California series, The Grass House (1983), like Shank's other hyperrealistic comedies, premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, directed by Theodore Shank. The setting is a hand-built house on the banks of Salt Creek; the one-room dwelling reflects the rugged lifestyle of Ben, the head of the family, and Ben's woman, Naomi. To this house, where growing marijuana is the principal source of income, Adele Shank brings from Sand Castles, Anemone, Paul (now known as Moon Hawk), Linda Blue, and Iris.

Anemone, loving Moon Hawk, has easily adjusted to her new environment and is about to become a child bride. She has invited her parents and her honorary aunt, Iris, to witness her marriage. Linda Blue, Anemone's mother, and Iris do their best to accept things, but often Iris is quite uncomfortable and worried about Anemone. Thomas, Anemone's father, cannot accept the couple's living conditions, the
absence of a solid future for his daughter, their illegal ceremony, their livelihood of growing marijuana, a prostitute for an ex-wife, the food, or the village witch doctor/minister/magic woman called Serenity. Ben, who has not divorced his own wife, tries to milk funds from Anemone's relatives; he foresees that his brother, Moon Hawk, can help him. Iris is leery of Ben and she worries that Moon was once a heroin addict.

Thomas, a municipal court judge, fears that again he is failing his daughter by not stopping this wedding, but he is haunted by the fact that he deserted a pregnant Linda and has not seen her nor Anemone for twenty years; Iris appoints herself to remind Thomas of his negligence. Humor is derived from the awkward moments between the city folk and the earthy group, and from Ben's strange ways. Even Ben's woman, Naomi, would like a more secure existence. Serenity accepts the existence and attaches special significance to the land while performing the wedding ceremony: "We stand where once the ocean was. . . . Here animals lived alone . . . Indians came . . . White men came and killed the Indians . . . but the land nourished them. It grows our vegetables and our marijuana. The land makes no value judgment."144

In the midst of possible danger (noise outside threatens of intruders), the primitive ritual over the half-finished bed (which was a wedding gift) is as truly beautiful as a traditional wedding. Anemone and Moon Hawk
dedicate themselves to one another and secretly decide to go away together and start anew in the lowest spot in the U.S., Death Valley. Serenity advised them to be true to nature's gift of love that they might be "happy in each other, strengthen each other, and come to understand each other." They have a chance at happiness as no other character in the play has experienced; theirs will be a "grass roots" relationship, unscathed by modern society. They depart the next day, after Moon Hawk has clipped the "grass," as he promised Ben. Anemone, the practical one, asks her husband if they might take the chickens, a wedding gift, to Death Valley.

Among the myriad relationships represented in the piece, all pale against that of Moon Hawk and Anemone. Problems of male-female relations abound, as do those between parent and child. As might be expected, the urbanites attempt to impose their values and lifestyle upon others. The natural environment lends vigor, freshness and potential to Anemone and Moon Hawk's relationship. The best of two worlds, urban and rural America, come together for the ideal love.

Faithful to her early tenets of hyperrealism, Ms. Shank expands upon the techniques in each of her five hyperrealistic comedies. An abundance of details provides some startling revelations essential to Shank's vision. While the characters engage in minutiae, patterns form and
mechanisms affect their lives: in and around the swimming pool, during the Christmas celebration, at the beach, and in the wilderness. Through casual conversations and ordinary circumstances, the play probes traditional familial values. As critic Bernard Weiner of The San Francisco Chronicle related, "The author offers no moral judgments about her characters--simply presents, flaws and all--but the play, cumulatively does raise disturbing social questions about the contemporary American family: its stability, lack of communication, emphasis on materialism and tendency toward sexual experimentation." Times change, people change and environments change. America needs to reevaluate its moral priorities, its major social institutions (such as the family and marriage), and its view of human relationships.

Scenic and sound effects accentuate those elements which would normally be overlooked, dismissed or taken as "Americana." For example, characters behave singularly and concentrate upon their own private interests simultaneously rather than sharing a collective objective. As a result, conversations awkwardly overlap, as if the characters were totally unaware of what preceded their own lines. Sometimes the effect is comic, but more often it provides an emotional detachment. The audience then must work to decipher any rational discoveries about each character in order to build Shank's profile of conglomerate America. Shank sees the theatrical style of hyperrealism as one which effectively
informs contemporary American mores. She insists upon a close-up view of behavior, a rejection of the tradition of the well-made plot, and an abundance of "recognizable" visual and aural images. The approach heightens the audience's theatrical experience by eliciting more intellectual involvement, and, at the same time, encourages a detached examination of America's social conditions and institutions.

Like Adele Shank and Lavonne Mueller, Wendy Wasserstein has emerged as a playwright with exceptional talents. She has not written about her theory or practice, nor has she written as many dramas as Shenk or Mueller. Nevertheless, with only two plays she has emerged as an important new voice in the theatre. Born in Brooklyn, in 1950, Wasserstein received a B.A. from Mount Holyoke College, a M.A. from City College of New York, and attended the Yale Drama School. Like Shank, she has collaborated with her husband, Christopher Durang.

Uncommon Women and Others (1977) proved a striking first play for Wasserstein, when produced at the Phoenix Theatre. The playwright adapted the piece for the Public Broadcasting System's "Theatre in America," a series on nationwide television. She has also adapted John Cheever's The Sorrows of Gin for the Great Performances series of WNET television; and, with Christopher Durang, has worked on a film, House of Husbands. Isn't It Romantic (1981 and 1983),
a comedy, has been called a kind of sequel to *Uncommon Women*. Other plays (yet unpublished) by Wasserstein include *Any Women Can't*, *Montpelier, Pazazz* (staged June 1976 as part of the Manhattan Workshop Festival Opening of new plays) and *When Dinah Shore Ruled the Earth* (with Christopher Durang), which was staged at the Yale Repertory Theater and the School of Drama's Cabaret, in 1977.

Critic Edith Oliver of the *New Yorker* called Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women* a "funny, ironic, and affectionate comedy." The play's subjects are five seniors, who were close classmates at a prestigious eastern women's school, Mount Holyoke College. Meeting for the first time since graduation six years ago, they gather at a restaurant and reminisce about their lives, loves, and aspirations. They reflect upon their philosophies of life and the "others" of the title, which include the housemother, a silent-type freshman, a friend who has left the clique, and a square-type who in conversation mixes strange subjects, like "elves" when others speculate on "practical arrangements," such as mating the women and Yale men for weekend dates.

Technically, the play is a collage of several small but interrelated scenes. These are prefaced by a male voice quoting from the college bulletin the attributes of a liberal arts college and the uncommon women it produces. In a single playing area, the various remembered episodes from
the past alternate with the present. At this point, these "liberated" ladies are about twenty-seven years of age.

"The real triumph of Uncommon Women," in the words of New York Post critic Edmund Newton, "is that you leave the theatre caring deeply about its characters." The friends exchange notes on their lives since graduation, but we see in a series of flashbacks what in their college experiences has shaped them into the "uncommon women" that they are. Each of the group is a distinct individual. Critic Edith Oliver agrees that "the characters are never allowed to become types, and with all their funny talk and behavior, they are sympathetically drawn." Muffet, stylish and attractive, wry, charming and cheerful, is just beginning to reexamine her earlier principle that men are more interesting than females. Holly alternates between being a spectator and a spectacle; she has adopted a strong moral code of warmth toward those one loves and wit toward those who scare one. The author notes that if Holly lost twenty pounds, she would be very pretty and if she worked, she would do well. Kate, the most handsome and composed of the friends, makes a good impression with an attache case; sometimes it makes her feel successful and at other times, she feels handcuffed. Since she "walks with direction," her friends enjoy making her stop and laugh.

If "uncommon" is a virtue, each of the women appreciably meets the criteria for such an ideal. Samantha
is a quiet classical female, the gracious daughter of the mayor of Naperville. Rita, always one for and with a cause, "refuses to live down to expectations;" she is assertive and imaginative." The "others" are four: Mrs. Plumm, housemother of the dormitory, always amusingly straight-laced, but in hindsight, one whose dignity the friends could admire; Susie Friend, the never-tiring organizer, who was "Miss Pink," with pink Villager sweater, pink Villager skirt, pink kneesocks, pink yarn in hair and Weejuns; the frail and inner-directed Carter in her over-sized skirt and shirt from prep school days; and Leilah, almost as attractive as Kate, quite serious and rather rigid. From the Voice's description of the "Uncommon Women," we wonder if the labels are not mixed-up someway in the play:

The college produces women who are persons in their own rights: Uncommon Women who as individuals have the personal dignity that comes with intelligence, competence, flexibility, maturity, and a sense of responsibility. Through its long history, the college has graduated women who help make this a better, happier world. Whether their primary contributions were in the home or the wider community. The college makes its continuing contribution to society in the form of graduates whose intellectual quality is high,
and whose responsibility to others is exceptional.\textsuperscript{151}

The women did not understand that the mere words would not mold them into "uncommon women." They even misinterpreted the lessons in loneliness and self-denial set by Miss Plumm. Instead, they just knew that they were the best of their kind.

Throughout their college days, the five friends knew they were special, uncommon, destined for glory. At this reunion six years after graduation, amid the hugs, shrieks, kisses and recollections of the good old days, each gives an update of her activities since graduation. "Under the laughter," as Edith Oliver discerned, "there is in almost every instance a feeling of bewilderment and disappointment in the world they found outside college, which promised so much and with their own dreams, which seem to have stalled."\textsuperscript{152} "When we are forty, we will be incredible," says Rita, the bold ring leader. During their undergraduate days, they were to be incredible first at twenty-five, and then it became thirty. Since they have not attained their goal yet, Rita gives them hope by projecting that the age will be forty. (We are tempted to think that the age will be changed every time they reunite.) So far, none of the five has children, only two have married, and only one has actually launched a career. Concerning children, Kate offers: "Do you ever think it's odd that none of us have
children? I know we're the uncommon bell curve, but I still think it's odd. I can't decide if I want any."  

Wasserstein makes a clear point: there are problems peculiar to being an adult and to being female in the contemporary world. Words do not suffice for action and the friends discover that their existences are made common by sheer inertia. Through clever dialogue, rather than plot, she conveys the world of these women who struggle for self-awareness; but in spite of their bluntness and candor in talking about their feelings, especially sex, "there is some confusion and underlying sadness among the college friends as they try to cope with the times and what is expected of them." Thus, the play takes on special meaning for contemporary young women who after graduation go forth in the ever-changing and often disquieting world; surely, the challenge for females to become responsible citizens in the contemporary world is now greater than ever. Wasserstein, however, has hopes that things will improve as the years increase.

Something of a sequel to Uncommon Women, the comedy Isn't It Romantic, first presented at the Phoenix Theatre in 1981, was rewritten and revived in 1983 to give the playwright the unique distinction of having two critically hailed Off-Broadway productions. The second of the Off-Broadway productions was a "long running record-setting presentation which was the most successful in the history of
New York's renowned Playwrights Horizons. Richard Corliss in *Time* wrote that the play "is romantic—also bright, funny, sentimental, and throughout, reaching toward wisdom," and Edith Oliver offered that Wasserstein is "among the funniest and most inventive writers around." "A nouvelle cuisine comedy," *Isn't It Romantic* examines the feminine dilemma in contemporary times.

On this occasion, the two old college classmates and friends are approaching thirty which makes them an older version of the *Uncommon Women*. This pair looks at particular problems of approaching adulthood. "Facing the conflict between personal independence and romantic fulfillment," both seek to cut the umbilical cord and establish their own identities. The play is about Janie Blumberg and Harriet Cornwall, their mothers and about the men with whom the two young women sleep, or date, or consider in their lives; and it is about the bond of friendship between the two young women.

Actually, it is Janie's story. Both women are unmarried, but Harriet's strategies do end in engagement. The witty, but overweight Janie, therefore, must cope with waves of sadness, perplexity and rootlessness. As Janie's story unfolds, Wasserstein's ability to portray character becomes evident.

While Janie, our heroine, awaits romance, her parents constantly wake her to learn of any progress as far as the
eligible young men are concerned. If not, why not? She does all she can to resist dependency upon her parents and clings to wanting "it all." Specifically, "all" includes marriage, family, a job as writer for Big Bird on the "Sesame Street" show, and those who respect her distance. Mel Gussow believes the play to be about mothers and daughters and friends as family. Just as Janie wants distance between herself and her eccentric, obsessive Jewish mother, Harriet intentionally competes with her successful career-oriented mother. Janie tolerates a father who is forever dropping by with gifts (such as a coffee table, barstools, and even a mink coat) and a "nice Jewish boy" of 32 (son of a restaurant owner who specializes in pop-overs and who is a kidney specialist anxious to marry and raise a family), but hates the idea of life as a housewife. The play takes her through an attitude problem ("Know what I resent? Just about everything?!"), to an identity crisis ("I very badly want to be someone else without going to the trouble of changing myself"), to despair (Harriet's engagement, since the two of them had agreed to remain single), to the joy of independence.

Harriet, the skinny and cute one, has several entanglements with her mother, a business executive, and conflicts with her self-image; she has high potential herself as an executive with Colgate Polmolive. We observe her during her first social and sexual encounter, with her
boss's boss, who is married. Clive Barnes found the exchange between the two most interesting, noting Wasserstein's satire, when Harriet mentions being brought up on Manhattan's Park Avenue: "Ah, a rich kid," her companion responds. "No," she replies, "just upper middle class." He retorts, "You have to be rich to know what upper middle class is." \(^{159}\)

Some critics thought the characters were not well developed but exist "merely to mouth clever remarks by Wasserstein." \(^{160}\) For some, Janie's self-discovery at the end of the play did not seem plausible. Another point of criticism centered around the episodic nature of the play; many critics found the brief scenes excessive and uneven. For critic Douglass Watt, the author had not satisfactorily resolved the central situation in her own mind, so that Janie's dance of joy at the end is hollow and unconvincing. \(^{161}\)

The Voice reading from the college bulletin in *Uncommon Women*, a structural device similar to the use of memory in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, makes an appearance in *Isn't It Romantic* as taped recordings on Janie's answering service; these mechanical messages, as in the earlier play, lend Wasserstein's piece much of its humor. Also, humor lies in watching these two "uncommon" Manhattan women leave the womb (of mother and more recently of the sheltered life in private high school and college) to enter
their first Manhattan apartment; two naive young ladies take their first steps in the "real" world.

Plays about the young and the relatively impoverished rich appeal as much as plays about the rich and potentially rich. Clive Barnes judges that the American theatre, true to its traditional taste as far back as the days of playwright Philip Barry, loves such comedies. Wendy Wasserstein offers contemporary uncommon women growing into adulthood and trying to stake their claim in America. Indeed, the contemporary women challenge the image of the "common," ordinary, and conservative women; uncommon women evaluate and determine their own positions in this society.

Female relationships are a common subject in the plays of Wasserstein, Shank and Mueller. Mueller explores females building a support system for each other against a hostile world and frustration. Shank's comic view of the disintegration of marriage, parenthood and family holds a critical mirror to society. Self identity and redefinitions of female friendships, mother-daughter, father-daughter and male-female relationships all surface in Wasserstein's dramas. Each of these playwrights criticizes the society of our times, and each seems to agree that these are the best of times for the female, if only she seizes her opportunity.

Just as the uncommon women hail from particular, sheltered backgrounds, playwright Adele Shank guides us through a candid perusal of the familiar behavior patterns
in our lives, especially in the modern family. A new theatrical style, hyperrealism, which grew out of hyperreal painting, resulted. In her series of plays about suburban life in California, Shank utilizes the style through design and sound elements and complex character relationships, which challenge the spectator to respond as a voyeur with emotional detachment. Through unconventional treatment of plot and character, Shank dramatizes the moral erosion of the American family, the mediocrity of contemporary parenthood, failed dreams of the older generations, and the impact of the environment upon contemporary America. Lavonne Mueller, too, examines the family, but as a potentially wholesome unit or viable institution superimposed upon the most unlikely situations. While Mueller tends to adhere to a self-developed writing formula, she explores a wide range of subjects for her plays. She believes that women playwrights need not be labeled as "female" writers nor restricted in subject matter; she has written about male war prisoners, women as the wellspring of heroic individualism and crime as an inevitable sign of an ailing society.

Mueller, Shank, and Wasserstein are women playwrights who have reached the threshold of the mainstream of contemporary theatre in America. Mueller promotes the "art" of playwriting, while Shank proposes a new "genre," and Wasserstein makes a case study of human relationships; all
three playwrights are sensitive to the female as a central figure and a critic of society. Fortunately, these writers have also found special laboratories for their theatrical experiments: Wasserstein at Playwrights Horizons and Yale Cabaret; Shank at Actors Theatre in Louisville and Magic Theatre in San Francisco; and Mueller with the Women's Project of the American Place Theatre. Nevertheless, the three playwrights have yet to find extensive audiences, with the exception of Wasserstein's Uncommon Women; they have been limited by managements unwilling to risk work by female writers, and by the uncommercial subject matter of the plays. Many audiences, for example, have perceived the world of the plays to be reserved for "females only" or even "select" females of the extraordinary and "uncommon" variety. Some critics have placed a disclaimer on hyperrealism; they charge that it is too taxing for the viewers and too close in resemblance to other theatrical styles.

Although each of the three playwrights has made a strong impression, their full potential collectively as dramatists is yet to be realized; they continue their quest of artistic development. Nevertheless, as I have suggested in this chapter, Mueller, Wasserstein and Shank effectively represent three varied visions of the present impulse in playwriting among American females.
ENDNOTES: CHAPTER TWO


2 Miles 10.

3 Miles 10.

4 Miles 5.


7 Ramay 4.


10 Zesch 109.

11 Zesch 109.

12 Mueller received the E. Ruth Taylor Award for Critical Writing (1968), the Chicago Writers' Conference Award (1969), Story Magazine Digest Award (1970), Nathaniel West Essay Award (1973), and the National Organization for Women award (1984). In addition, Mueller has received (for Little Victories) the Rockefeller Grant for Playwriting (1980), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1981). Also, she has received grants from the New York Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller International Study Center, in Bellagio, Italy.

13 Mueller, "On Becoming" 1.


18 Mueller, "On Becoming" 3.

19 Mueller, "On Becoming" 3.


23 Mueller, "On Becoming" 5.

24 Mueller, "On Becoming" 5.


31 Mueller, "On Becoming" 8.


34 Mueller, "On Becoming" 12.


Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 17.

Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 17.

Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 17.

Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 17.

Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 18.

Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 18.

Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 18.


Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 19.


Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 19.


Mueller, "Before You Write Your Play" 20.


Mueller, "On Becoming" 3.


Gussow 21.

Gussow 21.

Gussow 21.


Miles 12.

Miles 12.


Murphy 22.


Charles 13.

Oliver 77.

Charles 13.


Bennetts 30.


Gussow, "Little Victories" 22.
87 Gussow, "Little Victories" 22.
93 Bennetts 30.
94 Bennetts 30.
95 Bennetts 30.
96 Bennetts 30.
97 Bennetts 30.
98 Gussow, "Little Victories" 22.
99 Adele Shank was named co-winner of Actors' Theatre's "Great American Play Contest" in 1980; recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Playwriting Fellowship, 1981-82, and of a Rockefeller Playwright-in-Residence Grant, 1981. She has published articles on the theatre in *The Drama Review*, *The Oxford Companion to Theatre*, *Contemporary Dramatics* and several European journals. (From Resume of Adele Shank, sent to the Author, April 1984).
101 Leverett 292.
102 Leverett 292.

104 Lucie-Smith 7.

105 Lucie-Smith 8.

106 Lucie-Smith 11.

107 Lucie-Smith 10.

108 Leverett 292.

109 Leverett 292.

110 Leverett 293.

111 Leverett 293.


116 Shank 59.

117 Shank 59.

118 Shank 59.

119 Shank 61.

120 Shank 61.

121 Shank 62.

122 Shank 63.

123 Shank 63.

124 Shank 63.


126 Adele Shank 54.
127 Adele Shank 55.
128 Adele Shank 63.
130 Leverett 363.
131 Leverett 306.
132 Leverett 362.
133 Leverett 362.
135 Leverett 304.
136 Theodore Shank, "Stuck" 16.
137 Theodore Shank, "Stuck" 16.
138 Theodore Shank, "Stuck" 16.
139 Theodore Shank, "Stuck" 16.
140 Theodore Shank, "Stuck" 15.
141 Theodore Shank, "Stuck" 16.
143 Adele Shank, Sand Castles 269.
150 Wasserstein 7.
151 Wasserstein 9.

153 Wasserstein 11.


156 Taylor 44.
157 Taylor 44.

159 Marlowe 70.
160 Marlowe 69.
161 Marlowe 69.
162 Marlowe 70.
Ntozake Shange represents two minorities: female writers and black writers. One of Shange's notable predecessors, Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), was the youngest American, the fifth woman, and the only black dramatist to win the New York Drama Critics Circle award. She gained the prize in 1959 for *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was eventually produced and published in thirty countries. The film adaptation received numerous awards, including a special one at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival. Apart from Hansberry, however, black playwrights, male and female, have had difficulty in earning major recognition in the world of theatre. Two female playwrights serve as examples of this reality.

Alice Childress (1920-), actress, director, and writer, has lectured at Radcliffe under a Harvard appointment, gained an Obie Award, and international recognition of her work. She has created plays, novels, a screenplay and short stories. Despite these achievements, as Darwin T. Turner notes, she has never been given "the attention lavished on some of her more sensational or more controversial contemporaries."1 Her first play, *Florence* (1950), adapted from her own short story, depicts the struggle to maintain the dream of a career in theatre. *Gold Through the Trees*

Childress' Trouble in Mind, which won the Obie Award in 1955-56, has been produced twice by the BBC in London. Her Wedding Band, first produced at the University of Michigan in 1966, was later presented (1972) by Joseph Papp Off-Broadway, and as a teleplay on the ABC National Network. In collaboration with her husband, Nathan Woodard, she has written two musical pieces, Sea Island Song and A King Remembered (about Martin Luther King's bus boycott in Montgomery). Her anthology of black scenes contains her views on the work of black playwrights:

Often we have heard complaints about the one theme used most by black writers, freedom. But seldom are writers of any race able to write outside of their own experience. Black experience means
living a segregated and very special existence. There may be a few who were raised within a white experience and so are able to write best in this vein, but it is indeed rare.5

Ever devoted to a realistic portrayal of blacks Childress has refused to compromise her aims of presenting honest, human experience in dramatic terms, but her reputation as a writer remains relatively obscure. She refers to herself as "one of the best known of unknown persons." Despite her exploration of the black experience in a wide variety of genres, she has received scant critical attention. Some critics conclude that a just assessment of her work has been stifled by the times.6 Her Obie Award in 1956, for example, came when the political climate argued for integration, but her characters affirmed blackness. Also, her play preceded by only three years A Raisin in the Sun, whose remarkable critical distinction supplanted the memory of any play not in the same vein. Similarly Wedding Band, about interracial love, according to some, contradicted the "Black is beautiful" advocates of its day. Despite her relative obscurity, Childress has influenced many artists; for example, Sidney Poitier (who acted with her in the opening production of Anna Lucasta) has said, "I developed a very special relationship with a woman named Alice Childress [and] learned more from her than I did from any other person I knew during that period of my life. . . .
She opened me up to positive new ways of looking at myself and others."

Childress' play, Wine in the Wilderness, "shows a black woman's assertion of her autonomy in an 'educated' black culture striving to imitate the white patriarchy." The protagonist, Tommy, opposes the false ideal of subservient womanhood and the traditional stereotype of contemporary black women as domineering matriarchs; she is a self-reliant black woman seeking equality with men. Critic Janet Brown notes that "Tommy's individual spirit overcomes the societal determinants in the play, making it an optimistic statement of the feminist impulse," not merely the black impulse.

Set in the apartment of Bill, a black artist, after a riot, the play introduces Tomorrow Marie, or Tommy, a prospective model for Bill's three-panel painting on the subject of black womanhood. Tommy is to be in the third panel, which Bill describes to Oldtimer, a neighbor. The first panel shows an innocent little black girl and another shows the ideal, a cold perfect beauty in African garb; she is the center, the "Wine in the Wilderness." Tommy, then, is to be a contrast to the perfect beauty; she is:

*The lost woman . . . what the society has made out of our women. She's as far from any African queen as a woman can get and still be female, she's as close to the bottom as you can get without crackin' up . . . she's vulgar . . . a poor dumb*
chick that's had her behind kicked until it's numb . . . and the sad part is . . . she ain't together, you know . . . there's no hope for her.¹⁰

Tommy arrives with two neighbors, Cynthia and Sonny-man who are introducing her, so she thinks, to Bill to initiate a romance. When the men leave for Chinese food, Tommy reveals to Cynthia that she is attracted to Bill. She would like to be married, but "I don't want any and everybody. What I want with a no-good piece-a nothin'?"¹¹ At this point, Cynthia advises Tommy to stop wearing wigs, to be less brash and self sufficient: "Expect more. Learn to let me open doors for you. . . ."¹² Tommy inquires, "What if I'm stand' there and they don't open it?"¹³ "The ideal black woman," Bill has said, "should throw them suppers together, keep your husband happy, raise the kids."¹⁴ Cynthia tries to warn Tommy not to get too optimistic about a romance with Bill.

Eventually, Bill and Tommy are left alone and she has to settle for a frankfurter and an orange soda, because the Chinese restaurant has been destroyed in the riot. Tommy is insulted: "You brought me a frank-footer? That's what you think a-me, a frank-footer?" Bill says kings and queens eat frankfurters, to which Tommy responds, "If a queen sent you out to buy her a bucket-a Foo-yung, you wouldn't come back with no lonely-ass frank-footer."¹⁵ Tommy spills the soda
as she tries to eat and model simultaneously. While she is changing clothes, Bill describes the "Wine in the Wilderness" painting on the phone. Tommy believes he is speaking of her. She comes out transformed, without her wig, relaxed and confident that Bill likes her. The two spend the night together.

The next morning Oldtimer lets it out that Tommy was to be the "messed-up chick" and Tommy realizes that she is the only misinformed one. She denounces Bill and his neighbors, charging that "they pretend to support their own people, but actually hate them, as evidenced by their treatment of her." In asserting herself, Tommy has inspired Bill to do another three-panel, triptych: "This one will show Oldtimer on one side as the Negro's past and Sonny-man and Cynthia on the other as the young man and woman of the more optimistic present, and the center will show Tommy as herself, the hope of the future, Tomorrow Marie." In Tommy, as with most of her characters, Childress champions the genteel poor: Tommy represents the hardy strength of a race of people. Also, the play meaningfully educates us in black history, pride, and
beauty. Furthermore, with its female protagonist, Tommy, "asserting her autonomy in opposition to an unjust socio-sexual hierarchy," the piece can be considered feminist drama.¹⁹

In her dramatic celebration of the individual spirit, Childress earns a place not only as a black rhetorician, but as a spokesperson for the feminist sensibility in contemporary America. Nevertheless, despite critical approval of her work, Childress remains a playwright in search of a stage. Undiscouraged, she continues to persevere, "staying visible to other writers and a small public" even in the 1980's.²⁰ For example, in the spring of 1984, her musical Gullah was produced at the University of Massachusetts. In summary, distinct strains from Childress' works inform the legacy of the American female playwright in general and the black American female playwright in particular.

Adrienne Kennedy (1931- ), like Childress, despite having won an Obie, has found limited opportunities for the staging of her work. James Vinson calls her "one of the most complex of all contemporary dramatists."²¹ Since 1965, when she received the Obie Award for Funnyhouse of a Negro, she has earned two Rockefeller grants, a Guggenheim Award, and commissions for plays from the New York Shakespeare Festival and London's Royal Court Theatre Upstairs.²² In addition to Funnyhouse, her works include A Rat's Mass
(1970), An Evening with Dead Essex (1973), A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White (1976), A Lancashire Lad (1980), Orestes and Electra (1980), Black Children's Day (1980), two novels, and several short stories and poems. A graduate of Ohio State University, she has taught periodically, serving as distinguished lecturer in playwriting at Yale University during 1972-73.23

"My plays," Kennedy says, "are meant to be states of mind."24 An interest in the works of Tennessee Williams influenced her to consider theatre; Edward Albee's Playwriting Workshop at New York's Circle in the Square Theatre also directly influenced her as a dramatist. She writes "surrealistic and expressionistic avant-garde drama, characterized by lyric dialogue and penetrating insights."25 Although her works continue to be produced in Off Broadway and Off-Off Broadway theatres, the complexity of her style makes it difficult to identify her work as belonging to a particular school or movement.

Kennedy was born to college-educated parents, reared in a comfortable middle class, integrated community rich in Italian, Jewish, Polish, and black cultures; she first encountered overt racism and discrimination in college. The "indelible mark" of this experience settled upon her sensibility and "engendered an anger and hatred for prejudice and racism which would later find compelling expression in her plays."26 Funnyhouse of a Negro
established Kennedy's reputation as "a highly imaginative" writer who made creative use of "poetic language and surrealistic fantasy to express aspects of black and American experience." Three of her plays represent Kennedy's unique and potent dramatic voice.

Set in a nightmare world, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* portrays Sarah, a sensitive and mentally confused black woman, "tormented by the personification of her various selves." Unable to reconcile the ambiguities of life and the weight of her blackness, Sarah commits suicide. Kennedy's favorite play, *The Owl Answers*, continues to wrestle with multiple selves that merge in and out of one another: the main character is "She who is CLARA PASSMORE who is the VIRGIN MARY who is the BASTARD who is the OWL." An illegitimate child, born of a black cook and the wealthiest white in town, confronts her mythical forebears, Shakespeare, William the Conquerer, Chaucer, and Anne Boleyn, and desperately tries to resolve her love/hate for black and white.

*A Rat's Mass*, one of Kennedy's most experimental plays, combines the single dimension character *Funnyhouse* and the multiple characters in *The Owl Answers*. It parodies the Catholic Mass (the entire play is ritual) while presenting the issue of black manhood versus black womanhood. Actually, the play pleads for a strong racial love which has been replaced by the black brother's love or blind adoration
for the Rosemary, who is white. Although the Rosemary has
worms in her hair, symbolic of the decadence of her own
religion and values, Brother Rat loves her and everything
she represents. Realizing too late that Catholicism was not
for blacks, he has abused Sister Rat (stereotype of blacks
being oversexed and masochistic) at Rosemary's request and
further incites a destructive battle with Nazis
(representative of a predominance to be racially superior);
he also has a bitter encounter with Georgia relatives
(rejection by other blacks). Brother Rat and Sister Rat
stand criminally charged with being black and thinking white
(a gray existence); they have "ratted" on the cause.
Interpretation of the rat as a symbol of the ghetto and the
stereotype of blacks having tails further contribute to
Kennedy's provocative piece.

Confrontation, but not merely racial confrontation, has
always been foremost in Kennedy's plays. In An Evening with
Dead Essex, she confronts the American involvement in
Vietnam; A Beast Story examines sexual repression and man's
bestial tendencies; and A Lesson in Dead Language "suggests
that there is no solace or support for the black woman in
organized religion nor in other public institutions."29
Margaret B. Wilkerson notes, "Kennedy's plotless, richly
symbolic plays are evocative and appeal to a racially
diverse audience."30 Feminist critics, such as Rosemary
Curb, further note how imprisonment, political impotency,
sensibility, and death affect Kennedy's characters as females, who suffer under the weight of their families and culture. Kennedy's portrait of the black woman, Robert Tener notes, "makes a bitter and satirical comment on the American black female trapped by the conflict of cultures and sexual roles in twentieth century America."31

In 1980, Kennedy began branching out into children's theatre and into teaching creative writing at Princeton, Yale, and other universities. Moreover, Kennedy, in collaboration with Margaret B. Wilkerson of the University of California at Berkeley, has begun a Kennedy biography. Still, Kennedy does not have the audience that Shange productions have attracted.

In 1976, a single production established a female writer, who happens to be black, "as a major force in American theatre."32 Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf, like Childress' Wine in the Wilderness, treats the female struggle to achieve individual dignity and autonomy. Shange's plays differ, however, in insisting on women's support of one another as essential to their gaining individual freedom. In her work, Shange represents the highest level of sophistication in contemporary feminist drama and feminist spirituality.33

Born in Trenton, New Jersey, to a surgeon father and a mother who was a psychiatric social worker, Shange and her
family moved several times, to New York State, Missouri and Alabama. Paulette Williams, after her father, was the parents' choice of name for Shange at birth in 1948, but, along with her two brothers and sisters, she later adopted an African name. Ntozake means "she who comes with her own things," and Shange "one who walks like a lion." She discarded the name Paulette Williams because "I had a violent, violent resentment of carrying a slave name; poems and music come from the pit of myself and the pit of myself wasn't a slave." Shange's childhood was "an extraordinarily privileged one, filled with a range of activities extending from dancing and violin lessons to family musicales and reading sessions." On Sunday afternoons, the family enjoyed their own variety shows, as Shange in a _Ms_ self-interview revealed:

my momma wd read from dunbar, shakespeare, countee cullen, t. s. eliot. my dad wd play congos and do magic tricks. my two sisters and my brother and i wd do a softshoe then pick up the instruments for a quartet of a sort: a violin, a cello, a flute and a saxophone. we all read constantly, anything, anywhere. we also tore the prints outa art books to carry around with us. sounds, images, any explorations of personal visions wuz the focus of my world."
Her father, a percussionist and painter as well as a surgeon, also worked as a ringside physician, affording Shange an opportunity to meet famous musicians, such as Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, and a prizefighter like Muhammad Ali. "Artists and authors, including W. E. B. DuBois, were frequent visitors in the Williams home." In this stimulating, intellectual environment, she became an omnivorous reader."

I read all the Russians in English (my goal in life was to free Raskolnikov from his guilts) and the French in French and the Spaniards with the aid of dictionaries. Simone de Beauvoir, Melville, Carson McCullers and Edna Millay. And Jean Genet. I would say to my mother that I didn't understand a word he was saying but I like him.

Graduating cum laude from Barnard College, Shange later received a Master's degree from the University of Southern California. Afterwards, she taught in the Women's Studies Program at Sonoma State College. She enjoyed the academics, but experienced some personal problems during this time. During a period of depression, while driving home to Oakland after class, the sight of a rainbow provided inspiration: "women, especially black women, could survive on the realization that they have as much right and as much purpose being here as air and mountains do or as sunlight does."
Shange had other thoughts during that inspiration:

We can minimize those scars or those sores that we don't want in us. We can modulate them to the extent that they become at least not malignant. And we forget that. So that's what the rainbow is: just the possibility to start all over again with the power and the beauty of ourselves. . . . Rainbows come after storms; they don't come before the storm.42

The playwright's interest in Women Studies became "inextricably bound to the development of my sense of the world, myself and women's language."43 For example, she studied the mythology of women from antiquity to the present day; the experience inspired "Sechita" in For Colored Girls, as well as a revelation: "Unearthing the mislaid/forgotten, and/or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls and union leaders of our past proved to be both a supportive experience & a challenge not to let them down. . . ."44 "Thus," as Janet Brown noted in Feminist Drama, "Shange is among the first generation of writers to be consciously influenced by the recent wave of feminist activity in scholarship."45

The 1976 production For Colored Girls, produced by Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival, won the New York Critics Circle Award, the Obie (1977), the Audelco and Mademoiselle Awards, along with later nominations for the
Tony, Vernon Rice, Grammy and Emmy awards. Other Shange plays include *A Photograph, A Study in Cruelty* (1977); *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon* (1977); *From Okra to Greens* (1978); *Spell No. 7* (1981); *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* (1979); *Boggie Woogie Landscapes* (1980); *Mother Courage and Her Children* (adapted from Bertolt Brecht, 1980); and *Bocas: A Daughter's Geography & Three for a Full Moon* (1982). 46

Besides plays, Shange has written other works, including a novella, *Sassafrass* (1976); a book of verse, *Happy Edges* (1978); and novels, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), *What Language is Big Enough to Say Your Name! Three Suties* (1983), and *Betsy Brown* (1985). The latter, depicting the world of a 13-year old St. Louis girl and her family, explores the ironies and complexities in the lives of middle class blacks. 47 Shange says that it is the novel that she had to write. She chose a traditional realistic plot for the work, which is only vaguely autobiographical: "I was testing myself with character development and maintenance of structure." 48 Yet, the parallels with Shange's own childhood are there: a St. Louis childhood; a physician father and social worker mother; bussing to white schools; and a richly intellectual environment. 49 The novel is now being adapted as a musical.

Shange's study of dance in San Francisco has influenced her creation of "dance dramas," such as *The Jazz Life* (1984) and *Dance We Do: Five Generations of Post-Dunham Afro-
American Geography. She has written, with Bennie Daniels, "Shapes, Sadness, and the Witch" (1984) for the Children's Festival at the University of Houston.

Curiously, Shange prefers not to be labeled a playwright. In an interview with the author of the present study, Shange admitted a love for other plays, but she herself has no ambition to be a playwright: "Poetry and dance are my genres." In fact, "Once catapulted into stardom by For Colored Girls, she realized that success had exacted a price:"

I was—and still am—afraid that I would be looking for Colored Girls the rest of my life and never getting out of that time warp. When people ask me to read things from For Colored Girls . . . I simply tell them that I can't do it. It's not emotionally healthy. I have to move forward.

Despite her disinterest in dwelling on the play, For Colored Girls remains the piece which not only launched Shange's career but also established her as a champion of feminist awakening. In those early years while in San Francisco, prior to For Colored Girls, she had written "a constant stream" of poetry in response to her own frustrations, feminism and third world attitudes. Subsequently, she began reading her poetry in unconventional public places. Shange has described those years:
I began reading my poetry in women's bars. Not lesbian bars, necessarily, but women's bars, where they can go without being hassled or having someone try to pick them up. Anyhow, those were the only places that would hire me, and when I was there I realized I was where I belonged.\(^5\)\(^3\)

Paula Moss, choreographer-dancer, has recalled the genesis for the play, *For Colored Girls:

She [Shange] had this poetry and I had this dance and so we just started to put it out there and see if it would work. At first we had no idea that we would ever be paid. \ldots\ We would go to small bars or schools \ldots\ and give a workshop \ldots\ combine the two together. And I guess that's why she calls it a "choreopoem;" she likes movement to her work because her work is something of a song. I used to use her voice as music; I would just dance to her reading, her poetry, and that would be my music.\(^3\)\(^4\)

Shange and Moss first performed the choreopoem in New York on July 7, 1975, at the Studio Rivbea, a jazz loft in Soho. Having seen the show, Director Oz Scott offered to assist in the staging, making the piece more theatrical and cohesive; he recruited seven actresses to fill out the cast of seven women. As the play developed, it moved to the Old Reliable Bar, a Lower East Side poets' hangout, and then to
Domonte's, another bar, where black producer Woodie King, Jr. saw the play. King and Scott pooled their resources and staged the piece at the Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre, from November 1975 to June 1976; subsequently Joseph Papp began producing the show at his New York Shakespeare Festival's Anspacher Public Theatre.

Most critics greeted the Off Broadway production with enthusiasm. Jack Kroll wrote, "Shange's poems aren't war cries--they are cries filled with controlled passion against the brutality that blasts the lives of 'colored girls'--a phrase that in her hands vibrates with social irony and poetic beauty." Marilyn Stasio also was moved by the work:

... Shange's poetry touches some very tender nerve endings. Although roughly structured and stylistically unrefined, this fierce and passionate poetry has the power to move a body to tears, to rage, and to an ultimate rush of love. It helps if this body is black and female because that is the experience Shange writes about. Seven vital dancer-actresses, including the author, enact a story 'moving' from momma to whatever was out there! Through their encounters with rapists, abortionists, and an assortment of evil lovers, they grow in the beauty and strength of their womanness.
The play traveled uptown to the Booth Theatre on September 15, 1976; the playwright, in her introduction to the published script, wrote about the evolution of her play. "It is," she said, "as close to distilled as any of us in all art forms can make it... The cast is enveloping almost 6,000 people a week in the words of a young black girl's growing up, her triumphs and errors, her struggle to be all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten." The Broadway production was praised as a "compelling cry," "howling protest," and "a gripping celebration" of the pain, the dignity, and the triumph of black women in their quest for identity; critics insisted that the play filled a vacuum previously undescribed in literature. New Republic's reviewer Stanley Kauffmann, however, reacted less enthusiastically:

Most of the pieces seemed to be hyperdramatic and—as writing—superficial, given occasional weight by some skill in presentation and of course by the extra-poetic, extra-theatrical pressure of the subject. That subject is what it's like to grow up black and female in the U. S.

Some called it a "self-indulgent black drama," and others held that some of the actresses were not able to realize fully the experiences of which Shange wrote. In the Booth Theatre Playbill, Collette Dowling acknowledges such
an "occasional false note," but maintains that the "sense of confusion and the struggle to find her own way in the world is vivid and authentic" for black womanhood, as conveyed by all the actresses.61

A collage of poems mixed with song and dance, For Colored Girls has as protagonists seven black girls celebrating and charting their lives from adolescence to adulthood by way of several emotional experiences, some amusing, some painful, and mostly with men, until a sense of self-worth is discovered. The final affirmation is "i found god in myself & i loved her fiercely."62 Dance and music become metaphors for the courage the women need, in spite of the anguish and shroud of negativism, to venture into the world in celebration of self, sisterhood, and the potential of life.

The seven characters are identified by colors: ladies in brown, yellow, red, green, purple, blue and orange. As the play opens, the Lady in Brown states the purpose of the play:

somebody/anybody
sing a black girl's song
bring her out
......

sing the song of her possibilities63

The ladies identify themselves with an American city; the first declares, "i'm outside chicago," and the others, "i'm
outside detroit," "i'm outside houston," and so on, until
the Lady in Brown closes the sequence with "& this is for
colored girls who have considered suicide but moved to the
ends of their own rainbows."64

Children's games and songs preface longer statements
about growing up, entering dance contests, high school
graduation and sexual initiation. "No assistance," prefaces
the next section, wherein the Lady in Red speaks to a male
she has loved "assiduously for 8 months, 2 weeks and a day,"
as part of "an experiment/to see . . . if i cd stand not
being wanted . . . & i cannot."65 A statement on rape and
on abortion follow, topics that concern Shange, the mother
of a small daughter, even now: "My thing is to fight
pornography and violence against women and children. The
biggest issue is that we are not safe in the twentieth
century."66

In the sequence of scenes in For Colored Girls, Shange
creates detailed characterizations of several individual
black women, allowing the seven ladies to assume various
identities to portray their plights. "Sechita" is a black
dance hall girl with roots in "quadroon balls/elegance in
st. louis and even more ancient ones in the egyptian goddess
of creativity/2nd millenium."67 Directly inspired by the
Women's Studies Program at Sonoma State College, Sechita was
perceived as deity, slut, as innocent and knowing. Another
poem tells of a black girl (possibly Shange's Betsy Brown in
her latest novel), in a newly integrated St. Louis neighborhood in the fifties, who idolizes Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian rebel. One woman, in another scene, wants to be "a memory/a wound to every man/arrogant enough to want her;" she lures men home with her for sexual encounters, throws them out before morning, and then cries herself to sleep.68

"i used to live in the world," another poem and scene, reflects oppression in Harlem as Shange surely came to know it when she moved to New York from California, after college and on her own for the first time. The women of another scene provide comfort for each other when faced with harassment, and they can overcome jealous interest in the same man, as in "pyramid" by discovering the "love between them/love like sisters."69 Subsequently, the women confront their lovers with two poems: "lemme love you just like i am" and "my love is too delicate to have thrown back in my face;" and group dancing.70 The climax of the play, "nite with beau willie brown," was directly influenced by Shange's Harlem experience. Shange reveals the inspiration for this segment:

It was hot. I was broke. I didn't have enough money for a subway token. I was miserable. The man in the next room was beating up his old lady. It went on for hours and hours. She was screaming. He was laughing. Every time he hit
her I would think, yeah, man, well that had already happened to me. So I sat down and wrote 'Beau Willie.' All my anger came out.\textsuperscript{71}

Beau Willie, in the poem, tries to make up with Crystal who has obtained a court order forbidding him in her house, because he beat her and the two children. Crystal, now twenty-two and self-supporting, was thirteen when she first became Willie's girl; he has now returned from Vietnam. Forcing his way into the apartment, Willie threatens to drop the children he is holding out of a fifth-story window, unless Crystal promises to marry him. Before she answers, he drops the children anyway. To release the emotional hold of Crystal's ephiphanic moment, the women come together. Unable to stand alone, in "a layin' on of hands" the seven women spiritually strengthen each other and womankind. Led by the Lady in Red's description of what it is like to be caught up and cradled by the trees, moon and sky (indeed, all of nature), the women next recite a ritualistic "i found god in myself: & i loved her: i loved her fiercely."\textsuperscript{72}

For Colored Girls permits a rare unveiling of the black woman's pains and struggles for survival against desperate odds. Females have inherited pain, anger, defiance, scorn and anguish; the historical hopelessness only heightens the present dilemma. Yet, in Shange's play, by exploring the oppressiveness together, the women achieve liberation, a new awareness based on sisterhood and self-respect. Stirring
emotions that had been dormant for years, *For Colored Girls* for many women became a "quasi-religious moment in which some of the deepest feelings were acknowledged and a healing of wounds achieved." For countless other audiences as well, "it ignited a highly charged debate about male-female relations;" by so doing, it became a means for gauging one's reaction to the entire contemporary feminist movement.

Speaking to and for women of any race who are disinherited and dispossessed, *For Colored Girls* strongly articulates dimensions of being black and female. Clearly, too, the black men, the enemy in most cases, have "forced" women to become self-sufficient. Women can survive; they depend no longer upon the uncaring, insensitive and abusive male. Women who "refuse to despair in the face of loneliness, rejection, pain and rape" are the heroines.

As writer Guillory Brown stated about the play: "It is a tribute to black women who strive for and develop a sense of self," but Brown recognizes some weaknesses in the choreopoem.

Although the power of Shange's first theater piece cannot be denied, her character development is manipulated to suit her message. The poignant poetry carries the play, but the accusatory tone against the males becomes strained. What happened, we might ask, to the decent black males, after Toussaint L'Ouverture? Moreover, what provocations speak for the physical and emotional abuse portrayed in the
behavior of the males in this play? Audiences mesmerized by the stirring emotions forget to consider motivations which account for the women accepting the ill treatment for so long. Critic Jean Carey Bond wrote: "In Shange--up to this point--in her development, we have the poet's bold exploration of feeling without the illumination of insight." Failed encounters lay before us with no clues "as to what these encounters were about in the first place and what complex human forces destroyed them." Just as we know little about the accused males, we know little about the women, beyond their longings, ego needs and victimization. Nevertheless, even as a fragment of black life, For Colored Girls remains extraordinary. It becomes a rally for those women who have suffered more pain than joy in their relationships with men and more misunderstanding than understanding of self. The scheme of Shange's characterization works effectively to suggest unity among the ladies, but depth of character is limited.

After For Colored Girls, Shange uses the rites of passage theme in three other plays, A Photograph: Lovers in Motion, Boogie Woogie Landscapes, and Spell #7. In these pieces, however, she establishes a more precise social context. Shange's second major play and the more traditionally structured of the three, A Photograph: Lovers in Motion, received mixed reviews. Produced by Joseph Papp at the Public Theatre as A Photograph: A Still Life with
Shadows/A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty during the 1977-78 season, the play centers upon the gifted but unsuccessful young black photographer Sean David, a bitter man, who fantasizes being Alexandre Dumas, pere and fils. As Sean sheds his fantasy, he reaches a healthier creative vision; his new view of life comes in various images, as if taken by a camera. Richard Eder of the New York Times said For Colored Girls did not need a conventional plot, but he though differently about A Photograph: "She is something besides a poet, but she is not--at this stage--a dramatist. More than anything else, she is a troubadour." He argued his position further:

She declares her fertile vision of the love and pain between black women and black men in outbursts full of old malice and young cheerfulness. They are short outburst, song-length; her characters are perceived in flashes, in illuminating vignettes. Some of these things are found in A Photograph [but] the perceptions are made to do the donkey-work of holding up what attempts to be a whole dramatic structure, and they fail.

Other critics sustained this negative tone. John Simon, attributing Shange's success to the "knee-jerk liberalism of white producers, critics and audiences," now wished those who "gushed" over For Colored Girls would resee
Sharing this assessment, Martin Gottfried wrote, "Shange is a wonderful poet, but she is not yet a playwright and does not create playable characters." He also noted "stretches of outright recitations, beautiful soliloquies," appealing as with a recital, but not as dialogue. Edith Oliver was more positive: "Shange's own poetic talent and passion carry the show, and her characters are given flesh and blood by the author."

As in *For Colored Girls*, Shange explores emotional voices: this time, five characters interact, pushing and shoving into each others' lives with violent outbursts. Her poetry remains powerful. The plot of the play has a logical progression of action, with intermittent dialogue. While the other four of the characters remain constant, Sean, the central character, does change. Theme or thought is perhaps the least tangible of the elements in this play. As photographer Sean David attempts to launch his career, we see his relations with three women and one male friend, who make an effort to love him; all are Sean's victims. Michael, the artist/dancer, wishes to understand Sean and help him realize his dream to become an outstanding photographer; she is the only woman who begins to communicate with the complex Sean. The other two females, Nevada, a virginal, successful business attorney, and Claire, a fun-tramp, cocaine junkie and nymphomaniac, are obsessions with Sean. One wants to give him material things
and the other wants only to satisfy his sexual drives. The male friend, Earl, a lawyer and homosexual, desperately tries to understand his friend and satisfy Sean's every wish, but he discovers that he, too, is being used by Sean. The camera is a metaphor for Sean's manhood; he sees it as the key to fame, for he only wants the Nobel Prize in photography. Sean blames his maladjustment on his ancestry: Alexandre Dumas (pere and fils, both part-black; their literary and sexual achievements in 19th Century Paris affect Sean's present), his own dreadful childhood, and the hauntings of some dead soldiers that he photographed in Vietnam. Through it all, Sean seems a victim of his own ambition, confusion, and bitter frustration. With Michael's aid, Sean comes to realize that manhood, like womanhood, is not defined by material things but by a belief in self.

Critics censured A Photograph, calling it, for example, "an awkward experiment with a full-length play." The play might best be summed up as "a matter of brief scenes, music, dancing, and projected slides." Its form may be awkward, but its ideas are unquestionably poignant. Shange perceives that no panacea exists for the black "condition," except those afforded by blacks themselves: "the characters michael/sean/nevada/earl/are afflicted with the kinds of insecurities and delusions only available to those who learned themselves thru the traumas of racism."86

Boogie Woogie Landscapes (1980), first presented as a
one-woman piece at the New York Shakespeare Festival's "Poetry at the Public" series on December 18, 1978, depicts the character Layla as she relives her own emotional landscapes in order to reconcile self identity and social struggle. The stream of consciousness establishes the principal effect of the dramatic work by examining random thoughts and sensations as in sleep; it also manifests surrealistic and expressionistic features through the disjointed levels of awareness. The stream of consciousness describes Lyla's geography of whimsy, fantasy, memory and the night, with the aid of six night-life companions and a trio of musicians. Music, dance, and poetic language are used to interpret nature, spirituality, racial roots, and seeds of hope (children) for one woman's reawakening. Much of the play deals with Layla's problems of adolescence, but a dynamic plea for women's rights also resounds. As she wrote the first version of this dramatic work, Shange saw a utilitarian impact in the stream of consciousness, the literary device popularized by James Joyce: "i presented myself with the problem of having my person/body, voice & language address the space as if i were a band/a dance company & a theater group all at once. cuz a poet shd do that/create an emotional environment/felt architecture."87

Void of traditional plot, the piece ends in its own element of magic; there is a way out of any predicament, but we must lean on the Lord. In some ways, we are reminded of
the spirituality in *For Colored Girls*. Shange summarizes
the thrust of *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*:

>i wish it was gd to be born a girl everywhere . .
. i want being born a girl to be a cause for
celebration/cause for protection & nourishment of
our birthright/to live freely a passion knowing no
fear that our species was somehow incorrect . . .
we are born girls to live to be women who live our
own lives/to live our lives. to have/our lives/
to live. we are born girls to live to be
women. . . 88

*Spell #7*, subtitled "geechee jibara quick magic trance
manual for technologically stressed third world people,"
adds another theater piece to Shange's repertoire. Like *For
Colored Girls*, *Spell #7* consists of a series of poetic
sketches around a central theme, with variations shifting
from the comic to the ironic to the sorrowful. The theme
concentrates upon what it means to be black, with emphasis
upon women's experiences. A magician's son, the narrator,
analyzes the vignettes in search of whatever "real" magic is
necessary to make blacks rejoice in being themselves.
Originally, the play appeared as a workshop piece at New
York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater's Other Stage;
later, a revised production reached the main stage of the
Public/Anspacher. *Daily News* critic Don Nelsen thought
Shange cast a powerful spell in celebrating the joy and the
Indeed, the characters do cast a spell, as they discuss what it is like to live in a "deceitful country, a country which tries to deny blacks the right to exist." Shange conjures her magic in her own caldron, a St. Louis barroom which serves as the setting.

The characters first appear in Al Jolson-like minstrel show blackface masks, singing and shuffling to their own accompaniment of cymbals, harmonica, and washboard; they are very much a part of the historical line of black entertainers and black people. When they discard the masks, they are black artists discussing the woes of their profession during contemporary times: being turned down for parts, and having only stereotypical roles. Throughout, the characters assume many roles; they sing and dance and play scenes together; and then one by one they withdraw into monologues or dialogues of fantasies, dreams and recollections. Nine players, Player #1, Player #2, and so on, give powerful images of the irony attendant upon being black in white society. For instance, the narrator magician's father supposedly gave up the trade the day a black child asked to be white: "Ain't no colored magician in his right mind gonna make you white 'cause this black magic. You're gonna be colored all your life and you're gonna love it." Variations on this theme continue, woven in a combination of dialogue, dance and song.

Spell #7 presents monologues on various aspects of horror of blackness.
being a black woman, unwanted, unloved and unattended, but the tone extends beyond anger. Many of the monologues are humorous, such as that of a Brooklyn housewife taking a cab to Manhattan in search of a good time, "a good clean woman from Brooklyn out for the night." Another amusing image has to do with black women being pursued by black non-Americans abroad; and still another is a fantasy about brushing hair in white style. Shange employs a comic aspect to relieve the bitterness, disillusionment, and anger; the comic also contributes to the community spirit evolving among the characters. It is healthy for blacks to laugh together and at themselves.

Shange's comic twists sometimes turn toward ridicule. Satiric views ring through "a day in the life of a white girl" which parodies a soap opera; also, Shange derides, in this play, the way some blacks treat black women. The laughter does not last because stronger images evoke sadness, as with the woman who wants to be pregnant in order to love the baby named "myself" only while it is inside her body, but who kills "myself" after it is born, rather than expose it to the painful outside world. In addition, there is an angry demand for a white apology for the wrongs done to blacks. But the play suffers from limited character development; the characters attempt to express an emotion such as pain or frustration, but its source remains unclear. On a positive level, however, the play advocates that
blacks, though oppressed, learn to love and accept themselves individually and collectively.

The play's reception was mixed. Don Nelson decided that Shange's ability "to make the word flesh, to fuse idea and character so that it comes out humanity" is what takes her work out of the realm of the ordinary.91 Although New York Post critic Marilyn Stasio held that Spell #7 lacks the dramatic focus and force of For Colored Girls, she admitted that the piece "offers glimpses into the passion and beauty that babble in Shange's fertile poetic imagination."92 And Christopher Sharp said that in this musical essay, it is clear that Shange "values her verse much more than she values her characters."93 Finally, John Beaufort complimented Shange's continued development of the choreopoem technique.

Shange does not pretend to have a greater allegiance toward character than language. In the foreword to Spell #7, she clarified:

"as a poet in american theater/i find most activity that takes place on our stages overwhelmingly shallow/stilted & imitative. that is probably one of the reasons i insist on calling myself a poet or writer/rather than a playwright/i am interested solely in the poetry of a moment/the emotional and aesthetic impact of a character or line . . ."94

In the same essay, Shange speaks of a different set of
aesthetics for blacks, most of whom do have some music and
to movement in their lives. "This is a cultural reality," she
points out; "this is why I find the most inspiring theater
among us to be the realm of music & dance." Clear lines
of influence between Adrienne Kennedy and Shange can be
drawn, especially in their use of surrealism. Sandra
Richards notes the influence not only of Kennedy but also of
Amiri Baraka upon Shange, and acknowledges, as well, that
Shange has found her own style within those visions.
Throughout all of Shange's work, she attacks the English
language, which she finds oppressive. Seemingly obsessed
with this attitude, Shange views traditional English to be a
white tradition. She chooses to create her own language
both in her art and her life. This same spirit propels her
actively to seek the right of self definition through
poetry, music, and dance as a direct response to the
oppression she despises.

Mother Courage and Her Children, an epic play by
Bertolt Brecht was adapted by Shange in 1980 and produced in
that same year. Brecht's drama about the European Thirty
Years' War of 1913-48 has been transposed to the American
Southwest of the 1830's and 70's. With black characters,
rather than European, and the action relocated in Texas, the
Oklahoma Territory, and similar frontier points, this play
credibly assails white America's treatment of not only the
ex-slave population but of the American Indians as well.
True to Brecht's episodic plot, Shange's version
concentrates on Mother and her doomed offspring trundling their sutler wagon from one battle scene to another. Mother Courage herself remains a symbolic figure of human destiny, while Shange's climactic scene of Klansmen about to set afire to a sleeping black settlement has a strong impact of its own. Some critics denounced the play as a gross misinterpretation of Brecht, but others believed that Shange "achieved a genuinely valid new look at Mother Courage." She won an Obie for the adaptation.

Although Shange has continued to write since the extraordinary success of *For Colored Girls*, she has not produced another work to equal its impact. Her subsequent pieces have been variations upon the theme of *For Colored Girls*: autonomy for black women in a male-oriented world. In her plays, Shange begins a simple story, while simultaneously manipulating the particulars of an even greater and deeper narrative which becomes a macrocosm. Ultimately idea and character fuse into a personification of "humanity." Notably, the colors of the characters in *For Colored Girls* form a rainbow which omits black and white. The color assigned each actress maintains an individual identity for the characters, while collectively the characters suggest a "community" of women, a sisterhood. Similarly, each poem in *For Colored Girls* contributes to a larger view than the mere story of a single character; even Layla's growth, in *Landscape*, transcends the story of one person.
Writing from her black and female experiences, Shange has made a worthy contribution to the feminist impulse in America. Author Janet Brown adapted a model from *The Female Experience* to outline four phrases in the process of women's emancipation from the male-defined world that emphasizes women's solidarity: "The first step toward emancipation is self-consciousness, becoming aware of a distortion, a wrong: what women have been taught about the world, what they see reflected in art, literature, philosophy, and religion is not quite appropriate to them." The second phase "questions traditions;" the third advocates "reaching out for other women" which leads to the fourth and final phase, "feminist consciousness." For Colored Girls satisfies each of the four phases of women's emancipation; it is Shange's vehicle for communicating the feminist ideology. Many of the feminist theatre groups began by exploring previously unshared cultural experiences, the personal histories of women in their consciousness-raising group, to legitimize their own lives. *For Colored Girls* permits this kind of sharing among two wronged minorities, black women who have been oppressed and all women who have been oppressed. Shange, then, is one contemporary writer who strikes a chord that goes far beyond race to very human female conditions.


3 Page 41.


5 Brown 57.


7 Harris 68.

8 Brown 56.

9 Brown 57.


11 Sullivan 397.

12 Sullivan 401.

13 Sullivan 405.

14 Sullivan 405.

15 Sullivan 402.

16 Brown 59.

17 Brown 59.

18 Harris 71.

19 Brown 68.
She has had scripts translated into French, Danish, German and Portuguese; and broadcasts by Radio Denmark and the BBC.


"Trying to Be Nice," Time (July 19, 1976): 44.


Moritz 381.

Moritz 381.

Brown 116.

Ntozake Shange, preface, *For Colored Girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977) x.

Brown 116.

Resume supplied Author, by Luch Kroll Agency, New York City.

Felicia Lee, "Ntozake Shange Goes Beyond the Rainbow," *USA Today* (June 4, 1985): 6D.

Lee 6D.


Author's Interview with Ntozake Shange, LSU Union, Louisiana State University, February 22, 1985.


Gillespie 122.


Moritz 382.

Moritz 382.


Moritz 382.

Shange, preface *For Colored Girls* xx.

Moritz 382.

61 As quoted in Moritz 382.
62 Shange 67.
63 Shange 2-3.
64 Shange 3.
65 Shange 13-14.
66 Gillespie 203.
68 Shange 34.
69 Shange 44.
70 Shange 47.
71 Brown 115.
72 Shange 67.
73 Vinson 712.
74 Vinson 712.
77 Elizabeth Brown 243.
78 Elizabeth Brown 243.
79 Elizabeth Brown 243.
80 Elizabeth Brown 243.
81 Eder 11.
82 Locher 535.
83 Locher 535.
84 Locher 535.


91 Marlowe 108.

92 Marlowe 108.

93 Marlowe 108.


95 Shange, *Three Pieces*, preface x.


97 Janet Brown 140.

98 Janet Brown 141.
CHAPTER IV: TWO PULITZER PRIZE RECIPIENTS

Beth Henley and Marsha Norman

In *A Century of Plays of American Women*, Rachel France proposed that "women dramatists are our latest avant garde."¹ Yet, as France also observes, few women have received favorable or wide attention. Historically, the efforts of female writers succeeded with only a select and highly sophisticated audience; but with the rise of Off-Off Broadway in the 1960's, the situation changed dramatically, for the movement provided an impetus for women playwrights, whose numbers were greater in this decade than at any other time in the history of the American theatre. Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, Maria Irene Fornes, Rosalyn Drexler and Adrienne Kennedy became representatives of this new energy among females. Despite this increase of women authors, only a few succeed in entering the mainstream of American theatre, or receive the most coveted national awards. This chapter examines two female playwrights who have achieved exceptional recognition, Beth Henley and Marsha Norman, each of whom has received a Pulitzer Prize, as well as a "Best Play" citation. Beth Henley in 1980-81 became the first woman in twenty-three years to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama; Marsha Norman was selected for the 1982-83 theatrical season.

212
In 1981, prior to its Broadway production, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* not only won the Pulitzer Prize, but the New York Drama Critics Circle award and the George Oppenheimer/Newsday Playwriting Award. The prize-winning play was soon followed by two other full-length plays, *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, produced in Los Angeles in 1980, and at the Buffalo Studio Arena Theatre before reaching the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1984; and *The Wake of Jamey Foster*, which opened at Hartford Stage, 1982, and moved to Broadway in the same year.

Beth Henley (1952-) is a native of Jackson, Mississippi, and her attraction to the theatre can be traced back to her mother's avocation as an actress with the New Stage Theater in Jackson; Beth engrossed herself in the scripts that her mother brought home. "All my life I've seen plays," Henley admitted in a *Newsday* interview. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Theatre from Southern Methodist University, with the "single-minded desire to become an actress, not a playwright."

After college, Henley acted with the Dallas Minority Repertory Theatre in Dallas while earning a living as a waitress, file clerk, and a photographer of children at a department store. With a teaching scholarship, she resumed drama studies in the graduate program of the performing arts at the University of Illinois, 1975-76; she taught first year acting classes. In the summer of that term, she acted
in the Great American People Show, a historical pageant presented at New Salem State Park, before moving to Los Angeles to attempt a career as an actress in films. Finding scant opportunities for performing, she turned to writing. In an interview with Robert Berkoist of The New York Times, Henley assessed her situation at the time:

I didn't like the feeling of being at everyone's mercy so I decided to do something creative. Of course, everyone in Los Angeles is working on a screenplay so what I did wasn't bizarre at all. But no one at the studios would read my screenplay because I didn't have an agent, so I thought I would write a stage play that might at least get performed in a small theater somewhere. That's when I wrote Crimes of the Heart.6

Seeking to make her first full-length play attractive and economically feasible for production, Henley limited the cast and plot. When she finished writing the play in 1978, she considered producing the piece herself; regional theatres seemed uninterested in her script. A director friend entered the play in the annual new play competition of the Actors' Theatre of Louisville, without informing Henley. Jon Jory, the theatre's artistic director selected it as co-winner of the 1977-78 competition. In February, 1979, Crimes of the Heart had its world premiere in Louisville, as part of the theatre's third annual Festival
Henley explained that the play's initial production had a decidedly emotional impact upon her:

I was waiting out in the parking lot before the show and all these people showed up, dressed up. They were paying money to see my show without having any idea what it was like. I just started crying in the parking lot.\(^7\)

Time critic T. E. Kalem's composite review of the Actors' Festival recognized the play as "a potential crowd pleaser."\(^8\)

Following its success in Louisville, Crimes of the Heart soon found production in other regional theatres. It was presented at the California Actor's Theatre in Los Gatos in April 1979; the Repertory Theatre in St. Louis, October 1979; and at Baltimore's Center Stage in April 1980.\(^9\) When first submitted to New York theatres, the script met with numerous rejections, including one from Lynne Meadow, who headed the Off-Broadway Manhattan Theatre Club. Ms. Meadow later deferred to a director's request to do the play. Accordingly, Crimes of the Heart opened on December 21, 1980, in the Club's studio theatre, playing to full houses until January 11, 1981. By spring, the play had moved to the main stage. Remounted on Broadway, it opened on November 4, 1981, by which time it had been awarded the
Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics Award for Best American play.¹⁰

Some reviews inferred that *Crimes of the Heart* was autobiographical, which Henley denied; however, she did admit that the basic idea of family members reunited during a crisis was inspired by a memory of her grandfather being lost for two nights. *Crimes* grew out of her own memories of the ordeal. In the play, the MaGrath sisters, Lenny, Meg and Babe, unite in the wake of two events: their grandfather lies near death in the hospital and Babe has shot her husband in the stomach. Other calamities which have affected the sisters include desertion by their father, the suicide of their mother, and the consequent disruption of their home environment; their grandparents assume the parental roles of their father and mother, providing as little stability and moral guidance as the unethical parents did.

The production at the Manhattan Theatre Club drew raves from New York critics, who commended Henley's mature talent for finding laughter in the bizarre and spiritual support in the sorrowful.¹¹ John Simon described Henley as "a new playwright of character, warmth, style, unpretentiousness and authentically individual vision."¹² Of Henley's talent and originality, Edith Oliver wrote that "her script starts slowly, but once it is launched it stays aloft... This kind of play (loose-knit, precise and free) and this kind of
acting (first rate by any standard) are what Off Broadway is all about."13 Most of the critics agreed with Walter Kerr that Crimes is "clearly the work of a gifted writer."14 There were some dissenters, such as Michael Feingold, Stanley Kaufmann and Leo Sauvage; Sauvage, in particular, questioned Henley's "sick humor."

Variously called a Southern gothic comedy, a black comedy and a tragicomedy, Crimes "has elicited comparisons with the works of such distinguished Southern writers as Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, in part because [Henley] writes with wit and compassion about good country people gone wrong or whacko."15 Scott Haller continued his comparison: "like Flannery O'Connor, Henley creates ridiculous characters but doesn't ridicule them. Like Lanford Wilson, she examines ordinary people with extraordinary compassion."16 Henley's tale of three southern sisters, according to Terry Fox, "has about it a nonjudgmental air which hovers between sublime acceptance and massive amorality."17 Several critics find in Crimes a parallel to the tragi-comic action of Chekhov's plays. Despite their ridiculous nature, the sisters come to assess their individual roles, and make choices to change their lives.

The play, which thrives on eccentricities, unfolds as Lenny, on her birthday, has "a bad day;" her grandfather is dying, her sister has committed a crime and her pet horse
has been struck dead by lightning. The eldest of the three sisters, Lenny, has a problem ovary, which has kept her from marriage for all of the thirty years of her life. Her sister, Meg, a washed-out country singer, has returned from Hollywood after suffering a breakdown; she seeks absolution from guilt over the high school sweetheart she left when he became crippled. The three sisters have come together because the third sister, Babe, has shot her husband (she aimed for the heart and missed) and is on the verge of killing herself. Babe claims her reason for shooting was that she did not like her husband's looks.

Little by little, Henley reveals more about the characters as they interact with one another. The sisters are plagued by their mother's hanging. Why did she do it? Why did Meg flee from Doc Porter to pursue the fantasy of a Hollywood career? Why did Lenny end her relationship with her Memphis boyfriend? Why did Babe remain with a husband she loathed? And ultimately, what drives the sisters to join together in a healing familial union?

Babe, the baby (literally and figuratively), has everyone concerned about her fate at the hands of her wounded husband and the law; she's out on bail. Trying to plan her defense, Barnette questions her, looking for clues of continued physical and mental abuse inflicted by her husband. Babe recalls the details: "Well, after I shot him, I put the gun down on the piano bench and then I went out
into the kitchen and made a pitcher of lemonade."18 More candid with her sister Meg, Babe reveals an indiscretion with Willie Jay, a fifteen-year old black youth, son of Cora the maid.19 When Babe's husband discovered her and Willie Jay in a compromising position, he beat Willie and ran the youth away from the town.

Like her mother, Babe has considered suicide; she's been just that lonely. When she asks Meg why their mother chose suicide, Meg replies: "I don't know. She had a bad day. A real bad day. You know how it feels on a real bad day."20 Babe understands very well, but she recalls that the mother got national coverage, while she's getting statewide, and that is only because Zackery is a senator.

Meanwhile, she blows into a saxophone that she never learned to play, for her own comfort. Subsequently, Babe learns that Zackery has incriminating evidence, pictures of her and Willie Jay; and that Zackery's sister Lucille hired a detective to spy on Babe. When Meg views the photos, she responds to Willie Jay's size: "Well, he certainly has grown. You were right about that. My, oh, my."21 Learning that there are negatives of the sordid photos, Babe decides to put her head in the oven and end it all. It is Meg who advises of a better way to handle "a bad day."

Although Meg established a reputation of being promiscuous, selfish, and irresponsible years ago in Hazelhurst, she can be sensible and ultimately generous,
especially with her two sisters. Babe chooses to dismiss some of Meg's idiosyncrasies, because Meg "was the one who found Mama." Lenny maintains that Meg's behavior began long before. Addicted to books on disease, Meg would stare at the posters of polio victims; and then she would spend her dime on a bigger ice cream, rather than donate to the cause. During her mental breakdown in California, she tried to stuff all of her money and jewelry into a March of Dimes box. But when she learns of Babe's misfortune and her need for help, she immediately comes home, with a new clarity of vision. Her family's needs give her a sense of mission.

Lenny, a spinster and homebody, is the more rational (if not "conventionally sane") one. Seemingly, she has assumed the role of mother among the three sisters; her grandfather has convinced her ovary problem will scare off males, since she cannot bear children. She feels trapped by the burden of Old Granddaddy. But her compassion for him comes through:

Oh, Meg, please, don't talk so about Old Granddaddy!
It sounds so ungrateful. Why, he went out of his way to make a home for us; to treat us like we were his very own children. . . .22

A gentle, sympathetic tone rings in her thoughts about the grandfather's imminent demise: "Things sure gonna be different around her . . . when Old Granddaddy dies. Well, not for you two really, but for me."23
The sister's individual pursuits of happiness turn out to be illusions: Babe's marriage to the richest man in town; Meg's dream of a movie career; and Lenny's role as martyr to her grandfather. With their recognition of the reality of their circumstances comes pain and overwhelming loneliness. They discover, however, that through the nurturing bonds of sisterhood they have a new strength and joy.

Henley's dramatic control is exhibited in the three distinct lines of character development. In scene after scene, the sisters reveal themselves in honest moments of emotion and desperation, without destroying the comic tone of the play. Their lives abound in incident, their idiosyncrasies compel our interest and their mutual loyalty invites our admiration. Even with its wacky members, the MaGraths have much in common with any American family; they unite during a crisis. We need not laugh at them, but with them. More important, "we all have had bad days, when we contemplate--or are victims of--irrational crimes of the heart," Frank Rich reminds us; and Henley "shows how comedy at its best can heighten reality to illuminate the landscape of existence in all its mean absurdity."²⁴

Like many families, the MaGraths inherited disaster; they have many "skeletons." Crimes finally raises the query of how the sisters can escape the past and seize the future or come to terms with their existence. Meg tells Babe, "We've got to figure out a way to get through these bad
days."25 And the humor lies in the coincidence not in merely experiencing bad days but in the choices of how to "get through" them. Although there may not be replicas of the MaGraths among us everyday, there is enough basic truth behind the improbabilities which govern the lives of the MaGraths to make the characters funnier by contrast. Moreover, Crimes has as its power an implication about the state of the world; it says, "Resolution is not my business. Ludicrously horrifying honesty is."26

Babe's crime may be the most obvious one in Crimes, but the play considers other types of crimes, such as the wounds given and received by those who love, especially in a family. Crimes is very much like a tall tale; and in the development of that tale, Henley weaves an effective action: "I always start with an event, in this case the shooting by Babe, and develop my characters from that."27 Henley repeated this pattern in developing other of her plays.

Before winning the Pulitzer Prize, Henley had written two other plays, both of which soon reached regional theatres. After a premiere at the University of Illinois, The Miss Firecracker Contest was performed at the Victory Theatre in Burbank, California in 1980; it had subsequent professional productions in regional houses.28

The Miss Firecracker Contest focuses upon a beauty pageant annually on the Fourth of July in Brookhaven, Mississippi. For the contest, Carnelle Scott has dyed her
hair red, designed a garish red-blue-silver costume, and worked up a tap routine, complete with Roman candles, sparklers, rifle-twirling, and American flags. She wants the "Miss Firecracker" title to make up for an inglorious past. Carnelle's cousin, Delmount, suffers from bad dreams, and episodes of lunacy; and Delmount's sister, Elain, a former "Miss Firecracker," wishes to leave her "boring" rich husband. Also, Delmount, lately an asylum inmate, has recently quit his job of scraping up dead dogs from the road and aspires to earn a philosophy degree in New Orleans in order that he can "let everyone know why we're living." A lesser character Popeye Jackson, is Carnelle's seamstress, who began her vocation at the age of four by making outfits for bullfrogs. Although ludicrously drawn, the characters seriously try to escape unpleasant histories and search for a reasonably improved life. This combination of the serious and comic gives Henley's characters a highly credible dimension.

Henley never loses sight of the "humane" people inside her comic characters. Carnelle wants to overcome the low esteem engendered by a miserable childhood and her reputation as "Miss Hot Tamale" among the men. Delmount and Elain seek to "flee the psychological grip of their late mother, a 'mean' woman, who, through bizarre medical circumstances came to resemble an ape, shortly before her death." Popeye wants to escape to the Elysian Fields, if
she can ever locate this paradise on a map. The characters in this play join the long list of Henley's eccentrics who struggle against inevitability, with the specter of death haunting every funny line or character.

Carnelle, clearly the best developed and most appealing character in *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, wins fifth place in the contest. Through self-analysis, she charted a self-improvement course: winning the contest would be her means of escaping her present condition. We follow Carnelle's struggles to elevate herself. In her determination to achieve identity and redemption, though she lacks talent, she perseveres. Victory comes in merely trying to overcome. For Carnelle and all the characters of this play, the fitting resolution after the contest ends is to watch the fireworks; the unreachable dreams disappear with the disintegration of the fiery display.

Another Mississippi town, Canton, is the locale for Henley's *The Wake of Jamey Foster*. This comedy had its premiere at the Hartford Stage Company in Connecticut early in the spring of 1982 and opened on Broadway on October 14, 1982. A family has gathered for a serious and somber occasion, the burial of Jamey Foster, a man who dreamed of becoming a famous historian, but died after a cow kicked him in the head. In comic form, the play deals with the subject of loss and renewal in one's life, as well as the risks one
incurs in making oneself vulnerable in the course of loving another.³⁰

Critics had misgivings about *The Wake of Jamey Foster* when it premiered at Hartford Stage. When *Jamey* moved to Broadway, the criticism became vehement. Several critics charged that Henley had rewritten or reworked *Crimes*. Clive Barnes defended Henley's right to an individual style without being branded repetitious and classified her closer to British comic playwrights in "her concentration on serio-comic incident and the ironic complexity of character," rather than traditional smart crisp one-liners peculiar to American comedy and Broadway.³¹ Some parallels between *Crimes* and *The Wake of Jamey Foster* can be drawn: each contains three female characters; the two lawyers Zackery and Barnette in *Crimes* form a composite for Jamey; and each concerns the quest for self esteem.

The grotesque and comic combine in *The Wake of Jamey Foster*, a collection of vignettes, or graphic descriptions, about Southern life. Although the family has been brought together by death, no one grieves for the deceased. James' untimely death has been the direct result of a New York publisher's rejection of an unfinished manuscript surreptitiously mailed by Jamey's wife. Most of the characters who come to attend Jamey's corpse are from his family or his wife's family. Among the eccentrics, we meet Jamey's widow, Marshael Foster, a troubled young woman who
helped Jamey along to a death at thirty-three, and her rebel sister, Collard. Jamey was carousing with his fat, young mistress when the cow kicked him, and Marshael resents having to make arrangements for his mourning. Not everyone understands Marshael's lack of respect for the dead. For example, the deceased's brother retorts: "Well, I certainly would have hoped that the details and arrangements of my only brother's funeral would have concerned his wife more than coloring up a batch of goddamn Easter eggs!" The estranged wife is surrounded by her brother, sister, an orphan, a brother-in-law and his wife, and a friend of the family. Marshael's behavior puzzles everyone.

Jamey's mourners are an interesting pack and further evidence of Henley's skill as a playwright; each character is delineated through bold, unique strokes. Marshael's brother Leon works in a chicken factory as a turkey jerker; he is proud of his job:

They send them old turkey carcasses by on this conveyor belt, and I jerk out the turkey innards and put 'em in a sack. Have me an apron I war and everything.

Leon is just as proud of Pixrose, the orphan that he claims as his girl: "We both hate Dr. Peppers and Orange Crushes are our favorite beverage." Pixrose offers a priceless brooch to pay for fire damages she has caused in the kitchen, and breaks a plate when she tries to integrate with the rest of the family at dinner. She apologizes: "I've never been in people's homes." Katty, wife of the
deceased brother, is a Windsor from North East Jackson which makes her quality folk; but her frequent miscarriages have stirred feelings of inadequacy. Collard is Marshael's wild sister, who was the father's favorite and choice as partner in his law firm, until Collard's IQ tests came back:

Mine, well, mine said I was below average; ninety-two or something. . . . Twice more! It got lower each time! I ended up with an eighty-three. That's twenty-one points lower than Leon, for Christ's sake! Twenty-two points below Leon!! Oh, God! I was nothing in his eyes from then on! Just dumb and stupid and nothing!\[36\]

Henley justifies Marshael's behavior by informing the audience of her extraordinary past as a victim; she has been abused and misused by others, especially her husband. The author designs a lengthy plot to emphasize Marshael's epiphany, an independent manifestation necessary to Marshael's transformation into a self-reliant individual.

Both Marshael and Wayne, the deceased's brother, harbor guilt; each charges the other as being disrespectful. From their exchange of insults, we learn much about the deceased:

MARSHAEL: I mean all this sudden deep show of concern and respect when you never even liked Jamey! You never even cared for him at all. It made you happy to watch him struggle and fail!

WAYNE: It never did--

MARSHAEL: I remember clearly how you gloated with joy last Christmas Eve giving us that colored TV set when all we could afford to give y'all was a double book of Life Savers! You never wanted him to succeed! You never wanted him to make good!
WAYNE: . . . Hey, listen, Missy, you're the one who saddled him with those three children and that job he despised. You're the reason he never got his damn Master's degree.37

But Marshael carries a special hurt beyond Wayne's accusations; the deceased had rejected her. When she visited Jamey after he was hospitalized, he rejected her in front of "the other woman," Esmerelda Rowland, "the twice-divorced, yellow haired, sweetshop baker," with whom he had begun to live. How dare Esmerelda send over a blueberry pie, Jamey's favorite, for the wake!? In all her misery, Marshael tried to turn to Brocker Slade, who loves her, for affection; but "out of respect for the dead," Brocker, too, rejects her. Recalling her extraordinary tangled life with the deceased and other pressures throughout life (she had to attend to her sick parents with no help from Collard), Marshael decides to make her own case for human survival, and not even attend Jamey's funeral.

Four months before his demise, Jamey abandoned Marshael and the children. Two weeks before the wake, she filed for divorce; "Now he pulls this little stunt. . . . Well, as you can see, I've got mixed emotion about the entire event."38 Marshael's cathartic experience is especially significant, as she decides to leave rather than attend his funeral:

. . . Damn you, leaving me alone with your mess. . . . You're not leaving me here like this. You're gonna face me! I won't survive! . . . I've got t' have something . . . I'm scared not to be loved . . . I love you! God Stupid thing to say.
I love you!! Okay, okay... You're gone... You're not... nothing.

*Am I Blue*, a play Henley wrote while a sophomore in college (1972), was produced at Southern Methodist in Dallas, during Henley's senior year. Henley admits that "she was still too shy to use her real name on the program and insisted upon a pseudonym." In 1982, *Am I Blue* was performed at the Circle Repertory Company in New York, as part of a triple bill collective titled "confluence." John Bishop's play *Confluence* gave the collective its title; the third one-act play was Lanford Wilson's *Thymus Vulgaris*. Henley's play received praise as the strongest presentation on the three-hour bill; her eccentric characters were declared as engaging as those of William Saroyan and Tennessee Williams' plays.

One rainswept night in New Orleans in 1968, two virgins, a college fraternity freshman and a kookie sixteen-year-old girl, meet in the French quarter and develop a relationship. The male has been furnished a ticket to a brothel as a birthday present, and the girl is out practicing to become a shoplifter. John Polk needs courage, while Ashbe needs companionship. Both try to hide their loneliness, which, as Henley points out, knows no class distinction. Once Ashbe lures John to her place, she tries to impress him with her street wisdom, independence, and rum or water with blue food coloring added! She even is hospitable with her snacks: Cheerios and colored
marshmallows for John, and hot Koolade for herself. They grow to enjoy each other's company, talking and dancing.

The Debutante Ball, Henley's most recent play, began as a staged reading at the South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California, in late spring 1984, and was produced in Los Angeles in April 1985. Additionally, a five-minute play called Hymn in the Attic was performed at the Back Alley Theatre in Los Angeles, in a bill of other plays called 24 Hours. Henley has authored an original screenplay called The Moonwatcher and has another in progress. Also, productions of Crimes continue to be staged in England, France, Israel and Australia. As a writer, Henley uncovers much about her characters through psychological probing and hidden motivations. Moreover, her eccentrics seem at home in the Southern province, not unlike a Chekhovian landscape. Like those of Tennessee Williams, Henley's characters, though lonely and isolated, attempt to establish some credence of self-esteem within either a hostile or foreign environment. Henley's characters, like Chekhov's, wrestle with boredom and monotony, and hover between aspiration and accomplishment; eventually, however, characters resolve to claim, on their own terms, significance in their lives. Many reviewers look upon Henley's dramatic territory as the contemporary American South, but Richard Schiekel of Time chose to refer to the territory as a country of the mind: "one of Tennessee
Williams' provinces that has surrendered to a Chekhovian raiding party, perhaps."

Two years after Beth Henley's Pulitzer Prize (1980-81) for *Crimes of the Heart*, Marsha Norman received the same award for her play, *'night, Mother* (1983). Born Marsha Williams in 1947 in Louisville, Kentucky, she has retained the name of Norman from an early marriage. She received a B.A. from Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia. Her employment with emotionally disturbed children at Central State Hospital in Louisville while pursuing her M.A.T. at the University of Louisville provided material for her playwriting. Also, her work as filmmaker in schools, through the Kentucky Arts Commission, led to two summers of postgraduate study at the Center for Understanding Media in New York City. Her interest in writing freelance book reviews, features, and a children's newspaper with the *Louisville Times* aided her writing skills.

Seeking "more involvement" and choosing in 1976 to write fulltime, Norman wrote her first play, *Getting Out*, upon a commission from Jon Jory, artistic director of Actors' Theatre of Louisville. It was produced in November 1977, along with six other plays in the Festival of New American Plays. *Getting Out* was selected as co-winner, with Frederick Bailey's *The Bridgehead*. In February 1978, the play was staged at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and moved to New York's Off-Broadway Phoenix Theatre for 22
performances, on October 19, 1978; later the production transferred to the Theater De Lys, May 15, 1979 for an extended run of 237 performances.  

Other awards given Norman include a National Endowment for the Arts playwright-in-resident grant (1978-79) at the Actors' Theatre of Louisville; the John Gassner New Playwrights Medallion from Outer Critics Circle, the George Oppenheimer-Newsday Award (both in 1979 for Getting Out); and the Rockefeller playwright-in-resident grant 1979-80 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Norman's playwriting debut was astounding in the theatre community, but the play did not advance to Broadway, probably because of the blunt portrayal of the subject matter that grew from Norman's experience with emotionally disturbed youth at the Kentucky Central State Hospital. The play records a female's struggle to adjust to freedom following eight years imprisonment. Cast in a time frame of the first 24 hours after her prison release, the protagonist alternates between two coexistent settings, Louisville and an Alabama prison, with intermittent flashbacks. In addition, the protagonist suffers from schizophrenia: she is both Arlie and Arlene occupying one body. Facets of the prison experience impose upon the Arlie/Arlene predicament, such as monotony, dullness and a constant eroding of the prisoner's self esteem, as if to completely break her spirit. How can she ever be rehabilitated, if she must
always be everyone's prey? Are all criminals schizophrenic and is there but one kind of exorcism?

This case history of Arlene's transformation permits past and present to converge, locales to shift and violent physical action to emerge. As if a caged animal has been let loose, the uneducated, unrefined exjailbird has to adjust to the strange world which has no bars. At first, we see delinquent Arlie, given to fits of violence. Even the other characters contribute to the untamed atmosphere: a lecherous prison guard; the sloppy hostile mother whose occupation is that of cabdriver; Arlene's sweaty drug-addicted pimp; a mean and stern school principal; and a wise-cracking waitress. The correctional institution, the shabby one-room apartment, and all the flashbacks which invade the present join forces with the character to present through spectacle (a most significant element for this dramatic piece) a documentary on criminal behavior.

The flashbacks effectively comment on and clarify the past, while motivated by present action. Arlie is an extension of Arlene's hesitation, reaction or thought. Arranged chronologically, the succession of events brings us to the present moment, allowing us to differentiate between the two personalities, Arlie/Arlene. In some cases, the two personalities seem in competition with one another. Sometimes an object, such as money, conjures up the act of stealing; or a word provides the transition between Arlene
and a flashback, such as a conversation with her mother that triggers Arlene's memory of a doctor attempting to persuade her to abort the baby. Even an emotion like anger, provoked in the present and aimed at the mother, can trigger unpleasant memories of the past. And Ruby, for example, becomes for Arlene a comforter; Arlene can confess to Ruby because Ruby replaces the prison chaplain who comforted and advised Arlie.

Representing the "before" and "defiant highs," Arlie contrasts the transformed Arlene, who represents the "after" and "desperate lows." Arlie is the personality before prison release and Arlene is the new personality struggling to replace the old one. From birth, Arlie projects an image of the meanest, sharpest, most disturbed kid on the block. Poverty-stricken, the young girl turns to the most expedient means of survival: drugs, theft and prostitution. She faces similar challenges of survival while incarcerated; and once released, stark reality again forces the economic issue, with her limited job skills. A life of freedom may be honest, but it is still mean.

Arlie inherited social traps. An alcoholic father was often violent and left most of the responsibility to the promiscuous mother. Arlie, as well as the mother and other children, suffered beatings by the father, who later sexually assaulted Arlie. Moreover, Arlie endured resentment from her mother. The other siblings have also
been affected by this unhealthy family environment, as the Mother implies:

I could be workin at the Detention Center I been there so much. All I gotta do's have somethin big goin on an I git a call to come after one of you. Can't just have kids, no, gotta be pickin em up all over town.45

A sister, Candy, whose apartment Arlene now occupies, has left with her pimp. Seemingly, Arlie is the family prize, inasmuch as she enlarged upon her misdemeanors to include forgery, which, along with a charge of prostitution, earned her three years in Lakewood State Prison. Further crime during her aborted escape resulted in the second degree murder of a cabdriver, in conjunction with a filling station robbery and an attempted kidnapping of an attendant. Arlie served eight years at Pine Ridge Correctional Institute for the latter crimes.

The original Arlene, Arlie as flashback, "impinges agonizingly on the present, tearing at Arlene's precarious stability and raging and suffering upon the stage right beside her."46 While Arlie was in prison, the Chaplain influenced her desire to reform. The transformation began when she determined that she would exhibit behavior to merit parole: less screaming and emotional outbursts of tossing food or setting mattresses afire. Arlene recalls:

This chaplain said I had . . . said Arlie was my hateful self and she was hurtin me and God would find some way to take her away . . . and it was God's will so I could be the meek . . . the meek, them that's quiet and good and git whatever they
In her one-room apartment, Arlene wants Bennie, the official who escorted her to Louisville, to hang the cheaply framed picture of Jesus in a spot where she can see it first thing in the morning. The picture is a reminder of her commitment. Joey, Arlene's son whom prison authorities tried to persuade her to abort, is another commitment. Presently, the boy is in a foster home, because Arlene's sister Shirley did not feel like taking care of him.

Carl is Joey's father, though Carl does not know this. Bennie, the parole officer, warns Arlene not to get mixed up with Carl again, since the latter is an ex-convict and an accomplice in her last crime. Bennie learns when he himself attempts to seduce Arlie that he now has to deal with Arlene. Ruby, the upstairs neighbor, has also done time, but she is supportive of Arlene, just out of prison:

Hell, I heaved a whole gallon of milk right out the window my first day. . . . It bounced! Make me feel a helluva lot better. I said, "Ruby, if a gallon of milk can bounce back, so kin you."  

Although Arlene is a bit suspicious of Ruby's intentions, Ruby proceeds to tell Arlene about a dishwashing job opening. Finally, Arlene begins to trust Ruby and listens as the latter speaks of the evils of the Carl-types. Sharing her fears with Ruby, Arlene recalls how she attempted to kill Arlie (literally and figuratively):

... an there's all these holes all over me where i been stabbin myself and I'm saying Arlie dead an
it's God's will . . . I didn't scream it, I was just sayin it over and over . . . Arlie is dead, Arlie is dead. . . .

Purged after confession, Arlene breaks down; an apologetic Bennie enters with plants for a peace offering, but now Arlene wants both Carl and Bennie out of her life. This time the memory of Arlie is not as painful; and Arlene is finally in control.

Norman does not firmly establish Arlene's future; that is, one cannot be positive that she will go straight or straight back to jail. Will she be healed and redeemed? Instead, we have been presented the split personality of disturbed child versus troubled woman. We also have more understanding about the penal system and the effect of prison life upon the rehabilitation of the released convict. We know that Arlie's alter-ego, Arlene, is the real heroine who, as Clive Barnes pointed out, "is a burnt out, living corpse with just that vital spark of life to her that keeps flaring up." Like Arlene, each of us deals with two dies of our personalities, the good and evil; we must reconcile the two in accord with our view of ourselves in particular, and of society in general. The exhilarating fact about Arlene is that she has "gotten out" of prison and she has "gotten rid" of her most insidious enemy, her earlier self, the self that nearly caused her death in a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide.
The use of two protagonists, Arlie and Arlene, simultaneously presents a challenge to conventional playwriting. Interest is heightened in that the dual central figure is also female. Like the psychologist, the playwright presents an expose of the female psyche. Also, in her exploration of the alien, taboo, and dehumanizing environment of prison, Norman demonstrates a courageous rejection of the popular subjects of commercial drama. Hers is a strong voice among female playwrights in today's theatre.

Getting Out was followed by two one-acts, Third and Oak: The Laundromat (1980). When first produced at Actors' Theatre of Louisville, with Jon Jory directing, on March 22, 1978, the piece took the titles Third and Oak and The Pool Hall. The revised title, Third and Oak: The Laundromat reached Off-Off Broadway in December 1979, presented by the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York, with Kenneth Frankel as director.

In Third and Oak: The Laundromat, young DeeDee and the older Alberta discuss companionship as found between themselves and with others while doing laundry at 3 a.m. Both women admit being lonely, but DeeDee, the extrovert and an incessant talker, is willing to tell everything about her life and even tries to coerce Alberta into telling as much. What DeeDee talks about most is her husband, a mean and stupid womanizer whom she loves. Alberta finds DeeDee's
remarks strange or illogical. Consequently, Alberta meticulously attends to her own husband's laundry, except for one shirt. Dreading to go home because her husband might still be out, DeeDee comes to realize that Alberta does not have a husband to be coming home late. He died last winter, the day before his birthday. Since it has been difficult for Alberta to accept his death, she has avoided doing this load of laundry. The cabbage soup shirt goes unlaunched, because Herb died in it, as Alberta explains:

. . . So I asked him to take out the garbage. . . . I didn't miss him 'til I put the cake in the oven. Guess I thought he was checking his seed beds in the garage. I yelled out, "Herb, do you want butter cream or chocolate?" And then I saw him. Lying in the alley, covered in my cabbage soup. It was his heart.¹²

To cope with her loneliness, DeeDee brings in a little stand-up mirror while watching television: "It's my face over there when I look, but it's a face just the same."¹³ Alberta wisely says that DeeDee should remember that "Your own face in the mirror is better than a man who would eat a whole fried egg in one bite."¹⁴ DeeDee can stay longer now, rather than rushing home to her cheating spouse. Laughter is not all that the two women now share. After conversing, they have come to some understanding of their own problems, learning from each other more about isolation and/or rejection from others, whether by dying or a turning away.

Norman selects conventional realism for *The Laundromat*. Within a commonplace setting, characters reveal profound
needs and make important discoveries. Although they meet as strangers, they find common bonds, and a relationship develops which is wholesome and regenerating.

A pool room, next door to the laundromat, provides the setting for Holdup; two black men become reconciled following many years of bitterness. They experience a nurturing friendship described for the women in The Laundromat. A third play, Circus Valentine, appeared at the 1979 Festival of New American Plays in Louisville. Other writings include "It's the Willingness," a teleplay (PBS, 1978); and "In Trouble at Fifteen," Norman's first broadcast for the television program "Skag" (Lorimar Productions, 1980). Her unproduced screenplays include "The Children with Emerald Eyes," "For Columbia," "The Bridge," and "The Neighbor's Wife," all for United Artists.5

Norman's 1982-83 Pulitzer Prize winning play, 'night, Mother, opened at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge in December 1972; and reached Broadway (at the John Golden Theatre) on March 31, 1983, after the Pulitzer had been awarded. The play provides a clinical examination of suicide, not the act itself, but rather the motivation for the deed. Jessie Cates, self-contained, depressive but composed, gets things in order with a singleness of purpose, as if she is organizing the spring cleaning. Jessie lives with her mother, Thelma Cates, in the mother's "relatively new house built way out on a country road." They are
ordinary people going about their usual ways of living, except that Jessie announces her intention to commit suicide. Thereafter, the last hour or so of her life has a profound effect upon Thelma (and the audience), for the playwright insists upon a visible clock to tick away the last minutes.

Thelma attempts in vain to dissuade Jessie, and her terror and frustration mount as she watches her daughter attend to details before the deadly moment: the mother’s manicure (never actually finished, but Jessie has all the utensils handy); instructions for deliveries, such as milk; clarifying the contents and recipients of phone calls after the demise; clearing the garbage, and tidying the house. Jessie deals with other minutiae, such as cleaning the refrigerator, sorting drawers, and making cocoa. Jessie never wavers in her intent:

Mama . . . I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used.  

Against Thelma's every proposal, Jessie adamantly states that this is her own life and the disposal of it is the one thing of which she should and will have control.

"I'm cold all the time anyway," Jessie tells her mother. A lonely person since childhood, Jessie is not only the product of a loveless marriage, but she has seen her own marriage end in divorce. She has watched her son, Ricky, develop into a despicable being (the worst aspects of
her ex-husband and herself); Ricky has run away after stealing his mother's rings to satisfy a drug habit. Jessie learns this night that she has suffered epilepsy since childhood. It annoys her that Thelma permitted her to think that the seizures began after Jessie and Cecil married. In fact, the couple had traced the origin of Jessie's illness to a horse riding accident. Had Jessie known earlier, she might have sought medical attention years ago. Perhaps, she could have lived a more normal life; at least, she might have been able to hold a decent job. Thelma is sorry, but so many things have gone unsaid over the years. Jessie's own brother Dawson and his wife, who live nearby, make fun of her. It is too late for any of it to make a difference.

Thelma pleads, using a number of ruses. She will try to make life better for Jessie by keeping the family away, turning off the television, or helping Jessie move out on her own. "People don't really kill themselves . . . unless you're retarded or deranged." Thelma tries still another angle: "Jessie, how can I live here without you? I need you! . . . How can I live with myself after this, Jessie?"

As Thelma exhausts her strategies, she becomes childlike in her desperation:

How dare you! How dare you! You think you can just leave whenever you want like you're watching television here/ . . . You make me feel like a fool for being alive, . . . .

Although Jessie has waited on her mother hand and foot, she knows her mother is capable of caring for herself. Also,
the daughter has grown tired of listening to Thelma's endless foolish chatter. Finally, Jessie does not want pity, but she does want it known that a loving mother-daughter relationship exists between her mother and herself:

Now, somebody's bound to ask you why I did it and you just say you don't know. That you loved me and you know I loved you and we just sat around tonight like every other night of our lives and then I came over and kissed and said, "'night, Mother," . . .

The two women reveal more of themselves with one another in this desperate hour than in all the preceding years. The pressure of the moment prompts untold truths. For example, Thelma tells Jessie that "Family is just accident . . . It's nothing personal . . . They don't mean to get on your nerves . . . They don't even mean to be your family, they just are." Jessie, too, sees herself and her husband at war inside Ricky: "Ricky is the two of us together for all time in too small a space." Thelma and Jessie discover that neither knows the other very well: "You have no earthly idea how I feel," Jessie declares. When Thelma claims control over Jessie as mother with "You are my child!" Jessie counters with "I am what became of your child." For the first time, Jessie asks her mother questions about the seizures, and Thelma takes the opportunity tonight to question Jessie about her divorce from Cecil.

After genuine attempts to dissuade her daughter fail, Thelma becomes aware of the finality of Jessie's decision;
Jessie has already withdrawn from this world. After all the pleading, reasoning, threatening, mourning, regretting, and laughing, Jessie's answer to life is still no. On schedule, Jessie goes to her room, locks the door, puts a bullet through her head and ends her life. As the gun goes off, we watch a mechanical mother follow the instructions just as she had received them.

We, like the playwright, have remained somewhat detached from the horror of suicide, but we found definite strength in the wisdom of what it means to be a responsible person. Jessie came to understand that life engulfs far more complications than the average television soap opera admits. Although she assumed many household chores, she finally realized that she was not the master of herself. With many dimensions of the mother-daughter relationship unkindled in just this final hour, the play's symbolic clock reminds us of things undone, dreams unfulfilled and the uncertainty of the future. Plaudits for 'night, Mother generously cited Norman's extraordinary language: "Her words more than ring true, they tintinnabulate." Thelma describes her husband, Jessie's deceased father: "All the man ever did was farm and sit." In 'night, Mother, Getting Out and The Laundromat, Norman uses language to open up the characters' private and unique mental reservoir. The critics, such as Howard Kissel of Women's Wear Daily and Clive Barnes of the New York Post not only praised Norman's
dialogue, but noted, too, her uncompromising honesty with the language regarding the values or lack of values in our contemporary life.

Norman selects subjects from the ordinary, and brings both understanding and dignity to forgotten, dismissed, or tragic American lives. Norman shares Henley's interest in the lost and lonely. Both playwrights present fresh explorations of human relationships in the 1980's. Since each chooses central characters who are female, the feminists have found within the plays statements supportive of the contemporary liberated woman, especially in the exploration of roles of autonomy, assertiveness, and familial relationships. In her creation of Southern eccentrics from her mythical towns of Mississippi, Henley remains faithful to the Southern Gothic tradition of the bizarre and grotesque. Although Norman, too, is a Southern writer, her province is not a predictable coterie; it may include the least likely, untapped, isolated or unfamiliar landscapes. Just as Henley finds healing, humor and nurturing in unusual circumstances, Norman recognizes strength and dignity in the most restricted environs of prison and suicide. Both Henley and Norman are female playwrights who have sensitively analyzed the human condition and assumed a place for themselves in the making of contemporary American drama.
ENDNOTES: CHAPTER FOUR


4 Locher 186.

5 Locher 186.


11 Locher 187.


15 Scott Haller, "Her First Play, Her First Pulitzer Prize," Saturday Review (November 1981): 40, 42.

6 Haller 42.


19 Henley 30.

20 Henley 20.

21 Henley 61.

22 Henley 42.

23 Henley 59.


25 Henley 69.


28 Subsequent professional productions in regional houses included the Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago, Arena Studio Theater in Buffalo and the New Stage Theater of Jackson, Mississippi. Additional performances were staged in Seattle, Dallas, Atlanta and Dorset, Vermont. In May of 1984, it reached Off-Broadway, at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City.


33 Henley, Jamey 29.

34 Henley, Jamey 28.

35 Henley, Jamey 28.

36 Henley, Jamey 52.
37 Henley, Jamey 32.
38 Henley, Jamey 23.
39 Henley, Jamey 61.
40 Locher 186.
41 Delgado, The Best Short Plays, 1982 130.
47 Norman 6.
48 Norman 61.
49 Norman 47-48.
50 Norman 61.
53 Norman, Laundromat 24.
54 Norman, Laundromat 25.
57 Norman, 'night, Mother 16.
58 Norman, 'night, Mother 48.
69 Norman, 'night, Mother 51.
60 Norman, 'night, Mother 53.
61 Norman, 'night, Mother 19.
62 Norman, 'night, Mother 40.
63 Norman, 'night, Mother 37.
64 Norman, 'night, Mother 50.

65 Joel Siegel quoting Norman in 'night, Mother Review, WABC-TV, March 31, 1983. (In Marlowe and Blake, 1983: 3366.)

66 Norman, 'night, Mother 32.
The primary emphasis of this study has been upon the exploration of thought in the plays of ten selected female playwrights who produced work during the decade of 1973-1983. In order to identify, define, and analyze the ideas at work in approximately fifty plays, I examined two major determinants of thought: (1) the subject matter chosen by the dramatists; and (2) the form (or plot structure) chosen by the dramatists. While other determinants of thought have been considered in my study (such as matters external to the plays, i.e., influences upon the playwright from other dramatists, or from social/political events), the following principal questions governed my analysis and can serve to guide my conclusions.

I. What is revealed about thought in the subject matter chosen by the dramatists?

Thematic patterns that emerged from the collective plays focus primarily upon the family unit and roles within that unit; also, roles in male-female sexual relationships, and roles in social/political relationships, making use, in the latter case, of historical figures for the purpose of demystifying and de-idealizing traditional attitudes and images. Unquestionably, the family unit furnishes the most crucial terrain for exploration since its marital and
parental relationships profoundly influence the moral values of society at large.

If the American society in the seventies and eighties continues to pursue materialistic goals at the sacrifice of cultural and spiritual ends (a pursuit begun in earnest with the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century), the motivational drive for it surely springs from the complex, intimate, moral, and psychological lessons of familial experience. The women playwrights in this study chose to explore this subject to a far greater extent than any other; in doing so, they especially focus upon parent-child relations (or perhaps more often, the adult-child whose character has been shaped by the parents and their environmental circumstances), depicting the offspring, the younger generation, as struggling victims of their forebears' ignorance and distorted values. Particularly in the plays of Beth Henley and Marsha Norman young adults find themselves succumbing to a reenactment of their parents' destinies; a growing awareness of this approaching fate often brings the offspring to a new level of self-determined acts that can lead to breaking free of ingrained physical and mental destructive patterns.

Still another perspective seldom explored has been introduced among the playwrights of this study. The parent realizes and analyzes a special bonding and reflection of self in her offspring. As an example, it is difficult to
separate the thoughts of mother and daughter in Rose Goldemberg's *Letters Home*. Also, the mother experiences various levels of identification with her daughter in order to cope with the latter's suicide. Usually, it is the young adult or sibling who makes the discoveries of parent-child ties. In *Letters Home*, both parent and child have been cast in what Rosalyn Drexler calls a *Graven Image* of one another. Several of the playwrights emphasize that the ambivalence in mother-daughter relations is one great unsolved mystery.

The contemporary family requires reexamination, since values have become meaningless or nonexistent. Adele Shank's hyperrealistic plays present a distorted view of the traditional family on the brink of collapse. If *Suburbia*, U.S.A. indicates the heart of Americanism, the institutions of family and marriage are nearing disintegration. Each family member operates independently of the whole, and cohesiveness seems unimportant; yet, Tina Howe's *Painting Churches* warns of impending disaster and disillusionment if we wait too late to evaluate, appreciate, or capture the essence of familial relations. Even primitive rituals and lifestyles offer greater depth in meaning than much of the shallow trappings of rampant modern views and behaviors.

Women playwrights find themselves repeatedly challenged as artists. In the first place, many female dramatists must
reconcile numerous roles, including that of artist, parent/mother, or wife. While most of the female playwrights plead to be classified as mere playwright, rather than female playwright, critical responses to their work continue to be shrouded by gender, and the list of female models among historical playwrights is a notably short one. The writers of this study will help, at least, to build upon the history of female playwrights in America. If the female playwright is to prosper, she needs a solid history or heritage to which she can point with pride.

One resounding thematic note in this study has to do with the clarion call for community spirit among female writers/artists. Since the climb has been an arduous one, females can strengthen and encourage other female artists. Lavonne Mueller suggests that the ideas of the plays by women are not restricted; her *Warriors from a Long Childhood* clearly establishes that males can benefit from nurturing and bonding in familial situations customarily associated with females. Mueller further stresses a wider terrain of subject matter for the female playwright and a greater network of female playwrights.

Male-female sexual relationships have been under special scrutiny by the playwrights of this study. Such relationships constantly operate under dated views and misconceptions of the female's role, but it is up to the
female to insist upon an equal voice. All of the playwrights in this study explore the sense of self worth or self esteem for the female, in particular. However, these playwrights point out that love of self is a prerequisite in all viable relationships, whether one is male or female. The male encounters this truth, when he analyzes his relationships with females or other men. Also, the male must acknowledge the tenor of the times and accept the self assertive female.

Another thematic pattern which emerges among the female playwrights represented in this study regards roles in social/political relationships against a background of changing values. The protagonist, usually a female, challenges the reductionist labeling of females as outcasts, whether determined by sex alone, sex and race, economic status or the like. Each individual, male or female, seeks self actualization as she/he interprets her/his own involvements. Just as disintegration of the ideal family affects society negatively, an antagonistic, patriarchal society cripples the female in terms of her full development or potential for such development.

Some of the female playwrights in this study have chosen historical figures as subject matter. Since the female has been traditionally excluded from the pages of history, the female playwright turns to art to redress the balance. Disturbed by the female's limited historical
visibility, both as artists and persons, women writers are reexamining the familiar heroes or heroines and humanizing them according to the specific needs of the contemporary female. Mueller's *Little Victories* reveals new sensibilities about Joan of Arc and especially about Susan B. Anthony. With so few mythic roots explored in the past, female playwrights are finding fertile ground for such subjects.

Other themes explored by the female playwrights are related to spirituality or rites of passage wherein the character comes into her own as person, female, or artist. In particular, the dilemma of the artist's struggle for acceptance and visibility is a recurrent subject. The playwrights in this study see the stage as a proper place to explore such problems of gender and artistic identity, and their works encourage a fresh, objective critical assessment of drama written by females.

II. What is revealed about thought in the plot structure chosen by the female dramatists of this study? Influenced by the absurdists and alternative theatre of the '60's, a majority of the female playwrights of 1973-83 favor episodic plots, rejecting traditional, cause-effect chronological structures. In many cases, this approach involves a deliberate creation of irrational time and space, indicative of the fragmented society which breeds disruption and disorder. In other words, the playwrights use
unconventional plot structures to reflect their rejection of traditional values, aesthetically and socially. Some playwrights have not veered from conventional causally related plots. In such cases, usually, it is the subject matter that is less conventional. Many of the playwrights in this study have had difficulty in getting their plays accepted for production because of bias against female writers, or perhaps, more often the case, because of the unconventionality of their form or style. Some, like Tina Howe, have concluded that if their work is to find an audience it must be made more familiar in form and style, more accessible; her later plays (Painting Churches and Coastal Disturbances) reflect her move away from early experimentation.

III. To what extent have feminist political or aesthetic ideals influenced the thought of these selected plays? This study establishes a lineage between the female playwrights of the '60's and the playwrights of 1973-83. A number of female writers of the '60's identified with feminist collectives or ethnic, community, and political theatres, which redefined the female dramatist and her work. Feminist political and aesthetic ideals examine facets of domestic life and the role/image of the female in much the same way as playwrights in this study. Self identity, loneliness, fear, uncertainly, autonomy, mythic roots, and spirit of sisterly community are all feminist topics.
Instead of mere protest, confrontation or savage satire, the female dramatists of 1973-83 depict an optimistic, assertive individual spirit, as the female seeks to solve her problems singularly or within the strength of other females. Nurturing and bonding may be thought of as a natural feminine talent, but wholesome familial relationships serve both sexes, according to the female playwrights represented in this study. Similarly, the search for autonomy and individual realization of one's potential can be viewed as a female's rite of passage, and a person's rite of passage.

Obviously, the proliferation of female playwrights points to a new trend, which was generated, in part, by the adjusted attitude toward females in our society. It is gratifying to note that the output of female playwrights of 1973-83 does not stop with the ten writers of this study; instead the number continues to swell: Julie Bovasso, Jane Martin, and Emily Mann, for example, represent a continuing growth of promising and productive female playwrights. As biases are further overcome, as more stages become available, and as audiences enlarge, the number of female playwrights will undoubtedly keep increasing. Many female writers in contemporary theatre, like Kathleen Tolan, emerged from within theatre production as an actress, as did Mary Gallagher, Beth Henley, and others cited in earlier chapters of this study. Like Emily Mann, Elizabeth Swados
and Jo Ann Akalaitis are writers who also direct. Several lesser known playwrights have not yet established a full body of works (Shirley Lauro, Moncoko Iko, and Deborah Eisenberg), but their works reveal talents being developed. The increase of female playwrights in America can be taken as a part of a larger pattern covering every aspect of the theatre. Today, women producers, directors, and scenic, costume, and lighting designers are no longer uncommon. Increasingly, women writers receive encouragement from playwrights' workshops, festivals, institutional theatres, and various foundations which furnish financial support to theatre in this country.

It is still premature to distinguish a true "female aesthetic" peculiar to the female playwrights of 1973-83. This eclectic group aptly reveals diversity among a new wave of writers. The creative impulse among these dramatists has been punctuated by individualism, despite some common strains in subject matter, plot structure, and feminist echoes. Within this realm of various points of view, these female playwrights, like their male colleagues, while often exploring particular gender issues always insist that their primary concern is not gender rights but human rights. Repeatedly, the playwrights demand to be recognized as "playwright," not "female playwrights." As female writers for the stage continue to increase and to realize their
potential as artists, hopefully an expanding and increasingly critical dialogue will accompany them.
APPENDIX A

Selected Playwrights and Specific Plays of the Study

Tina Howe:
1. Painting Churches (1983)
2. The Nest*
3. Museum (1976)
4. The Art of Dining (1978)
5. Birth after Birth (1973)

Rosalyn Drexler:
1. He Who Was She (1976)
3. Vulgar Lives (1979)
4. The Writers' Opera (1979)

Rose L. Goldemberg:
1. Apples in Eden (1975)
2. Absolutely Everything*
3. A Little Traveling Music*
4. Rites of Passage (1975)
5. Letters Home (1979)
6. The Rabinowitz Gambit (1973)
7. Marching as to War (1972-73)

Mary Gallagher:
1. Dog Eat Dog (1983)
2. Chocolate Cake (1982)
4. Father Dreams (1981-82)
5. Little Bird (1981-82)
6. Love Minus (In Progress)
7. How to Say Goodbye (In progress)
Adele Shank:
1. Fox and Co. (1977)
2. Sunset/Sunrise (1977)
3. Winterplay (1979)

Lavonne Mueller:
1. Little Victories (1983)
2. Oyster Crackers,
3. Warriors from a Long Childhood (1979)
5. Crimes and Dreams (1980)

Marsha Norman:
1. Getting Out (1977)
2. Third and Oak: The Laundromat and the Pool Hall (1978)
3. Circus Valentine (1979)
5. 'night, Mother (1983)

Wendy Wasserstein:
1. Any Woman Can't*
2. Montpelier, Pazazz*
3. When Dinah Shore Ruled the Earth*
4. Uncommon Women and Others (1978)
5. Isn't It Romantic (1981; 1983)

Ntozake Shange:
1. For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf (1977)
2. A Photograph: Lovers in Motion*
3. Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon*
4. Sovereign Spirit (1977)
5. Magic Spell #7 (1979)
6. Boogie Woogie Landscapes*
8. Bocas: A Daughter's Geography*

Beth Henley:
2. The Miss Firecracker Contest (1982)
5. The Debutante Ball (1985)

*Dates Unknown
LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

BOOKS:


**ESSAYS AND ARTICLES:**


Kroll, Jack. "'night, Mother." Newsweek, 101 (January 2, 1983), pp. 41-42.


Lewis, B. "'What's $80,000 Split 35 Ways?' Women's Project." Ms, (May 7, 1979), pp. 71-72.

Moore, Honor. "Theatre will Never be the Same." Ms, (December 6, 1977), pp. 36-39.


Raidy, William. "'Warriors' Opens Women's Series with a Stark Drama of POWS." Newark-Time Ledger, (May 21, 1979), p. 44.


"Who Erased the 70s?" Esquire, (December 1977), pp. 152-155.
DISSENTATIONS AND THESIS:


Hope, Diane S. "A Rhetorical Definition of Movements: The Drama of Rebirth in Radical Feminism." Diss. State University of New York at Buffalo 1975.


OTHER SOURCES:


Resumes on the 10 major playwrights; sent to Author, 1984.
Joyce Ann Williams O'Rourke was born on October 13, 1941 in Bessemer, Alabama. She was reared in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where she graduated valedictorian from Druid High School. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Talledega College, Talledega, Alabama. In 1968, she received the Masters of Arts degree in Speech and Drama from the University of Alabama. She studied briefly at Florida State University before enrolling in the Ph.D program in the Speech Department, as a theatre major, at Louisiana State University. She has taught at Louisiana State University and several other colleges, including Stillman College in Alabama, Carleton College in Minnesota, and Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Virginia, where she chaired the Department of Speech and Drama for five years. Presently, she serves on the faculty of the Department of Speech and Theatre, at Southern University, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Joyce O'Rourke

Major Field: (Theatre) Speech

Title of Dissertation: "New Female Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1973-83: A Critical Analysis of Thought in Selected Plays"

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:
March 16, 1988