

Towards a Feminist Comedy

“**T**o profane, through laughter, the forbidding symbols of divine and political power is to expose them as *merely* symbols, and thus to throw into doubt the tragic and sacrificial world-view which they enshrine (91),” writes Anthony Gash in his discussion of the carnivalesque. What I propose is that Ann-Marie MacDonald’s recent dramatic work, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, opens Canadian feminist comedy to exactly such profaning through laughter which Gash associates with the potential for real social or political change. Before showing how *GD (GJ)* partakes of elements of the comic carnivalesque I will summarize the larger theoretical debate concerning comedy’s power to transform audiences.

While throwing into doubt the tragic world-view has always been comedy’s goal, theorists have disagreed on the permanence of the overthrow. One side would argue that comedy is ultimately a conservative force allowing the audience to play with freedom for a time, but then ensuring that the status quo is restored at play’s end, thereby acting as a kind of purgation of chaos (Eco, Cook, Dolan, Nelson); the other side asserts that comedy revives and excites revolutionary forces that lead not only to social renewal on stage, but also to an awakening of subversive energies in the audience (Bakhtin, Frye, Turner, Santayana). Absent from these theoretical speculations is discussion of plot, characterization, and the audience’s accompanying emotional responses, the very starting points of the Aristotelian study of tragedy still underlying traditional scholarly analyses of that genre. By giving attention to the effects of plot and characterization, we can propose that dramatic comedy is sometimes

conservative and sometimes radical in its cultural work, depending upon what happens in each play, to whom, and how the audience responds.

Surely a play like *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* in which an English professor named Constance overcomes her diffidence and begins to show both sexual and professional power has a different meaning from a play in which an English professor named Constance gives in to her diffidence and quits her job, marrying a nice man (perhaps a dentist), and starting a family (in Mississauga). And if the English professor is, say, aboriginal or disabled or lesbian, certainly the play's meaning is altered yet again. I suggest that plays in which marginalized women gain success and audience empathy explicitly through allying with other women to ridicule and best powerful figures in the mainstream, and that create a joyful mood, might form a sound basis for evaluating the radical potential of Canadian women's comedy; clearly, the borrowed theories noted above, however progressive or sophisticated, have not considered such plays.

But even to such drama specialists as Erik MacDonald, Elin Diamond, and Kate Lushington who do consider women's plays, my discussion of a Canadian feminist carnivalesque represents something new. I can most clearly locate my approach within existing theory with reference to the kind of eclecticism Sue-Ellen Case advocates in her *Feminism and Theatre*:

For theatre, the basic theoretical project for feminism could be termed a 'new poetics,' borrowing the notion from Aristotle's *Poetics*. New feminist theory would abandon the traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in the art, support their liberation from the cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorisation of the male gender. In pursuit of these objectives, feminist dramatic theory would borrow freely . . . (114-115)

But in promoting a specific structure for plays I am working against the latest trends of postmodernist theatre as described by Erik MacDonald in his *Theater at the Margins*: "the post-structured stage remains on the selvage of continual disappearance, for, in resisting its own institutionality, it pulls the rug out from under the foundations, as it were, of aesthetic, or canon-forming, processes" (174). Canon-forming of another kind, for example discovering such a new genre as that ably described by Elin Diamond as "hysterical realism" (68), seems closer to my project although the play I discuss would perhaps appear—because of its accessibility—too close to the familiar realist-naturalist tradition.

In supporting a popular feminist theatre that borrows from the comic carnivalesque as does *GD (GJ)*, I look forward to a success for feminist theatre like that of its triumphant heroines. My very definition of popular feminist comedy, however, strikes Kate Lushington—Artistic Director of Toronto’s Nightwood Theatre (discussed below) from 1988 to 1994—as problematic:

Getting there [to material success] you have to do the male thing, the white thing, and then where is your community? Where are you? The price is huge for that kind of material success. Fewer and fewer people are making it; we have an alienated left. That’s the problem with material success. (personal interview 1993)

The larger community, however, has less difficulty with material success and that community must be hailed by comedy in order to be moved and changed by it. Hence my tolerance for a play which because popular may strike other drama specialists as conventional, but which in fact through the power of comic inversion may both attract and renew its audiences.

Ann-Marie MacDonald’s comedy about an English professor named Constance qualifies as feminist comedy by my definition above because the white, middle-class Constance is at least slightly marginalized (eccentric, probably brilliant) and yet she stirs audience empathy. To the extent that Constance is mocked, the play undermines its radical potential, but more importantly to the extent that Constance herself learns through other women to laugh at her oppressors and so reclaim her power, providing hopeful closure, the play shows progressive force. Theorists (Freud, Purdie) have posited that laughter provides us with at least a momentary sense of superiority over the person or thing being laughed at, and so critical commentary upon who laughs at what or whom in women’s comedy such as *GD (GJ)* and its audiences, and who seems to gain by the laughter, should provide a key to the play’s potential as a power for or against cultural change. I have chosen MacDonald’s comedy as a sample not only because of its popularity before and since the national tour in 1990—Ottawa, Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto (see reviews by Crook, Coulbourn, Hunt, Branswell, Friedlander, Charles, Dykk, Bemrose, Nicholls, Crew, and Conlogue)—but also because of the theatre which first produced it, Toronto’s Nightwood Theatre, whose consistent success at promoting feminist comedy merits further attention. The paper will not attempt to survey Canadian feminist comedy, or the theatres that produce it, but rather to use *GD (GJ)* and Nightwood as representative examples of where Canadian women’s most promising dramatic comedy now stands.

Some theories of feminist dramatic comedy have studied alternative happy endings of plays, thereby supplying that firm basis in plot absent in theories of mainstream comedy. Susan Carlson in her responsible treatment of the history of dramatic comic theory, including that of contemporary British feminists, writes that overall “women’s theatre has irrevocably been established as communal,” and “these communities intensify women’s tendency to write plays grounded in joy” (284-285). The recent tradition of feminist comedy in England, as in Canada, thus seems closely linked to the collaborative methods of feminist theatre. Collaborative methods of course pertain to the North American alternative theatre movement in general, not just to women’s alternative theatre (see Johnston, Fraticelli). But in a short article updating statistics from Rina Fraticelli’s report on the status of women in the Canadian theatre, Bronwyn Drainie suggests that women’s alternative theatre now provides the kind of cultural leaven that Canadian nationalist alternative theatre provided twenty years ago.

Although Ann-Marie MacDonald’s play, her first solo creation, takes feminist comedy in a new direction in terms of its individual authorship, its vision remains hopeful in that—significantly—the central female figure triumphs. “[I]t is such positive vision,” Carlson writes, “that distinguishes the women’s work [from contemporary male comedies rooted in despair], even more basically than the formal innovations or the novel subject matter. In other words, the difference in women’s comedy depends on optimism” (307). Regina Barreca corroborates Carlson’s theory that feminist comedians’ independence from the established dramatic tradition emerges in part through the endings of their plays, observing that the “endings of comic works by women writers do not, ultimately, reproduce the expected hierarchies, or if they do it is often with a sense of dislocation even about the happiest ending” (1988, 12). Such “dislocation” seems inevitable as hierarchies are overturned and the comic carnivalesque does its usual work.

Carlson sees several ways in which contemporary British feminist comedy eludes audiences’ expectations about the return to order which endings in conventional comedy have promised. The group protagonist, for example, challenges the audience’s concept of an individual hero and his or her lover who, typically in romantic comedy, overcome obstacles to their union and marry at play’s end. In her informed discussion of several feminist endings which overturn established generic conventions, such as the preference for birth as closure (240), Carlson writes: “plays that conclude with groups

of women usually drop both men and marriage from their definitions of happiness” (238). Other common elements among women’s comedies are “disregard for stage realism” (205), casting against gender and number, intrusive musical interludes, and women’s cabaret/laughter (213-244), the first two of which appear in MacDonald’s work, described by her as a “classic adventure-mystery-fairytale-comedy” (qtd. in Branswell).

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)

PhD candidate Constance Ledbelly, lecturer at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, reaches the lowest point in her career and emotional life near the play’s opening, but not before developing her brilliant theory about two of Shakespeare’s tragedies having been comedies in their sources. What Shakespeare struck from each original text, Constance argues, was a witty fool, the very figure Constance herself will become later in the play when a flight of fancy will take her into the worlds of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Newspaper and magazine reviews focus on the play’s humour and theatricality, but little attention has yet been given the work in academic journals. Mark Fortier’s otherwise favourable article in *Canadian Theatre Review* concludes that

[t]he play completely elides the issue of race There is little in the play about class None of this is necessarily to fault MacDonald’s work; her task has been to express humanism with a woman’s face, and that’s what she has accomplished. (51)

Her “humanism with a woman’s face” might inhere in Constance Ledbelly’s theory of comedy, never referred to in any critiques of the play but deserving of serious attention, for it is this theory that redeems Constance and endears her to her audience.

Early in Act I Professor Ledbelly reads the following from her incomplete doctoral dissertation entitled “*Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*: The Seeds of Corruption and Comedy”:

Fate seems too generous in both plays. In both plays, the tragic characters, particularly Romeo and Othello, have abundant opportunity to save themselves. The fact that they do not save themselves, tends to characterize them more as unwitting victims of a disastrous practical joke—[Romeo the undelivered message, and Othello the handkerchief]. (1.1)

Constance thus sees the humour in two of the most revered tragic texts in the traditional canon, foreshadowing her potential for mockery of the powerful, oppressive icons in her personal life.

She then meets and becomes acquainted with the female heroes in order to determine whether they should be read as tragic characters doomed by a fortune they cannot control, or comic figures redeemed by self-knowledge. In the end Constance herself becomes a kind of hero of Shakespearean romantic comedy in that she gains status in her own estimation, while Shakespeare's women, although they do not transform their tragedies, are at least permitted to gain a knowledge of self like that which Othello, for example, is allowed by Shakespeare to gain. And Constance herself, through her encounters with Desdemona and Juliet, is able to see finally that she has been manipulated by the man she "loves," an academic promoted to Full Professor as a result of having persuaded the astute but distracted student Constance to write his articles and reviews for him, and she seems to have gained the necessary insight into her thesis topic to know how to conclude it as well. Having been just a fool at the play's opening, laughed at by the audience and other characters, she thus becomes the witty fool.

Such triumph, marginal as it is, seems perfectly suited to the academic climate of southern Ontario of the 1990s where the feminist agenda, far from having produced reverse discrimination, has had little effect on the fact that "married women teaching in universities have been more likely than their male counterparts to be employed in part-time positions at low salaries with few benefits" as a result of their giving time to families rather than careers (Lyons 15). In MacDonald's play, Constance seems at first in a vulnerable professional condition because of the low status and esteem allowed her by the one male academic who appears in the play. Although she is not married to Claude Knight or anybody else, she wants to be married to Knight, and her behaviour towards him is slavish in the extreme. But Constance's liberation through alliances with other women—women who explicitly lead her in attacking Knight (Desdemona) and replacing him in her desire (Juliet)—and her avoidance of the kind of reestablishment of the social order through marriage typical of traditional comedy, permits modest hope. In a personal interview, MacDonald stated that "there is a marriage [at play's end]. It's a marriage of Constance's selves. She marries herself." And audiences seeing MacDonald's play seem more likely to be moved to joy at this marriage than the one Constance had initially yearned for. Perhaps in a still more subversive feminist comedy she would marry a woman of colour (a dentist?) and become Queen's University Principal, but the audiences who have made *GD (GJ)* so popular are perhaps not yet entirely ready for such a plot.

MacDonald senses the revolutionary potential of feminist comedy as is clear from her response in a personal interview when asked why she continues to write comedy, as opposed to tragedy:

You can go into more dangerous territory, or more challenging territory for the general audience than with something that isn't comedy. That is not a value judgment. . . . I happen to do the kind of comedy that I hope challenges but invites people of diverse backgrounds and identities to an experience that they might be prejudiced against at first. But I somehow am going to make it possible for them to enter an experience that they thought they had no sympathy for. And in the end they find themselves identifying with people who they thought were perverse or alien or deviant, and that's my crusade if I have one.

And in an interview with Rita Much she states that “[f]or me writing comedy is inevitable . . . I am also obsessed with redemption and can't bear the spectacle of unremitting suffering” (135). Echoing the British female playwrights in Carlson's study referred to above, MacDonald continues in the Much interview that “[p]oking fun at institutions is iconoclastic and girls are not supposed to be rebels . . . I take something people identify with or revere, like Shakespeare, and say, ‘Excuse me, while I turn this upside down.’ I would never lampoon something that I hated” (136). But in an interview with Judith Rudakoff for *Books in Canada* she adds, “I don't sit down to write a funny play. I always have a very serious [perhaps even revolutionary] intent” (25), an intent which clearly fits the strategies and purposes of the carnivalesque.

Nightwood Theatre

Described in the 1989 edition of *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* as “[t]he most influential feminist theatre company in Toronto” (“Feminist Theatre”), and by Vit Wagner as “the highest profile feminist troupe in Canada” (“By Women”), Nightwood began in 1978 through the collective efforts of Cynthia Grant, Kim Renders, Mary Vingoe, and Maureen White. Its original mandate was not that the theatre be either feminist or comic but rather, in the words of Cynthia Grant, “a theatre of images . . . which would devote itself to explorations in style and content” (45). But Renate Usmiani writes in a study of the alternative theatre movement in Canada that “in alternative theatre the emphasis is shifted from the play itself as a work of art to the audience and its involvement in the theatrical process” (1). Like other Canadian alternative theatres, Nightwood was originally, and perhaps remains, defined largely by its relationship with its

audience, in addition to the style of work it produces. More on the subject of alternative theatres, Susan Bennett writes:

Instead of a desire to work up to the “status” of a company who can perform in a building designated for theatre performances and for audiences who are able to pay an economically-determined ticket price to enjoy a period of leisure, these companies have avoided what they often see as a white middle-class ghetto. Instead these groups foster audiences across different and broader sections of society.

I would suggest further that the more powerful the voices in Nightwood’s audiences, the more obvious and effective the social and political aspects of the theatre’s work will be, since it is precisely those empowered voices who need to experience their ideal worlds turned upside down on stage in order for the feminist comic carnivalesque to thrive.

Nightwood inevitably changes over time, having for example established a board of directors in 1985 to replace the “loose collective” (13) by which it had been run since its inception, to borrow Susan G. Cole’s wording in her article on Nightwood’s first ten years. “How does a theatre company remain true to its alternative roots while fulfilling a political mandate of reaching out to a large audience?,” Cole asks (12). Starting in 1985 with the employment of Mary Vingoe as Nightwood’s first artistic coordinator, the theatre has opted, Cole writes, to

concentrate less on collective work and more on developing individual writing talents. With less than 17 per cent of Canadian productions written by women (and even less directed by women), Nightwood could significantly alter the face of Canadian theatre by producing women’s work. (15)

Although Nightwood’s plays are still often experimental in form, the theatre’s primary concern is “to nurture radical voices” (Cole 15), working since 1989 with an explicitly anti-racist mandate. Diane Roberts, Co-Artistic Director since spring of 1994 (with Alisa Palmer), states that, while some women are gaining success in mainstream Canadian theatre, they are not necessarily advancing her voice as a Black woman:

Plays being done by women in mainstream theatres fit into their mandate. I don’t feel that my voice is being advanced. It’s still our theatres with no money that are pushing to have these new strong voices with a different take on the mainstream, like Nightwood and Buddies in Bad Times [also in Toronto]. We’re taking risks. (personal interview).

The program for the 1994 Groundswell Festival of works in progress by women (discussed further below), a festival produced by Nightwood and

directed in 1994 by Roberts, includes the following statement entitled “About Nightwood Theatre, unique feminist theatre from diverse cultural perspectives”:

Nightwood Theatre has been creating, developing, and producing unique plays by women for 14 years. From its initial explosion onto the Toronto Theatre scene in 1979, Nightwood has been recognized for its risk-taking approach to new play creation. Widely known for the 1990 production and subsequent national tour of Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet*, Nightwood Theatre creates alternate visions of the world, offering a woman-centred theatrical space to encourage new playwrights and expose new ideas.

Because of the relatively small but devoted houses which most of Nightwood’s low-priced productions have drawn, the theatre remains alternative, while that status must be tempered with reference to the mainstream success of such Nightwood productions as *GD (GJ)*. Continuing to provide a visible forum for feminist theatre artists through its two successful annual revues, Groundswell and the exclusively comic Five-Minute Feminist Cabaret (FemCab), Nightwood nevertheless has also come to represent the chance for women artists to achieve success with larger and more diverse audiences, especially through comedy.

States former Nightwood artistic coordinator Kate Lushington, who in 1988 became the theatre’s first coordinator from beyond the original collective of four women:

“Some people are saying Nightwood is going soft: ‘They used to do plays about violence against women (*This Is For You, Anna*) and now they’re doing a play about a university lecturer who finds herself through visiting the worlds of Shakespeare [*Goodnight Desdemona . . .*].’ Those people want to plug us into their stereotype of what a feminist theatre company should do. But Nightwood is about exploding stereotypes. And that involves knocking conventional ways of thinking sideways a bit—our own as well as other peoples.” (Wagner “By women”)

The function of Nightwood Theatre and its popular comic successes in recent years has, I believe, been integral to the promotion of a radical feminist comedy in Canada. To continue the development of the genre, critics might seek out and publicize comedies that show marginalized women laughing at the powerful and overcoming them, leading from these studies of plot and characterization to a theory of the power of feminist comedy for social or political change. Such a comedy need not be cruel, but it must be hopeful and bold, eliciting feelings of empathy and joy in the audience; therein lies the route to dramatic celebration of our most marginalized women’s experiences, and perhaps further to their celebration in the culture beyond the stage.

Lushington has commented freely on women's theatre and comedy, as follows:

Comedy has been traditionally the way of dealing with oppression, the best way. It's a way of working out contradiction because comedy is based on contradictions. There's lots of contradictions within what women from different perspectives face every day. What *Nightwood* hopefully can do is provide an environment where women can laugh at our experience, at our sorrows, laugh at ourselves. . . . I think it's very important, too, to spread some kind of hope. (personal interview 1992)

Laughing at themselves is what feminists can do when working together; when working against the inertia of the powerful, however, it seems feminist comedy will need to laugh at and win over them.

Reprise: *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*

Lushington's idea that contradiction underlies comic structure perhaps refers to the traditional view of the genre that its characters are deceived until the resolution: audiences perceive the disparity between what players think they are and they deserve, and what they in fact are and get. Constance Ledbelly follows the pattern in MacDonald's play, while she also finally expresses some kind of hope, perhaps like that which Lushington mentions, thus moving beyond the traditional comic ending. And her new indeterminacy concerning sexual preference is unconventional indeed.

MacDonald's plot, to summarize, entails Constance's triumphant confrontation with a romantic servitude that has suppressed her identity; the triumph remains subtle and psychic, however, rather than clear and material. The play opens with the disclosure that the man she loves is not only leaving her, and with another woman, but also firing her from her job as his ghost writer. He has achieved the kind of success that might be granted the comic heroine herself were audiences to encourage it—promotion to Full Professor, the offer of a visiting lectureship at Oxford, and engagement to a Rhodes scholar. She would need, moreover, to win her success by joining forces with other women to obviously best a more mainstream colleague, perhaps but not necessarily a man.

As is in MacDonald's published script, Constance's growth in power is never really shown. She moves from the abjection of the early lines—"I'll call the Dean and resign. I'll go back to my apartment and watch the plants die and let the cats copulate freely. I'll order in groceries. Eventually I'll be evicted. I'll smell really bad and swear at people on the subway" (1.1)—to this final

revelation: "I've had it with all the tragic tunnel vision around here. . . . [L]ife is a hell of a lot more complicated than you think! Life—real life—is a big mess. Thank goodness. . . . [I]f you're lucky you'll always feel somewhat confused" (3.9). Meanwhile Claude Knight is off in England enjoying his prestige, his teaching post, and his lover, apparently without remorse.

Although MacDonald's protagonist wins by acknowledging and accepting the "opposites" (3.Epilogue) that constitute her newly recovered identity, she remains a lonely Lecturer with an unfinished dissertation and, courtesy of Claude Knight, a job in Regina. Still, the muted lesbian sexuality of Act III, Scene vii may linger in viewers' minds, the scene perhaps closest to MacDonald's idea that her comedy allows audiences to sympathize with what they "might be prejudiced against at first," might consider "perverse or alien or deviant" (qtd. above). Juliet's eloquently poetic seduction of Constance—for example, JULIET "O touch me with those hands that held thy quill / before I learned to read and write my name . . ."—and Constance's simple acquiescence—"Okay"—suggests an unrealized radical potential for MacDonald's play.

But the plot of *GD (GJ)* does not end in heterosexual marriage, the female hero gains some power through her alliances with other women while audiences feel empathy for her and rejoice in her final hopefulness, and the play is popular. Professional theatres in many Canadian cities have produced it, as has the Classic Stage Company in Manhattan and other US playhouses. And to produce or applaud such theatre, theatre with roots in the comic carnivalesque, is to enter the theoretical debate on the social effects of comedy, on the side of those who defend those effects, for to support the psychic and/or material successes of a vulnerable woman like Constance, to share in her joyfulness, is to question the status quo not only of a conventional comic ending but also of the world that endorses it.

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