

preting, or commenting on images, but by amplifying them with associations, or carrying an image on - extending its range into a soundscape or a physical move for example. If an actor resonates her way into a character this way through embodied sound and gesture, the words of the text, when they arrive, seem to emanate less from the ego and more from the psyche. Then it seems possible to tell whether or not the text as it is written "makes sense". At this stage new words will sometimes come spontaneously from the actors, or from Ellen who can suddenly hear another way of conveying the piece's intent. Song words (written by the composer with our contribution - another story, another level of the collaboration) are woven in during the rehearsal process.

In the final fabric of each play the word order is as fixed as the musical score and the choreographed movement. On the opening night when I have flown from the Twin Cities to North Carolina to see the play for the first time I recognise some of the words, but the transformation of my writing is as complete as the transformation of genetic material that goes into the making of a child;

and as impossible to separate out. Which is why when people ask to see "the script", in order to read what I have been writing lately, I have to say, sorry, you won't find it there. It is a thread, substantial, but come and gone, grown into full-expression of itself, acted out and vanished into the shimmering vortex of performance.

NOR HALL (USA) is a psychotherapist, writer and lecturer from St Paul, Minnesota. Her books include *The Moon and the Virgin* and *Those Women*. At the last Myth and Theatre event 2000 she spoke on behalf of Gossip and the art of talking between women. Currently she is working on the fifth production with Archipelago Theatre company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina: *A New Fine Shame: On the Life and Loves of Lou Andreas-Salome*.



As an actress who has also become a writer, I came to ask myself how women write, how women writers incorporate actors' invention and director's montage and why women are excluded from most of the history of theatre. I have started answering these questions by studying my own life and work, my education and my community. I write plays to create new and alternative universes, to see situations

that make me laugh and inspire me, to see stories on stage that I have never heard before.

My mother is a painter who gave up to take care of her family. For her, there was an irrevocable split between caring for others and getting to create art. For me today, writing is as precious as being alive.

Women who have become established

artistic directors and writers do not usually make a point of their femaleness. It is much safer to feel androgynous, just a person creating a play. According to Rina Fraticelli's 1982 report, *The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre*, less than 10% of plays done in Canada are written by women. Former artistic director of Vancouver's Women in View Festival, Kathleen Weiss, states that these statistics have not changed over the past eighteen years. My need to influence this situation is an extra motive for my writing.

When I first started writing, I had to avoid play-writing books and classes altogether. I wanted to go far enough inside my heart to find out how I really felt, what I really thought. Only then could I study the craft and benefit from my predecessors.

There is no more exciting time to be a woman writer. You can say something entirely fresh, from a new perspective. I have found stories in history, which have inspired me because they challenge what I have been told.

One of my plays, *To Please the Audience*, is about Isabella Andreini, who ran a Commedia dell'Arte troupe with her husband during the Renaissance. Isabella Andreini was mentioned only briefly in my theatre history course in university.

Another one of my plays, *Lieutenant Nun*, is based on one of the first autobiographies by a woman. Catalina de Erauso escaped from her convent in 1600, sewed her habit into men's clothes, and lived as a man. She became a soldier for Spain, conquering what is present day Chile. She had a violent temper, often killing civilians over card games. She was arrested and about to be hanged when she revealed that she was a nun and an intact virgin. Although it was illegal for a woman to even wear trousers at that time in Spain, Catalina received special permission from the Pope to dress as a man,

and triple a typical military pension.

I have noticed that directors and actors appreciate my flexibility. I will change almost anything in the interests of making the show work. If someone improvises a line that is funnier or pithier than mine, in it goes. I see my plays as an improvisation that I have taken as far as I can in the loneliness of my room. It is heaven to watch something created from my heart blossom in the body and mind of an actor. For all the sorrows involved in our history, I still feel incredibly lucky to be a woman writing today. It gives me focus and the opportunity to innovate.

My latest project, *Burn Gloom: Rituals on Millennium Eve* is for me a potentially relevant study in a female aesthetic. I asked fourteen writers to go out, all over the world, on Millennium Eve and to collect stories and characters. The writers submitted all kinds of texts, audiotapes, videotapes and newspapers. I went to New York City for three months to be that city's correspondent, and have received writing from Tasmania, Bali, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Southeast Africa, China, Singapore, Japan, Sydney, Chile, Southern France. For the past year, I have been listening to hundreds of hours of tapes, and sifting through writing to create a piece which captures a sense of how we tried to come together for a meaningful ritual, all over the world. The project incorporates all kinds of physical theatre traditions, and is a collaboration with a four piece music ensemble called Talking Pictures.

The play I have written and adapted is a starting place for our ensemble. If the meaning of a line is better served by a moment of physical theatre and musical improvisation, the line will not be spoken. The text is merely a point of departure for our collective work.

It has taken me a long time to find a structure that weaves in so much; I have settled on following four characters' stories.

There is a policewoman who works at Times Square in New York who is terrified about threats of terrorism. Another character is a North American businessman in Africa who finds himself celebrating New Year with an African dance tribe in Malawi. Compiling several women's stories from Asia, I have written the story of a woman who plans to present a geisha dance at a party in Bali, only to find that the gathering is not meaningful to her. The fourth character, adapted from the material sent from France, hoped to be at a swanky private party slurping oysters and knocking back champagne, only to find himself in the middle of one of the worst storms and oil spills in history. The characters contact their friends around the world via telephone, allowing us to jump into places as varied as the streets of Canton, a Tasmanian forest with an aboriginal teenager, and a party of millionaires in Toronto.

Kathleen Weiss, the director of the piece, and I decided to make our recent workshop an exploration into new ways of working with music and actors. We read the play, received feedback, and devised ways of exploring themes I wanted to develop through improvisation. The afternoons were exciting because we invented ways in which the musicians of Talking Pictures could improvise with the actors. I realised that musicians have an improvisational advantage over actors - they know their instruments so intimately. This seems like an actor who works on a particular character her whole life. This is why each actor had a main character to start with.

Now it is my job as writer to take the exercises the director, actors, and musicians devised and incorporate them into the script. This improvisational workshop has enabled me to think of entirely new ways for me to work with physical performance and music.

One of the characters in the piece is an expert in the dances of Japan. The actress

playing the role and I were recently able to participate in a workshop with Colleen Lanki, a woman who has studied dance in Japan for several years. This workshop helped me discover another way to work as a writer.

*Burn Gloom* will premiere in Vancouver in January 2001. The title is inspired by the Chilean tradition of writing one regret down on a piece of paper, pinning it to a giant straw man, and burning him in the town square on New Year's Eve. This is called "burning gloom".

I continue to struggle with the question of how women writers may be different than their colleagues. I am impacted by the sadness of our history, and the subtle (and not so subtle) exclusion of women from positions of power in theatre. I worry that all of us might be shying away from traits that are defined as "female" traits which might be very important for the health of our societies. Yet if being a woman has enabled me to create the types of projects I have written, if being a woman has made me tune into hidden histories, then all I can express is gratitude at being part of a long tradition of female innovators.

ELAINE AVILA (Canada) is a writer and actor based in Vancouver. One of her passions is working with communities who do not traditionally have access to theatre. She recently appeared as Desdemona in Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*.