

Women's Auto/biographical Theatre: Affirmation, Preservation and Intercultural Communication

BY SELENA COUTURE

Auto/biography has gained new respect through theory written by feminist scholars. People have produced autobiographies for many years, but they have generally been considered either instructive, as when great leaders explain how they became who they are, or merely the product of a self-absorbed person. As Sherrill Grace explains in her introduction to *Theatre and AutoBiography*, "Until fairly recently, the anti-personal bias of modernism dismissed the auto/biographical as self-indulgent, effeminate, and thus as a failure of art itself" ("Theatre" 20). By focusing on ideas of gender oppression as well as on the lives of women, feminist theatre theory and practice have participated in the societal discourse that has encouraged women to write their own work. This increasingly positive atmosphere has had results. There has been a 23% increase in women playwrights being produced in Canada in the twenty years since Fraticelli's report on the status of women in Canadian theatre (Burton 21). Auto/biographical theatre is a natural outcome of this work. Women feel stronger in their lives; they are aware that their voices matter (and that they will be listened to carefully) and therefore are compelled to present themselves:

[T]he autobiographical voice and eye/I are available to minorities and to groups, such as women, who have been excluded from the dominant discourse and whose stories have been dismissed as worthless ... [A] desire for agency, voice, visibility, and subjectivity has surfaced, clamouring for attention and seeking ways to create meaningful identity ... While this predilection for AutoBiography no doubt satisfies a basic voyeuristic impulse (and does well in the marketplace), it also represents a crucial site for inscribing and preserving cultural memory. (Grace, "Theatre" 14-5)

There is little surprise therefore that the auto/biographical play is a form that Canadian women of colour have embraced or that part of the auto/biographical imperative has been to suture cultural divides. The result is often a compelling theatrical experience, politically and personally empowering to the women who produce the theatre and to their audiences, as well as being an opportunity for intercultural communication between the stage and the audience. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* by Marie Clements and *an understanding of brown* by Lesley Ewen are examples of recent Canadian auto/biographical works that function respectively to affirm and preserve the truths of women of colour in Canada. The former focuses on solidarities among an intercultural group of Native and other women of colour who have been victimized; the latter on intercultural identity-formation within the mixed-race auto/biographical subject.

[Insert Illustration 09Couture01]

Of the two plays, *an understanding of brown* is immediately recognizable as traditional autobiography; yet Clements's work can also be said to operate within this genre. Auto/biographical studies have long recognized the link between autobiography and biography. When you are telling your own story, it is almost always necessary to tell the stories of others whose lives are intertwined with yours. When you are telling the story of someone else, you see it through your own life filter; so part of the self of the biographer is included in each biography:

[T]he two genres [biography and autobiography] have never existed entirely independently; ... and no autobiographer can tell his personal story without infringing on the biographies of others. (Grace, "Theatre" 17)

Clements acknowledges the autobiographical connection she feels with the characters in her play when she discusses her method of writing:

On a blood level the street research was already in me. I had grown up in Vancouver, my father was a logger; I knew Skid Row because that was where a girl could get a new pair of running shoes and a logger could get his chain sharpened and a few beers. Growing up I knew some of the old loggers who lived in these hotel rooms, and I knew that isolation could amputate people who were already down. I also understood on a profound level that the only thing that separated me from the women I was writing about was privilege. (Clements, "In the End" 329-30)

Clements has chosen to use her abilities and privilege to tell the life stories of women who were unable to do so themselves. By choosing to focus on these stories, she is revealing her own desire for justice and agency. For the purpose of this examination of contemporary auto/biographical theatre by Canadian women of colour, Clements's and Ewen's plays will be considered in order to show how different playwrights/actors use different styles and facets of theatre to illuminate and ultimately heal their lives and the lives of others.

Marie Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is based on the true story of a man who preyed on Aboriginal women and women of colour, including Asian Canadian women in Vancouver's downtown eastside neighbourhood. Over thirty years, he killed at least ten women by poisoning them with alcohol; eventually, he was caught and imprisoned. Clements was angered that the media chose to focus on the man who murdered the women, while virtually ignoring who the women were. She has written a play that focuses on the women as survivors not as victims. She has a transformative vision of the play: "I'm sure the audiences came in for a good old-fashioned Native women victim story and came out a little afraid, not because the women were frightful but because the Native women were just women, just like you and me, and had had 'enough' ... and there is power in that" (Clements, "In the End" 330). Clements is purposefully working to change the intercultural narrative that has been told about Aboriginal women by colonial society - intercultural both within a Native community constituted of many nations and between that community and other women of colour. Clements's play starts with the presence of a naked Native woman, rising from the forest floor. The presence of her naked body in the performance space, portrayed matter-of-factly, cues the audience that this is performance will be both shocking and beautifully human.

[Insert Illustration 09Couture02]

Although the play was years in development, with staged readings all over the country, it was deliberately mounted for the first time at Vancouver's Firehall Arts Centre. The theatre is located in the Downtown Eastside of the city, very close to where the women lived and died. Clements also worked that year as playwright in residence, running writing workshops at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (Oliver 61). Clements's work is onstage, but it is also in the air, through the many sound effects, and in the light, through projected slides - and it leaks out into the neighbourhood through her community workshops. The stage is merely one place where the play materialized during the Firehall production.

Clements's play is a multilayered, poetic piece of performance that uses symbolism, such as domestic objects that attack the women or give them comfort, and magical realism, such as interactions between the dead women and the living. The play is less accessible than a narrative drama might be, but Clements uses these elements because she is attempting to convey many meanings at once. As filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha explains,

[O]nly in poetic language can one deal with meaning in a revolutionary way. For the nature of poetry is to offer meaning in such a way that it can never end with what is said or shown ... Roland Barthes remarked that "the antonym of the 'poetic' is not the prosaic, but the stereotyped" ... as the stereotyped is not a false representation, but rather, an arrested representation of a changing reality. (325-6)

Clements's goal, in this play, is to have the audience understand, in a new way, the women who were murdered, not to dismiss them as unfortunate, dysfunctional alcoholics, but to accept them as an intercultural community of unique, individual women who have come together in solidarity, albeit after death. The "drunken Indian" stereotype is entrenched in our world, is reinforced constantly by media and is the product of viewing the residents of Vancouver's downtown from a distance as "all the same." Clements also writes with the technique that Minh-Ha identifies as "speaking nearby," "[a] speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place" (327). By including, in the character of Rebecca, accurate facts and observations about her own life,

Clements creates a voice which can “speak nearby” the deceased women and give us a new and more compassionate understanding of their lives.

Unlike real life, where the convicted murderer died of natural causes after he was released from jail after serving his time, in Clements’s play, he is caught by a woman looking for her mother and then killed by the spirits of the women who have died.

REBECCA/AUNT SHADIE: I felt like I was part of the magic that wasn’t confused.

REBECCA: The crystals sticking to the cold and the cold sticking to my black hair, my eyebrows, my clothes, my breath. A trap set.

(REBECCA braces herself. She takes the razor and is about to cut his throat.)

An animal caught.

(The BARBER’s eyes suddenly blaze open. He grabs her hand and they struggle with the blade. The blade draws closer to her neck and is about to cut her open.)

(AUNT SHADIE emerges from the landscape as a trapper. She stands behind REBECCA. She puts her hand over REBECCA’s hand and draws the knife closer to the BARBER’s neck. He looks up and panics as he sees AUNT SHADIE and THE WOMEN/TRAPPERS behind her. Squirming they slit his throat.)

(Unnatural 125)

The scene ends as Rebecca hands each of the women their braids, which the Barber has kept as trophies. She hands Aunt Shadie’s braid to her last, and Aunt Shadie says, “Re-becca,” and touches her tenderly. By emphasizing the “Re” in Rebecca’s name, Clements is inviting us to consider what Rebecca has replaced. The name Rebecca means “to tie or bind” in Hebrew, and Rebecca’s act of avenging the murders of the women as well as returning their braids has returned the women to their honourable selves. As Yvette Nolan, the director of the play at Native Earth Performing Arts explains, “[F]or us in the Aboriginal community, braiding is body mind and spirit body mind and spirit body mind and spirit that’s what we are doing when we braid; that’s why we braid sweetgrass; that’s why we braid our hair; it’s to be whole and holistic” (5). That the braids include that, also culturally marked, of at least one murdered Asian Canadian woman is a telling intercultural moment of coming together. Clements cannot bring the women back to life, but by portraying them onstage as she does, Clements “makes visible the otherwise invisible through the focus of a dramatic text” (Bennett 88).

Clements has chosen to write the auto/biographies of the Aboriginal and other women of colour who died. They did not have the chance to do so in their lives, and Clements uses her privilege as an artist and an Aboriginal woman to tell their stories in an affirming way and to braid them together a women’s intercultural community of solidarity. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* serves to re-present the Native women who died as survivors and to give strength to the living. It is a powerful, albeit posthumous, affirmation of their humanity.

[Insert Illustration 09Couture03]

Lesley Ewen’s *an understanding of brown* is an example of a living artist’s affirmation of her own humanity as an embodiment of intercultural hybridity. The actor/playwright presents herself on a bare stage with only one prop – a small brown paper box that contains “a corner of her life [that she is] too scared to acknowledge” (1). Through the course of the performance, she puts down the box and then kicks it away, as she reveals her struggles with identity. Only after she passes through all the pain to an understanding, does she retrieve the box, bring it to centre stage and open it. Inside, she finds a brown sweater that she puts on, and then she smiles. It is a gift of warmth and comfort. The box serves as a symbol with the dual meanings of containment and confinement. The box, used four times in the performance, also provides structure: she carries it in, puts it down, kicks it and retrieves it. During the fourth and final use she opens it as she concludes her performance and accepts the comfort of her own brown-ness.

The play tells the story of having grown up the daughter of a white woman and a black man. She reveals personal details about the difficulties she had with her mother’s racism and shame at having had a brown daughter, as well as her own internalized racism. The following quote identifies each of these central elements:

“I’m so glad you don’t have one of those Afro things.”

And we'd laugh in conspiracy and relief. She relieved that I hadn't pointed out the ball and chain of shame around her fine white Scottish ankle. Me, relieved she hadn't discovered the litre of expensive cream rinse that held my hair at bay. (Ewen 6)

By telling her story in this way, Ewen makes it impossible to refute it. She relies on her physical presence as validation of her own truth and does not hide behind a character. She is a mixed-race woman coming to her own voice with an audience as witness, and she gains the audience's trust by exposing her own vulnerability.

Ewen's method of telling her story is very much in keeping with the style of women autobiographers. Nancy Miller notes that "the model of a relational identity historically has been characteristic of many female authored autobiographies ... The evidence of this pattern, moreover, has already attained the status of truism" (2; emphasis added). Ewen explores herself by exploring her relationships - first with her mother, whom she then kills off: "I hope she's loved her shame to bits and now lies in her celestial grave marveling at the textured beauty of her charred skin. I think she's probably spinning in it" (Ewen 7). This passage has the effect of chilling the audience who listen to her apparent glee in her mother's death. She then discusses her lovers and the difficulty she feels with either white or black people. She eventually comes to an acceptance of herself alone, perhaps through the naming of the shame and guilt and through the symbolic killing of her mother. She is then able to express a gratitude for her mother's love when she brings her back to life at the end of the play: "Confession. My mother isn't dead. I hope she'll forgive me. She did her best. A job worth doing. And she did it very well" (Ewen 13).

Ewen has performed the play over one hundred times all over Canada and she often stays to have a talkback session with the audience (*La Flamme*). She is at once subject, writer and performer. She also creates more of herself - performing herself into being as a mixed-race, intercultural subject - each time she performs the play and then enters into a dialogue with the audience afterwards. As Grace explains,

When the subject of a play is auto/biographical, then it is identity itself that is being performed ... [and] that a performance enacts the performative in that the performer changes, adjusts, modifies identity and life-story in the process of playing the part and we are able to watch and possibly learn that identities need not be prescribed, interpellated, and fixed. (Grace, "Performing")

[Insert Illustration 09Couture04]

This play is a model of how performed auto/biography validates the truth claims of the writer/actor. To watch Ewen perform these personal statements in front of an audience and across racial and cultural differences - onstage, within the audience, and between audience and stage - is to witness the power of personal connection to move people. In writing and performing her story, Ewen has decided that her story is important. She takes the time to discuss racism and hybridity with her audiences in the hope that people can have an opportunity both to connect with her and to understand better the issues a mixed-race person faces in our world. As the audience listens to her story and talks with her after a performance, Ewen and the audience members become part of each other's stories. This is possible in theatre and is part of the uniqueness of theatrical auto/biography, the "liveness" of the performer and the audience. They can effect each other and know that they have. Ewen's choosing to tell her story in a theatrical performance suggests a belief in her that it is important to share that story with others, to have an affect on people's lives and to record her own truth for the future.

[Insert Illustration 09Couture05]

Clements and Ewen have chosen to tell their stories and the stories of other women onstage. They use the theatrical space as a place of truth-telling and healing. Clements attempts to staunch the open wound of the mistreatment of Aboriginal and other women of colour in our society and to begin to find a way to heal. Ewen courageously exposes her scars and explains how she has healed herself. Together, these two works exemplify the creative ways that women's lives can be lived, performed and appreciated, all the while having a positive impact on gender- and intercultural relations in Canada, now and in the future.

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