

Nightwood Theatre, Asian Canadian Women, and China Doll: The Ties that Bind

This paper will offer a survey of involvement by Asian Canadian women with Nightwood Theatre, and will also take a closer look at one of the most successful plays to be produced by Nightwood, Marjorie Chan's *China Doll*. Since 1979, Nightwood has been Canada's most prominent feminist theatre, and the commitment to anti-racist work in the company's mandate has made it a home for women of colour along with newer companies like Cahoots (founded 1986) and fu-GEN (founded in 2002). *China Doll* will be discussed as an example of Nightwood's process of play development, and also as an illustration of certain notions of postcolonial, post-national, and transnational theatre.

A Nightwood and Fu-GEN comparison

In her "Preface" to Volume II of the *Love and Relationships* anthology, playwright and actor Marjorie Chan begins by asking what plays by Asian Canadians have in common, and goes on to express anxiety that a focus on ethnicity may isolate Asian Canadian theatre from the mainstream and produce a segregationist theatre: "I am concerned that our community's efforts to get their work seen, noticed, heard, published, funded and *validated*, are only succeeding in separating us further from the 'mainstream.' We have built our own shows, our own companies, and our own, yes, our own publications" (iii). Chan agrees that to celebrate differences within a community is affirming, but worries that such activity does not reach out beyond the circle.

This is a familiar argument to anyone who has studied the history of Nightwood as Toronto's women's theatre company. Time and again, similar concerns are raised: by providing a place where women can work, where women can have their plays produced and their voices heard, does Nightwood inadvertently marginalize that work and limit its audience? Does the very

existence of a "women's" theatre company burden any play it produces with preconceived notions of what a feminist play can and should be? And is the effect even more complicated when the woman is a woman of colour? In her 1985 article "Fear of Feminism" in *Canadian Theatre Review*, former Nightwood artistic director Kate Lushington makes the analogy that both Canadian theatre and feminist theatre need the same encouragement and protection. Lushington points out that Toronto companies like Passe Muraille, Tarragon, and Factory were founded with a mandate to do Canadian works because there was a clear developmental need to privilege those works in opposition to an environment dominated by American and British theatre. If it can be agreed that, in a postcolonial context, nationalism is a good enough reason for a protectionist mandate, why, Lushington asks, are people so terrified when women claim their true voice and equal participation in culture as women? Her argument is that, as valuable as it may be to have more plays written and directed by women within mainstream theatre structures, the ongoing project of feminism and feminist theatre is far more wide-ranging and complex, and part of this larger project can only be carried out within the space of a women's theatre company such as Nightwood (Lushington *Fear* 11).

Can it also be argued, then, that a certain kind of environment within an Asian Canadian company allows work to emerge that might not be created elsewhere - is there a dynamic, a process, that needs both freedom and protection to be developed? Eleanor Ty makes the case for just such a comparison in the "Introduction" to her book *The Politics of the Visible in North American Narratives* when she writes, "our subjectivities as Asian Americans and Asian Canadians in North America are in a state of dependency or non-being, comparable to the status of women in an andocentric society. As we can be defined only by what we are not, by our lack of whiteness, particularly in Canada [. . .] we remain, as feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray says of woman, in a state of 'unrealized potentiality,' as beings who exist 'for/by another' [. . .] The consequences are damaging for women and for Asians as they find themselves 'homeless' in this symbolic order" (Ty 25).

Statistics that prove women's absence from the mainstream provide a compelling case for why a women's theatre company is necessary and relevant. In her 1989 article "The Changing Body of Women's Work," Lushington cites statistics released by the Playwrights Union of Canada in 1988 showing that, of all new plays produced in the 1987/88 season, only seventeen percent were by women; even fewer were directed by women, and there were also few roles for women actors (Lushington *Changing* 20). In 2006, updated statistics were released, this time as part of a national campaign called Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women's Initiative, spearheaded by Nightwood in partnership with the Playwright's Guild of Canada Women's Caucus and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT). The Women's Initiative conducted a survey of professional theatres in Canada and the picture that emerged indicated that gender equity has still not been achieved. Companies led by women reported significantly lower budgets; female-led companies were less likely to be incorporated or to have charitable status, and were less likely to be full members of PACT; and, while 49 percent of companies that responded to the survey reported having a regular performance space, 67 percent of these companies were male-led and only 33 percent were female-led.ⁱ The statistical representation of people of colour - both male and female - was even more dismal, ranging from 3% of directors to 6% of Artistic Directors (Burton 7). One must be cautious in drawing too many easy parallels between examples related to gender and ethnicity - or to sexual orientation, or any other category of supposed "otherness" from the mainstream, for that matter. But strategic alliances can and should be made, and arguments for the protection and promotion of one under-represented group can be employed for the benefit of others.

In the American context, Esther Kim Lee discusses the relationship between Asian- only companies and mainstream acceptance in her book *A History of Asian American Theatre*. Lee writes, "In the 1980s [. . .] as multiculturalism became topical and even profitable [. . .] Mainstream regional theatres commissioned Asian American plays in order to gain access to funding for multicultural art [. . .] In some instances, Asian American theatre became a mere steppingstone to the mainstream theatre" (Lee 128).

Lee reports that some practitioners worried this would result in a talent drain from specifically Asian American companies, while others saw the involvement as tokenism, and still others felt "Asian American theatre was finally finding its niche in mainstream American theatre" (Lee 128). Certainly, Nightwood's commitment to producing work from diverse communities was in many ways a logical and pragmatic response to both official government policies of multiculturalism and the changing demographics of Toronto. As former artistic director Diane Roberts explained in 1995, "Councils and arts organizations have been compelled to expand their vision and have been challenged to include in their vision the 'voice,' the perspective of artists of colour—the additional Canadian voices. Nightwood has been doing that for some time. So we benefit both artistically and financially" (Roberts qtd. in Glen 38).

However instructive the history of Nightwood may be to a younger company like fu-GEN, its most immediate value lies in the first opportunities it afforded to women who have gone on to established careers. Nightwood was the first stop for a number of the women represented in *Love and Relationships*, before companies like fu-GEN emerged to broaden those possibilities.

The first reference to an Asian-Canadian involvement at Nightwood was at the November 1987 Groundswell Festival of new works in progress, with a play called *Settlements* by Beverly Yhap . At Groundswell the next year, that involvement doubled when *Dead Honky* by Betty Quan was directed by Yhap, who also served on that year's selection committee. In 1989, *Sun and Shadow* was presented at Groundswell by Janis Nickleson and Sun Gui Zhen, and Nightwood's mandate had been adapted to more specifically highlight anti-racist work: "To provide opportunities for all women to create and explore new visions of the world, stretching the concept of what is theatrical, and to hone their skills as artists, so that more of us may see our reality reflected on this country's stages, thus offering theatre goers the full diversity of the Canadian experience" (Lushington Letter n.p.). In 1990, Beverly Yhap was back at Groundswell with *Body Blows* and in 1991 Betty Quan premiered *Nancy Chew Enters the*

Dragon. The first show of the 1994/95 mainstage season was *Wearing the Bone*, written and directed by then-artistic director Alisa Palmer, and starring Sandra Oh.

In March and early April of 1995, Groundswell included the first incarnation of *The Yoko Ono Project* by Jean Yoon, directed by Sarah Stanley. This was the launch of a play that has gone through much revision and several versions, including the one that appears in *Love and Relationships* as *Yes Yoko Solo*. Yoon went on to join the Board of Directors of Nightwood and to participate in a tenth anniversary Groundswell panel presentation, hosted by artistic co-directors, Diane Roberts and Alisa Palmer. The topic was "Art in Your Face: what is women's theatre development and what should it be?" and the moderator was Sally Han.

At the 1996 Groundswell, *Raining Tin* by M.J. Kang was presented. The 1997 Groundswell featured *IKI:Etudes* with Dawn Obokata, Joy Kogawa, and Denyse Fujiwara, and *Hee Hee* by M.J. Kang, with music by Lee Pui Ming. In 1998, the fourteenth annual Five Minute Feminist Cabaret (FemCab) fundraiser was co-hosted by Sandra Oh and included Sook-Yin Lee. At the 1998 Groundswell, M.J. Kang's play appeared again, this time called *Hee-Hee: Tales from the White Diamond Mountain*. Sook-Yin Lee was part of FemCab the next year too, and again in 2001 along with the comedy troupe Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, whose members included Mariko Tamaki. Jean Yoon was the playwright in residence, resulting in her play *Blood* being done at the 2002 Groundswell, directed by the new artistic director Kelly Thornton. Also at that Groundswell was *The Butterfly Body* by The Butterfly Body Collective, which was initiated by Marjorie Chan and made up of a diverse group of women artists, including Keira Loughran. In an interview in *Canadian Theatre Review*, Chan explained "The topic we started with as a jumping-off point is body image. It spawned so much conversation we could just sit and talk for hours, so I knew there was something there that speaks to women " (Chan qtd. in

Kim 27). Mariko Tamaki was part of a Playwright Slam fundraising event in 2002 and then curated FemCab the next year. The 2003 Groundswell included *BeBe (Brecht's Women)* by a collective of women including Keira Loughran, and the first staging of *China Doll* by Marjorie Chan; Write From the Hip included Marie Beath-Badian. In 2004 *China Doll* was directed by Kelly Thornton at the Tarragon Extra Space; the production will be discussed more extensively later in this paper. At Groundswell, *The Zoe Show* by Lisa Pijuan, was directed by Marjorie Chan; Chan was a commissioned playwright that year, and Mariko Tamaki was commissioned the next to write *Skim*. *Skim* was done at Groundswell in 2005, directed by Kelly Thornton with Julie Tamiko Manning. And bringing the list to its conclusion, *a nanking winter* by Marjorie Chan was done at the 2006 and 2007 Groundswell Festivals and then produced by Nightwood in association with Cahoots Theatre Projects in early 2008, directed by Ruth Madoc- Jones at the Factory Theatre.

Nightwood has also benefited from the many Asian Canadian women who have worked in administrative, fundraising and organizing capacities, by serving on the Board of Directors, the Groundswell selection committee, or working on FemCab. These women include Jean Yoon, Sally Han, Lee Pui Ming, Danielle LiChong, Mariko Tamaki, Lezlie Lee Kam, Marjorie Chan and, in particular, Dawn Obokata, who was a Nightwood stalwart in many important capacities over a number of years.

China Doll

Now to a more focused discussion of *China Doll*, as the best example of a high profile Asian Canadian success story at Nightwood. The play was originally commissioned as a CBC radio play and was then commissioned by Nightwood as a full-length play and taken through a developmental process, including its appearance at the 2003 Groundswell and a three-week

intensive workshop at the Banff playRites Colony. Featuring Marjorie Chan as the lead character Su-Ling, along with Jo Chim, Keira Loughran, and John Ng, the 2004 production at the Tarragon was nominated for three Dora Awards in the General Theatre category, for Outstanding Costume Design, Best Production, and Best New Play. It was also nominated for the 2005 Governor General's Literary Award. During the 2004 run, on March 8, Nightwood presented an International Women's Day panel discussion called "First Steps: Chinese Canadian Women Leaving Their Mark." It was held at the Tarragon Extra Space and featured Marjorie Chan, Susan Eng, Avvy Go, Shirley Hoy, Brenda Joy Lem, Vivienne Poy, and Kristyn Wong-Tam. ⁱⁱ

Set in the period of 1904-1918 in Shanghai and a nearby village, *China Doll* follows Su-Ling from the ages of five to sixteen, when her grandmother attempts to find her a husband. Because her parents died in dishonourable ways, Su-Ling has few prospects. One of her only redeeming qualities is the extreme smallness of her bound feet. Another character, Merchant Li, secretly teaches Su-Ling to read and gives her a copy of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll House*. ⁱⁱⁱ At first, Su-Ling is dismissive of the play:

Merchant Li: It's about a young woman, who discovers her own worth and walks away from her life.

Su-Ling: That's just another story. No one could do that (*China Doll* 2009, 166).

Merchant Li draws a comparison between the character Nora and the Chinese political figure Qui-Jin ^{iv} when he observes, "She tired of being the wife of a merchant's son and so she fled to Japan. But she returned to start a journal for women" (167). Qui-Jin was soon executed, and Su-Ling picks up on this as a likely fate: "So Nora walks out the door? What happens to her after the door closes? Is she like Qui-Jen, leaving... only to find death?" (185). At this point in the play,

Su-Ling can only focus on survival, but eventually, the examples of Nora and Qui-Jin inspire Su-Ling to unbind her feet and to walk away from the house of her fiancé. She says to her grandmother, "This is not life. I do not feel alive. This is only a world where I am constantly waiting. To be his plaything, picked up at his will, used and discarded. I will not stay here" (192). Like Nora in *A Doll House*, Su-Ling chooses to reject her fate as a woman in a patriarchal house. This direct analogy indicates a cultural feminist equivalency in women's oppression across historical periods, racial differences, and national boundaries, but the playwright is also careful to focus on specific historical details of Su-Ling's situation—the political changes sweeping through China, the intricacies of foot binding, and the tensions between women of different classes and generations—allowing materialist elements to complicate its feminism. Her grandmother, Poa-Poa, perpetuates her grand-daughter's confinement and strictly enforces their superiority over another servant girl, Ming - but in the end it is Ming that helps Su-Ling to escape. Chan finds many tools to evoke the ways that generations of women are diminished by a patriarchal society, but also the ways they find to remember and support each other. As she leaves, Su-Ling chooses to comfort her grandmother by "reading" an imaginary letter to Poa-Poa from her own mother, a concubine who ran away and left behind her child. The words of the letter could as easily have been written by Ibsen's Nora: "I love you, but I could not stay" (193).

China Doll is an excellent example of what Yan Haiping describes as transnationality. Haiping explains that, much like modernity is a response to modernism and modernization, "transnationality is about how the human subjects caught in this historical confluence 'feel about themselves'" (Haiping 232). By negotiating relations "between their societies of origin and of settlement," transnational artists bring their experiences and feelings - "historically conditioned and [. . .] actively bodied forth by human subjects" - into a new kind of theatre, one that Haiping

calls "a tension-ridden reconfiguration of humanity and social relations in the present moment of global sea changes, highly significant as well as full of real or potential pitfalls" (232).

In the Preface to his 2005 collection of radio plays entitled *Where is Here? The Drama of Immigration*, Damiano Pietropaolo invokes Northrop Frye in order to argue that Canada is in a stage of post-national consciousness and urbanism (Pietropaolo 7). Pietropaolo commissioned the plays in his collection for a CBC Radio Sunday Showcase, and he notes that the proposals he received in response to the initial call were "submitted by Canadian writers whose cultural horizons extend way beyond any notion of national boundaries" (9). Northrop Frye suggested that the post-national writer is less concerned with the question of "who am I," than with the question, "where is here" - meaning not just the geographical but also the temporal location, since the past and present are understood to co-exist (10). Similarly, Pietropaolo claims that, "Memory of another time and place haunts the immigrant writer like a phantom limb" (10).

This may be true not just for the immigrant writer, but for their children. A Canadian-born playwright like Marjorie Chan, for example, draws upon Chinese history primarily from curiosity, both from a conception of herself as a natural "translator" of one culture (Chinese) for another (Western), and as an artist writing from what might be called a transnational identity. As Chan writes in her "Preface" to Volume 2 of the *Love and Relationships* anthology,

When I think of my own identity as a Chinese-Canadian, there is a great deal of information that is not at my grasp. I look behind me and there is a hole in my knowledge of history. As I write, my curiosity about myself and my culture brings me to the subjects of my plays. And hopefully, my culture to you, the audience (v).

In Marjorie Chan's radio play *Spring Arrival*, a daughter learns to appreciate the stories her mother told about the time when she first arrived in Canada. There are lines in *Spring*

Awakening that illustrate the interest of the daughter (and the playwright) in learning more about what went on in the country of origin. The daughter, Jenny, reflects that her mother's stories are all from the time after she first arrived in Canada: "My mother's stories don't come from her life before Canada[. . .] Her life in Hong Kong... The details are sketchy at best but with intriguing beginnings" (Chan *Spring* 65). After some examples, Jenny continues, "They are germs, seeds of stories. I can only wonder, and hope they have a happy ending" (66). In the last speech of the play, Jenny says, "I realize now there's no way my mother's emigration from Hong Kong was that easy, that enjoyable, like her stories" (71). Jenny realizes that her mother chose only to tell the humorous and hopeful stories because they brought people together, but clearly she is curious for more. This is paralleled by the playwright, when she writes: "we are compelled to reach back into our cultural heritage as well as forward to complete the picture of ourselves" (Chan *Preface* iv).

As much as *China Doll* looks to the past with fascination, there is another, darker tension at work in the particularly gendered nature of the heroine's situation. In her "Introduction" to Volume 1 of *Love and Relationships*, Nina Lee Aquino writes that *China Doll* is about "human beings [. . .] wanting to be free from the traditions that bind them" (x). To be inspired by one's culture is not necessarily to embrace every aspect, and this may be particularly true for the contemporary feminist playwright. As we have seen, Chan has explained that the subject of her play was inspired by "a questioning back to the cultural practises that continue to shape my world" (Chan *Preface* v). This is an argument familiar to feminist historians; Yvonne Hodkinson, for example, has noted how many plays engage in "unravelling women's past as a first step to understanding present day Canadian women, " and identifies the knowledge of a meaningful past as necessary to making choices for the future (Hodkinson 12). Or, as Eleanor Ty

explains in reference to Asian Canadian and Asian American writers, "In their re-presentations, the authors often have to juggle the identities and selves that emerge through the available, though sometimes competing, discourses of their ethno-cultural traditions, Asian and Euro-American notions of femininity and masculinity, good citizenship, the media, and popular culture" (Ty 12).

In explaining the source material for her play, Marjorie Chan tells the story of encountering authentic lotus shoes on display at the Bata Shoe Museum in downtown Toronto in 2001 and realizing, to her amazement, that women had actually walked in them (*China Doll* 2004 7). Chan recalls that, while looking at the shoes, she struck up a conversation with another museum-goer, and that the two women marvelled together at what women have done to themselves and each other in the name of beauty. Only when the other museum patron walked away did Chan notice the woman was wearing extraordinarily high-heeled shoes: was she unaware of the irony, or all too sympathetic with what traditional Chinese women endured? The story takes yet another turn when considering the fact that Chan and Jo Chim had to achieve a distinctive walking style in the production in order to suggest that they were wearing lotus shoes. Chan explains that the costume designer purchased "stripper shoes," disguising the fronts to look like lotus shoes, because only such extreme heels could provide the tiny foot base to balance on (Chan, Interview with author).

Finally, within the play itself, there are two very distinct moments of trans-cultural parallel. Su-Ling tells the story of Yexian which, for the Western spectator, starts off as an "exotic" Chinese fairytale and then, unexpectedly, ends in the same familiar way as Cinderella - two stories from different cultures that, significantly, centre on the fate of a woman's tiny shoe. ^v The most obvious cross-cultural parallel is the reference to *A Doll House*, echoed both in the

play's title (*China Doll*) and in the emotional response evoked by a female character walking away from the house in which she is a possession. By using the Yexian/Cinderella story and *A Doll House*, Chan challenges the audience's easy assumptions about and condemnation of the place of women in traditional Chinese culture: surely, she points out, China is not the only culture that has bound its women.

Notes

ⁱ Chief researcher Rebecca Burton presented these statistics 26 May 2006 at a conference entitled “Canadian Women Playwrights: Tributes and Tribulations,” held at the University of Toronto. She acknowledged that company revenue numbers were inflated due to the significantly larger budgets of companies reporting at the top end of the scale, and also noted a higher response rate to the survey by companies led by women.

ⁱⁱ The author thanks Kelly Thornton for the opportunity to view a videotaped recording of this production.

ⁱⁱⁱ First published in 1879 in Norwegian. Chan refers to the 1906 English translation.

^{iv} Qui-Jin lived 1875 - 1907.

^v The Yexian story dates from the 9th century, while the earliest European version is from Italy in 1634. The Grimm fairytale version dates from 1812. Intriguingly, there are multiple versions of this story in cultures all over the world.

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