Women Playwrights and Their Stony Road

Politics and Rights Issues Highlight an International Meeting as Writers Share Tales of Their Struggles

by Judith Michaelson

BUFFALO, N.Y. — A bright orange tabby cat, once an assembly line worker, now a domestic goddess. Two bouquets of flowers, a vase of eggsplant and a basket of ballet shoes, are to be handed to each of the participants as a symbol of welcome.

As the second morning of the first International Women's Playwrights Conference at the Buffalo-Amherst campus of the State University of New York. The tomatoes, candles, etc., served as props for a reading of "Myth, Legend and Ritual in Plays by Women."

250 playwrights, directors, producers and academicians from 34 nations turned up the conference into a forum where politics and women's issues were at least as important as their art. Although there were a few play or play excerpts performed on the campus or in downtown Buffalo theaters, along with a score of staged readings, the playwriting art and the women's art itself turned out to be the conference subtleties.

"But other than a difference in the art written by women, a conference run by women playwrights proved to be a relatively unencumbered occasion, with a special discussion flowing into the next session regardless of the announced topic (or participants), as if a conversation had been adapted and was ready to begin again."

"It has never been easy, for women to make their way as playwrights," conference director Ana Katz said. "English and theater at Buffalo, at the outset, 'Many of the departmental policies were of significance and anonymized, treated with neglect, even condescension,'"

hear the women playwrights, discrimination is a given. They did not need gentle treatment. Kathleen Bettsko to tell them that just 7% of plays produced in this country are written by women, and those playwrights produced generally on the "rungs of the theater ladder, on the Off Broadway," in the United States and many countries abroad.

In America, two of this country's better-known playwrights—Emily Mann ("A Delicate Balance of Justice") and Wendy Wasserstein ("Isn't It Romantic?")—did attend. They were working on plays currently in production. Bettsko ("Johnny Bull"), who grew up in London, and, asserts that a generalized character written by a man playwright is deemed an "archetype" while the same character written by a woman is dismissed as "stereotype."

We know a lot more about many little things than women do because we have had to work and wash and bury the dead, and take care of the births. Today, people call me to do something, and I said I'm afraid I can't (because of the conference) but I'll ask my husband, Nathan, (composer) Nathan Woodard. She said, 'Oh don't bother her.'"

"They must constantly be reminded, our women writers, that the greatest writers in the world, whoever they may be, have to write the first word, the first line," Chidress said. "You will create new forms, not to be stylish, but you will create them because they come out of you, and you have to find a way to express yourself without permission. And we have to be taught how not to put down ourselves."

"Is there a woman's aesthetic, or is true art genderless? Are women writers creating their own art forms?"

Soviet playwrights.

Vrublevskaya wrote "Proof of Paternity," a 40-year-old unmarried woman who did not have a child, and started wanting one. Her idea is that it's not absolutely essential to have a family, because if you have a child and a husband, you're really got two children. But when she has a child, the woman psychology changes. After the fact she wants the man to acknowledge his paternity."

Finnish playwright Inkeri Kilpinen wrote "Vesi, veri" in which she reversed traditional sexual roles. "I built up a fantasy world where women had power, all the education, and the men had to stay at home and educate and take care of the children. To make this fantasy even sharper, I made the men wear a black chador (shawl)."

"Also, the man had the right to marry four husbands," Kilpinen concluded, "and the story started when this rich village merchant woman married her fourth husband, the most handsome young boy of the village who was 17.""

"Especially male critics become furious," Kilpinen added. "I read headlines in the newspapers indicating Kilpinen had gone mad, and 'what is all this rubbish!' During one performance, one man leaned forward at intermission and said, 'I am not going to watch any more of this kind of insult.' So a woman close to him said, 'Are you so weak you can't even take 3/4 hours fantasy performance of these things with which the woman has had to stay for thousands of years?' He stayed," Kilpinen said, and later became a friend.

"But we are not alone. Women playwrights are not alone. We have come together in a conference that makes the world of playwriting and the world of women's art a bit more exciting, a bit more fun."

"When Zora Soffa of Nigeria, a country where polygamy still exists, last year wrote: "Memories in the Moonlight," which also involved a sexual role reversal, the critics, not surprisingly, blasted her. (In her play, an unhappy married woman goes back to her father's house, has lovers and children, then returns home with her offspring.) Soffa, a college professor, has five children in a monogamous marriage, "but you have to be prepared for everything," she said.

China's Bai Peng, who started writing a dozen years ago in the post-Mao period, after several decades as an actress, specializes in plays about women and rather controversial ones in terms of family issues. In her third play, "And a Bright Moon,"