

Thirteen Hands and Other Plays – Preface by Carol Shields

Before becoming a playwright, I was a novelist, and one who was often impatient with the requisite description of weather or scenery or even with the business of moving people from room to room. I was more interested in the sound of people talking to each other, reacting to each other or leaving silences for others to fall into. Always while writing I felt a quickening of interest when a patch of dialogue was about to erupt in my novels. I noticed, too, that the books I loved to read were full of human speech.

I was an avid theatre-goer in the sixties and seventies, and was greatly attracted to the experimental theatre of the time. I remember once seeing a play in which not one word was spoken, and another play whose script was improvised by the actors as they went along. I liked rough theatre with episodic structures, theatre that was richly theatrical, theatre in which one never knew from one minute to the next what was going to happen.

Departures and Arrivals was my first attempt at a full-length play. It has seen a number of incarnations, beginning its life as a musical set in an airport and culminating in a dramatic script comprising twenty-two vignettes. It was originally written for six actors (three men and three women), but in its many productions as many as 150 actors have taken part. What interested me in the play was the way in which our lives are heightened and enlarged when taken within the frame of public spaces—airports, train stations, public streets—so that we all become, in a sense, actors. The circular theme of departure and arrival has been, and continues to be, a theme in all my work, as does the fusion between the real and the surreal, the naturalistic and the fantastic.

The early development of *Departures and Arrivals* led me to an almost holy respect for directors and actors, and a delighted satisfaction in seeing a single play take so many creative curves. The play's structure is open so that separate scenes can be omitted or re-shuffled, and geographical references regrouped as required.

I wanted to write a play that an audience would enjoy. As a writer I did not feel it was my task to shock, shame and punish those who had bought tickets to my play. I wanted to ignite in them moments of recognition and toss out a handful of provocative questions at the same time. The central proposition of drama is not what happens. It is who are we and how do we see ourselves.

My friend David Williamson and I often discussed this matter, and we decided to write a play, *Anniversary*, within a very tight, self-assigned box. Was it possible, we asked ourselves, to haul out one more time that singleset domestic drama of discontented suburbanites? Two acts. A middle-class living room. Real time. Two couples and a fifth character thrown in to help stir the conversation. *Anniversary* was the result. A talky play.

The play is built on a triple narrative irony. One couple in the play are married and pretending to be close to separation. Another couple, who are separated, are pretending to be married. The third and overriding irony is that the separated couple are still emotionally together, while the married couple have already emotionally separated. We like to think this play operates, as all good theatre does, on a subversive level; it mocks its own confines, confronts its own familiarity and redeems the idea of comic pleasure through painful recognition.

Fashion, Power, Guilt and the Charity of Families is a musical play written with Catherine Shields. A mother and daughter, we were both interested in the ambivalence felt toward families, the drive we all share to find or create some kind of family—and the equally strong desire to escape the family's fury. We began the play by giving voice to the notion that if the family didn't exist, it would have to be invented—and this felicity led us away from a strictly naturalistic approach.

Family is the most universal of our institutions and the most mysterious and private in its workings. It seemed important to interrogate the basic assumptions about the nuclear family by

placing abstract commentary margin-to-margin with the ongoing life of a “real” family, and bring music and drama edge-to-edge in order to open that question as far as it would allow.

Our characters are a mother, a father, a son and a daughter, and, in addition, we created Character Five, a woman actor who plays a number of roles and who provides the outsider’s perception of the drama that every family sets up. We have reinforced this family-as-theatre sense in the newly revised script of the play that appears here.

For many years I’ve been interested in the lives of women, particularly those lives that have gone unrecorded. The last twenty or thirty years have seen, in literature and in theatre, the partial redemption of women artists and activists. But one group seems consistently overlooked, a group who, for historical reasons mainly, were caught between movements: “the blue-rinse set,” “the white glove brigade,” “the bridge club biddies.” There were (are) thousands of these women, millions in fact. I am reluctant to believe that their lives are wasted or lost. Something important goes on around a bridge table, a place where many women have felt not only safe but brilliantly alive. It is altogether possible to believe that feminism found its early roots in just such gatherings.

Thirteen Hands, a musical play for four women actors, attempts to valorize those lives. (The play has been produced with eight and even twelve actors.) Two principal patterns of human behaviour play against each other: continuity and replacement.

Continuity is represented by the multi-generational range of the play and by the way women create and preserve history in their stories.

Replacement is the inevitability that all people face; in this play new faces appear around the table; a wife replaces one who dies, mothers are replaced by daughters and granddaughters. In the play, the four founding members of the bridge club are all, one by one, replaced, but there is an ever-present yearning—expressed in the final scene—to return to that moment when the four original members sat down at a table in the early years of the twentieth century and began their lives. The game of bridge is used literally and metaphorically in the play, and it is hoped that this doubleness is strengthened by the fact that the word *bridge* never appears.

Conflict in this play lies not between generations or between one woman and another, but between the differing social constructs that balance and assign the worth of a human life.

I have felt greatly honoured by the many productions that have flowed from these four play scripts. The collaborative aspect of theatre has given me an almost inexpressible gift of happiness. I remember that on the first day of rehearsals for *Thirteen Hands* at Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg, forty of us stood in a circle on the stage: director, actors, stage managers, carpenters, designers, all of them committed to taking a piece of writing on a page and blasting it into a third dimension. And this they proceeded to do.

— Carol Shields