
REVIEWS

A MOVING, AFFECTING EXPERIENCE

MOTHER WOVE THE MORNING

drama by Carol Lynn Pearson



Drama review by Elouise Bell

PEOPLE ARE ASKING a lot of questions about Carol Lynn Pearson's new one-woman play, *Mother Wove the Morning*. Some ask questions before they have seen the play; still more ask questions afterwards. It is the latter questions that are the most thought-provoking, of course. They provoke thought because the play does.

But let's deal with some of the easier questions first. *How's the play doing?* Very well indeed, thank you. Pearson has performed the play in several locales in California and Utah, before diverse groups including Roman Catholic nuns and Mormon ward members, to enthusiastic, sold-out houses and for runs that have been extended (in every case) by popular demand. When an unadvertised performance was scheduled for a few BYU classes for which the work seemed especially relevant, tickets vanished like Snelgrove's ice cream on a hot July day, and rumors of scalping were heard in the land.

Is she a good actress? Absolutely. Pearson was a recognized actress before anyone ever paid much attention to her writing (except perhaps Bruce B. Clark, her freshman English teacher at BYU, who urged her to defect from her drama major.) She twice walked off with Best Actress of the Year Award at BYU; those who saw her as Joan of Arc still talk about the experience twenty-five years later. In *Mother Wove the Morning*, she portrays sixteen women, from Bruen, a Stone Age woman circa

20,000 B.C., to Helah, a little Midianite virgin, to Phoebe, a freed slave-become-deaconess in nineteenth-century America, to the aging, sharp-tongued Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Many of the characterizations are truly remarkable. Genevieve the Witch comes alive with an excellent, distinctive voice quality and a barely-controlled rage that differentiates her from any of the others. Paula, a Christian homemaker living in Ephesus about four hundred years after Christ, sparkles with simple cunning. Phoebe, the black Shaker, sings and rejoices movingly over her discovery, with Ann Lee's help, of the female presence in Deity (the quest for which is the unifying thread of the play). As the pulpit-thumping Mrs. Stanton, Pearson assumes a strong cracked voice and a stiff-legged walk that creates a heavy-set older woman before our eyes, where only seconds before there was the lithe youthful Carol Lynn.

Now for a harder question. *Is the play good?* Not so absolutely. To begin with, it would benefit from cutting. There are many in her audience who are so engrossed, so predisposed to hear her message, that they barely notice the length of the work. But if she is to reach many of the "less converted," the playwright will be wise to pare down the work, painful as that might be. A two-hour production featuring a cast of one reaches a point of diminishing returns with all but the most compelling scripts. And this script has some problems. Three are rather serious.

TO begin with, Pearson's most memorable characters all come in the first half

of the play. After Bruen, the Paleolithic woman, speaks what amounts to a brief prologue, we get a vivid, fast-paced enactment of the Biblical Rachel stealing her father's teraphim, or idols, and avoiding detection by using the patriarchy's own misogynistic rules as a shield against paternal wrath and violence. This is a lively, pointed vignette. (To compare with the Biblical account, read Genesis 31: 19ff.) The play quickly reaches its apex with the haunting, powerful portrayal of Lydia and "The Rape of the Levite's Concubine." This is drama at its best. As scriptwriter and actress, Pearson had me right with her each time I saw this sketch, hiding at "the high place" with young Lydia and her mother while men perform unspeakable horrors before their eyes. We need comic relief after this purgation, and we get it in "Io, the Greek." But that is followed by "Julia, the Gnostic," rather a pale interlude at this point. The first part of the play ends with "Paula, Christian at Ephesus," which again gives us some humor, laced with a few shudders and much poignancy; it's a rich characterization that is well-placed right before intermission. Unfortunately, nothing that happens *after* intermission moves us as much as what we have already experienced.

A second problem comes at a place where no playwright can afford problems: the ending. The difficulty is more than just the challenge of equalling the power of "Lydia." "Marie, Therapist," is among the weakest of the vignettes. Marie, a contemporary psychiatrist, tells us about one of her male clients, who is sleeping on the therapeutic couch even as she speaks. Now a sleeping male, especially a male sleeping under the watchful eye of a female shrink, might have been a wonderful satiric touch, had Pearson played it for satire. But she plays her straight. Dramatically, Marie is nothing at all in this sketch except a narrator. The bit evokes zero emotion because Marie reveals no emotion of her own beyond a touch of professional compassion; and the emotion her client is supposed to have felt—emotion which, we are asked to believe, led him to spend half a night with a gun poised in his mouth—is never dramatized, never really *created*. The potential here is great: women (and men) therapists feel deep anguish as they work with female and male clients tortured to agony because of the absence of the feminine principle in modern society. Pearson shows us (no, tells us *about*) a man who shudders in horror at his life when he sees a dolphin die because of industrial waste. No one is more fierce on the matter of animal rights than your reviewer;

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but surely the scene would have more power if Daniel wrestled with an issue like wife beating, emotional abuse of family members, sexual harassment, child molestation, infidelity. Yes, our raping of the environment and our fellow and sister animal creatures is indeed a manifestation of the imbalance of our age, of the absence of the feminine principle in our lives. But if this scene is supposed to be the balance of what has gone before, if it is designed to tell "the rest of the story," then surely we need to see a man who has diminished, thwarted, crippled or otherwise damaged a *woman*, or a child, and to understand, or at least glimpse, both the causes and the effects of being a perpetrator.

The third difficulty is that the play does not build. Except for the chronological sequence, there is no reason for any one of the vignettes to be where it is rather than somewhere else in the play. Now, some might say that this is the *point*: that we have not progressed in our vision of the female face of Deity in more than three thousand years; that we have, in fact, lost enormous ground since the prehistoric days of Bruen, who knew the Mother intimately. (Perhaps, a wag might say, Pearson is writing her own version of *Waiting for Godot*, this one subtitled *Waiting for Goddess*.) Such a point could well be made. But even if this historical dilemma has not ameliorated in three thousand years, the audience's insight and emotional involvement should deepen and grow in the course of two hours. But in effect, we get variations on a single theme, without development or progression.

Having said all this, I must reaffirm that for most viewers, the play is a moving, affecting experience. The problems may weaken the play, but it retains a powerful impact. (Such a situation is not unusual in the annals of theater: most of Eugene O'Neill's work falls into this category.)

On to a still harder question: *What does this play mean for a Mormon audience?*

Pearson views the work as her most important creative effort so far in her life. That's quite a claim, from someone whose poetry has been carried around by certain admirers like a fifth Standard Work for years, whose musicals are the core of the contemporary Mormon repertoire, and whose autobiography (*Good-bye I Love You*) has been an international success. All of these publications, especially the last, have changed lives. Will *Mother* do the same?

The play itself certainly does not have a "Mormon" theme, any more than it has a Jewish, pagan, or Shaker theme. (Emma

Smith, "Mormon First Lady," does put in an appearance, staunchly defending her beloved Joseph and revealing at the same time the grief of marriage to a polygamist. "I would like to speak with God's first wife!" she cries out in despair.) But if, as suggested above, the dramatic structure of the play needs some pointing, the *argument* of the play is perfectly clear. And the argument is as relevant to Mormons as to any other group on the planet today. Some would assert that it is *particularly* relevant to us.

The argument goes like this: Anciently, the female principle in Deity was equally present, equally powerful, equally adored. There were even cultures in which the female principle predominated, cultures which worshipped "the Goddess." In time, however, human males began to use economic blackmail, brainwashing, force, and violence to subjugate and hobble human females. To do this, it was necessary to minimize and eventually eradicate the female principle in Deity as mankind understood Deity. (One could not convincingly teach that women had no souls as long as one also taught of the Goddess.) With the subverting of the feminine principle, humankind became increasingly violent and increasingly fragmented, both as communities, as families, and as individuals. And, to put it simply, both men and women mourned the loss of the Mother. Both suffered from her absence. In recent decades, there has been a renewed search for the Mother among peoples of the Western world. The children of "the motherless house" have discovered that they do indeed have a Mother, and they are inviting her to return to them. (Another question I had about the play was why Pearson did not show a single example of a twentieth-century woman who has rediscovered the Goddess. Examples abound, as Pearson knows.)

Now, the concept of a Mother in Heaven does not startle Mormons as it might some other Christians. The image has existed in Mormon religious thought for almost as long as the Church has been around in this dispensation. (Pearson at one point sings a few lines from "O My Father": "Truth is reason, truth eternal/ tells me I've a Mother there.") But the image, the *theory* has been a reality for relatively few Latter-day Saints, and no such reality has ever been codified or "Correlated." Mormons do not pray to the Mother, sing hymns to her (except in the line or two mentioned), worship her, rejoice and testify to each other upon seeing her hand in all things, have no scripture that begins, "Thus saith your heavenly Mother." As one result of Pearson's

play, still more Mormons may wonder why these things are so, may muse to themselves, "If we *do* believe in Mother, then why. . . ." Specious, transparent answers such as Mormon folklore offers may be less readily accepted.

(After Pearson did the play for her BYU audience, students and others asked her questions for forty-five minutes. All participants seemed to accept her premises; their questions had to do with solutions and particulars: "How can we. . . ?" It seemed to this reviewer that Pearson would not have had the same response in the same setting ten years ago. Many sound questions were asked, many good answers given, on both sides. Perhaps the wisest comment I heard came from a young woman who said, "I have found personally that when I start to wrestle with these questions, I feel a lot of fear. I have learned not to be afraid of the fear, but to keep on despite it.")

The impact of this play will depend on many things, few of them institutional in nature, nearly all of them individual. One determinant will be whether any given person seeing the play thinks of the *perpetrators* in this long history of injustice as Them, or as Us.

In terms of the outcome, the victims here are not the real issue. Of course the play centers on them, and it is they we think about first. Some women and men who view the play will see the tragic characters (and not all the characters are tragic, by the way) as Them, wretched people to whom these terrible things happened historically. Some, perhaps many, viewers will see the victims as Us, will identify with the victims, knowing that they themselves, or people that they know and love, are even now living lives that are less than they might be because of sins committed against the feminine principle in human life. Some playgoers will even have the upsetting and illuminating experience that used to be called "consciousness raising," a realization for the first time, or for the first time to such an intense degree, that the victims are, indeed, Us—Oneself.

But the question I am most interested in has to do with the perpetrators. Most viewers, I believe, will think of the guilty as Them: the ancient Hebrews, the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Levites, the Greeks, the early Christians, the early Catholics, the medieval witch-hunters, the nineteenth-century slave-holders, the twentieth-century Nazis. All those who drove Mother from her throne on high and have persecuted her daughters ever since.

But some who see *Mother Wove the Morn-*

ing may think, perhaps for the first time, of the perpetrators as Us. Some may consider that we are all fish in a single pond of water, all one species on a single planet, and that there is no Them. There is only Us. Victims and Perpetrators alike. On such viewers, the impact of this play will be great.

Whatever the results, Carol Lynn Pearson deserves highest praise for courage, commitment, and superb stewardship in the management of her considerable gifts. ☞

FICTION AND THE FREE IMAGINATION

MR. WAHLQUIST IN YELLOWSTONE AND OTHER STORIES

by Douglas H. Thayer

Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City, 1989, 154 pages, \$7.95.

WINDOWS ON THE SEA AND OTHER STORIES

by Linda Sillitoe

Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1989, 174 pages, \$9.95.

TOPAZ

Brother Christenson
said it was the color
of honey, the sun.
The way the world
will be when He comes,

bright as wheat, more
glowing, more golden.
Our eyes closed on stars,
our dreams became one
sea of glass, white fire.

So when light came we
climbed to the far
hill, combed rocky
dust, breathless for
the first shining.

But quickly grew bored
at cracked black eyes,
stones we culled then for
wrist-rockets—
our sharp aim tore

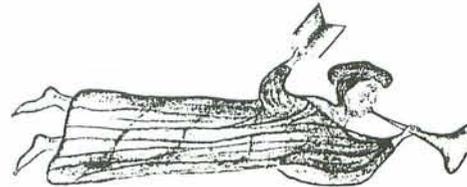
jackrabbits, magpies
screaming out of air.
The fathers those nights
stayed late at the fire,
speaking quietly of flights

over distant jungles,
our older brothers, war—
Richie Borden's uncle
lost somewhere, never
to return. That summer

the unimaginable color
of sun burned in our eyes,
that dreamed tincture.
Scrambling for topaz,
we caught fractured

obsidian, black glass.

—PHILIP WHITE



Reviewed by Helen B. Cannon

TO START A serious book review by quoting dust jacket blurbs hardly seems an avenue to in-depth analysis, yet, asked to do a comparative review of two new story collections by Mormon authors, I find jacket blurbs to be precisely the springboard that I require.

Of Douglas Thayer's collection, *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone*, William Kittredge writes, "Doug Thayer has written a tough-minded, vivid book of stories about the American West." And Levi Peterson writes of Linda Sillitoe's *Windows on the Sea*, "no one teaches us so intensely, so emphatically, that women think and feel differently from men. No one else sets forth so authentically the cages, dilemmas, and nascent freedoms of contemporary Mormon women."

It's true. If I had read these two collections "blind," without knowing their respective authors, I would have known that *Mr. Wahlquist* could only have been written by a man, and with somewhat less surety that *Windows*

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on the Sea was written by a woman. The question is, would this classification deserve censure or praise for the authors? Furthermore, is there any pertinence to observing or even granting the possibility of a distinction between male and female writing?

If we were to accept Virginia Woolf's ideal of the androgynous writer, and if it is true that Thayer and Sillitoe write from single sexual perspectives, then we would have to admit that their stories have been inhibited in a fundamental way.

Certainly Woolf's theory of the androgynous mind is attractive—the idea that two sexual aspects reside within us all and that in the best of writers "the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating."

For years I've bought that assertion, assuming that the truly fertile imagination can only come from a marriage of male and female aspects of consciousness. Yet Sillitoe's collection causes me to think again. Suppose Sillitoe had diluted her female sensibilities by looking constantly for male perspectives with which to conjoin her thinking. Would her stories have been more luminous, as Woolf projected androgynous writing would be, or

would the stories have lost a certain daring, revelatory, inside perspective of the distinctiveness of female experience and sensibility? And just as importantly, would they, diluted with masculine writing, have lost certain female insights about the Church? This is after all, not just a woman writing. It is a Mormon woman *cognoscente* writing.

Why then do I object to the "tough-minded" maleness of Thayer's stories? I go back to Woolf's androgynous vision for an answer; in fact I go back to Coleridge, who provides Woolf's list of requisites for the happy condition of androgyny. The writing product of such a mind should be, says Woolf via Coleridge, "resonant and porous . . . transmitting emotion without impediment . . . naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" (*A Room of One's Own*, 102). Such writing would evidence a mind well-educated and free, "which had never been thwarted or opposed, but had full liberty at birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked" (103). By her own adopted definition, then, for Woolf androgyny in the writer is less a question of male versus female than it is of multiplicity and freedom of vision rather than single-mindedness or constraining duality.

Thayer has set himself a theme. Call it male tough-mindedness if you will, but the result is characters who are obsessed and transparent. By contrast, Sillitoe's stories range freely and her characters have flesh and blood dimension, even in their private obsessions. Here instead of masculine emphasis on polarity and justice, we find feminine emphasis of connections between characters. The first story in the collection, "A String of Intersections," is a case in point. Yet, though Sillitoe writes from a female perspective, she also records a multiplicity of human views. Adopting the window metaphor from her title story, it is as if a woman brushes aside a curtain from the window in order to better observe those who pass by, in all their male and female diversity.

Consider two stories, one from each collection, that present Anglo views of Indian ways. There's Mr. Wahlquist from Thayer's title story, obsessed with the West and with Indians—a man who romanticizes and a character who has no dimension. Though he can name all of the wild Indian tribes and has encyclopedic knowledge of their ways, though he collects their artifacts and mourns their passing, though he comes from Omaha each summer with his wife to fantasize and romanticize *Yellowstone's* Indian past, now vanished, he has no first-hand knowledge at all. His information is bookish, his character

one-dimensional. Moreover, his psychic vision is myopic, as though the thick gold rimmed glasses he wears provide the wrong visual correction, distorting rather than clarifying. The message—and Thayer's stories do have messages—is that the real West has no patience with such romantic, sentimental, clouded vision. Mr. Wahlquist, in trying to embrace romanticized wildness, dies in a grizzly's savage embrace.

The West will not lend itself to bookishness. It is nature, tooth and claw, and as Thayer says of his theme, "If you make a mistake, you pay" (Interview, KUSU-FM, Logan, Utah, September 25, 1989). That theme holds in the long (tiresomely long) story "Dolf" and in "The Gold Mine." It is true in Thayer's earlier, finely-crafted "The Red-Tailed Hawk" as well. That's the formula.

But in Sillitoe's "Coyote Tracks" there is more unfolding than formula. Shannon, a young Mormon woman estranged from her philandering husband, has come with her daughter to the furthest outreach of Utah's border—to San Juan County—where she teaches high school English to Navajo teens. Shannon comes with her own romanticized notions. In fleeing a marriage gone sour, she reasons that the scenery would be "spectacular" and that living in the Navajo nation would seem "almost like foreign travel" (40). But she moves beyond this touristy notion. Stanley Yazzie, the school's Navajo football coach and counselor, son and grandson of medicine men and former BYU football player, is himself between two cultures. Shannon's lover and shaman, he leads her to learn things about the land and Navajo culture. In the process she learns things about herself and about the culture she comes from. Mr. Wahlquist tried to forcibly enter a culture and land not his own. By contrast Shannon is receptive to the culture's entering her. As female is receptive to male, she is open, and in consummation learns something of her own sexuality as well. Here is woman writing certainly, but it is writing that moves from femaleness to a deeper, flesh and blood humanity—androgynous vision after all.

To give an indication of Sillitoe's writing that is strong, thrusting, unstinting (stereotypical male qualities), but that is also sensitive, introspective, mother-tongue telling, consider the passage where Shannon reads the Navajo myth of the birth of sensual pleasure.

A rare male rain beat on the windows of Shannon's classroom during lunch hour. . . . She was not even a hundred pages into the complicated

worlds of the Diné, but as she pored over the paragraphs, her astonishment grew. Surprisingly, First Woman, hoping to bond men and women, had created sexual pleasure. Not sex for procreation. . . . No, sexuality itself, intended to delight and fulfill both men and women. From turquoise First Woman fashioned a penis and from white and red shell a vagina and clitoris. Then, before the watching village, she had placed her creations on the ground and taught them to respond to one another.

Obediently, the organs had lengthened, each at the thought of the other, and then they had learned to shout (47).

Brushing aside, for the moment, her heritage of "Victorian prudery, Christian preaching, and the Kinsey Report," Shannon reads the Navajo explanation of masturbation as abuse of the gift of sexual pleasure.

When First Man and First Woman quarrelled and separated, they learned longing and began to abuse themselves. One maiden, lost in her desire for a man, had found an antler; another one day discovered a stout eagle feather; a third whittled a cactus smooth and fleshy; and the fourth maiden selected a long stone. Each had warmed the object all day in the sun, then spent an entire night evoking shouts from her *bijóózh*.

If the reader has any question about the explicit sexuality of this passage or wonders about *bijóózh*s, Sillitoe discreetly but certainly makes it clear.

In high school, Shannon mused, she had considered her *bijóózh* once a month and then unhappily. She'd had only the vaguest notion that it could shout but a strong sense that it must be protected, even above her life. Later, of course, when she and Don married at twenty, her *bijóózh* seemed suddenly her most valuable part—not only to Don but to the gynecologist she had to see, maybe even to the Sunday School President who kept flirting with her, certainly to the women in her Mormon ward. They were all intent on the particulars of conception, miscarriage and birth. They made only a rare, veiled allusion to sexual pleasure. . . . But Navajo girls grew up with female and male gods stationed on every mountain, with misty female rain and driving

male rain, even with male and female hogans (48-49).

I quote this passage at length because it illustrates the point I wish to make. Here is a writer able to enter the mind of her character—a mind in the process of coming to greater awareness and understanding. Here is a writer able to use symbol, myth, and dream as revelatory. Here is woman writing, yes, but it is also poet writing. It is androgynous mind, “well nourished, well-educated, free mind” at liberty “to stretch itself in whatever way it likes” (Woolf, 103).

It is not so much a question of how Thayer, as a man, portrays a woman (and he does this really only once, and unsuccessfully, in “The Gold Mine,” where the loquacious Mrs. Miller monopolizes the story with her talk, becoming not woman character but caricature of woman), or of how Sillitoe as a woman writer portrays male characters. It’s not a question of sexist language either. It is, rather, a question of the free imagination. In this story collection Thayer seems locked into writing that is self-consciously male. Even though his declared stance as author is anti-macho, Thayer seems unable to draw characters or to write in language that is free from uni-sexuality. In “The Rooster,” for example, Thayer obviously intends to draw an unflattering portrait of a macho type. Beer-bellied, crass and insensitive, this husband beds his wife in as loveless a way as he had earlier stalked a pheasant. The unconvincing thing to me is how capitulating and complicitous is the wife—a character drawn only in this final bedroom scene:

He pushed the door back quietly, stepped silently in. He closed it again and pushed the bolt, fingered it to make sure. He stood waiting for his eyes to get used to the pale light of the moonlit room. He didn’t want to turn the light on. She lay on the far side of the bed, her face hidden by shadow. He couldn’t tell whether she was awake or not. He stepped closer. He saw his reflection in the mirror. He didn’t have a head, only a white body.

“Honey,” she said whispery.

He paused. His throat tightened again.

“I been waiting,” she said. She pushed back the covers, exposing a heavy white arm cut off at the shoulder by a pink nightgown. “I been waiting” (75).

Clipped, male, imitative of Hemingway, this writing has no subtlety. It is heavy-

handed and stereotypically male. The husband fingers the bolt as he would finger a trigger. His wife’s body is drawn as mutilated victim, her “white arm cut off at the shoulder.” Yet inexplicably she is waiting. Where is the motive, the unfolding? Where is the dimension and possibility for change? Where is an harmonious blend of male and female making up credible human characterization? Thayer found that blend successfully in the stories of his earlier collection, *Under the Cottonwoods*, where he drew characters I still remember and believe in, characters who grappled with their Mormonness and with their human frailties rather than with formless, free-floating concepts of Nature and the West.

It is as much a mistake to lock oneself into a critical construct as it is to be locked into a fictional one. There are many critical tacks that could be taken into these story collections besides the question of male and female perspectives. Thayer and Sillitoe, as talented

Mormon writers, both have strengths and weaknesses.

Sillitoe’s collection is certainly not without flaws. I had to make a considerable effort, for instance, to keep her different characters, with their improbable names (or maybe for Utah, hilariously probable) firmly in mind. I also felt annoyed by her often curious choice of words and turns of phrase, to say nothing of a few grammatical errors that no editor should have let pass.

And while objecting to Thayer’s self-consciously virile focus, I admire descriptive passages throughout that show his marvelous awareness of the harsh beauty of the western landscape as well as certain passages dealing with the psyche that are resonant of his earlier, stronger writing. ☞

REFERENCE

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*. Harcourt, Brace, World: New York, 1957.



“Would you summarize your presentation, Alan? Just in case some of us missed the point.”