ALIENATION AND IDENTITY

The Plays of Margaret Hollingsworth

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A NOTABLE ASPECT OF CANADIAN DRAMA is the strikingly large percentage of ranking dramatists who are women, and in this constellation Margaret Hollingsworth is a very bright star, sharing with many of the other women writers an interest in feminism and the female experience, but adding to this a particular concern for the manifold problems of the immigrant and outsider, and the isolated mind in general. These two themes recur in all of her plays, growing in complexity and profundity from her early work to the most recent; and correspondingly, what starts as an essentially realist style — overlaid from the beginning, however, with telling incongruities and grotesqueries — becomes increasingly subjective and surreal. "I can compare it to Magic Realism. . . . That's the way I see life. I see it in a very surreal way, but rooted in practical reality."[1]

In many ways the artistic development of Margaret Hollingsworth corresponds to the creative modes described by André Breton in his Surrealist Manifesto.[2] Breton believed in the free association of words and images, holding that unexpected juxtapositions could create new hybrids having the power to reflect, or even to evoke pure psychological states. Form for the surrealist referred less to the technical aspects of a work of art than to an approach to and affirmation of a particular consciousness in which the mind's capacity to synthesize its own reality is central. For Hollingsworth, too, surrealism has meant freedom to design a world of her own imagination. As play has succeeded play, she has transcended the literal and narrative limitations of realism by increasingly complex psychological exploration. Time has acquired new flexibility in her drama; space has been endowed with more subjective meaning; and language has begun to express the irrational qualities of the mind. Not surprisingly, much of Hollingsworth's university training has been in psychology.

Related to Hollingsworth's interest in psychology is her concern for the problems of women. Nearly all of her plays take a female point of view, but because her approach is psychological rather than philosophical, this view is always ideologically neutral. She concentrates on women's needs and experience, and is interested in a "female" approach to problems, which takes the form of explorations rather

than answers or solutions. And, unlike doctrinaire feminists, she is less concerned with women relating to each other in a corporate experience, than in women discovering and realizing themselves individually. In fact, Hollingsworth nearly always focuses on the isolated person. This relates her concern with women to her preoccupation with the immigrant, the lonely outsider in an alien land, plagued by feelings of dislocation and loss of identity. Such feelings are compounded, of course, when the immigrants are women, aliens by both nationality and gender. And in her most recent work this overlaps further into concern for the mental isolation of being a writer.

The shapes and settings of Hollingsworth's plays reflect these feelings. The early plays have claustophobic settings — small rooms, shacks, lonely farmhouses — situated in a huge, featureless land. These sometimes symbolize an emotional "safe place," at other times a stifling environment.

> I finally pinned down my sense of smallness in a vast outside and the sense of the outside always impinging and my having to make a small space that can be mine.[3]

A change comes about with Hollingsworth's fifth published play, *Ever Loving*, in which three immigrant women learn how to cope with the terrors of a strange, new land, but it is their ability to cope rather than their terror that is reflected in an opening out of space in the play and in its extreme fluidity of time and space. And this more confidently subjective form is central to most of her recent work, particularly *War Babies* which is in many ways a consumation of all Hollingsworth's earlier technical, stylistic, and thematic explorations.

HOLLINGSWORTH'S TWO EARLY one-act plays — *Bushed* (1973) and *Operators* (1974) — are carved-out moments set in space, moments selected not for their strangeness or qualities of crisis, but for their very typicalness. Both plays reveal a Pinteresque darkness of vision overlaid with pathos and humour. Even their titles have the same laconic brevity as Pinter's. *Bushed* is a pun on the anachronism; while *Operators*, which suggests mechanical functionaries, contrasts ironically with the poignant humanity of the three women in the play, who are struggling to reach out and communicate with each other. As in Pinter's work, anonymous rooms have a psychic life of their own, so the constricted space in *Bushed* and *Operators* has power to affect the audience emotionally. In Hollingsworth's plays, however, it is our awareness of the vast empty space outside that gives her small rooms their ominous, and peculiarly Canadian, character. The threat that surrounds the shed provides an environment for the eruption of violence in *Operators*. In *Bushed*, on the other hand, Hollingsworth uses the same exhaustion and irrelevance of men living in an environment which is itself an

device for comic purposes where the incongruity of a laundromat in a decimated forest forms the basic absurdity of the play.

Technically, *Bushed* has admirable shapeliness and economy. It starts with Lehto, a Finnish immigrant, sitting in the laundromat in the late afternoon, rolling a cigarette, pocketing it while he talks to his Ukrainian friend Kuzac, waiting for the arrival of the elderly female laundry attendant, then lighting his cigarette and leaving as she locks up and the play ends. In between these two minimal gestures, the life stories and characters of the two men are revealed in Pinter-like dialogue which runs along parallel tracks that only occasionally intersect. Hollingsworth even incorporates some Pinteresque word play to point the fact that English is not the native tongue of either man, a fact which further emphasizes their isolation, not merely from the women washing clothes in the background but even from each other. Black humour is also here, but without the threateningly sinister quality found in Pinter's plays. Lehto's plan to rape the laundry attendant is patently absurd and merely emphasizes the pathos of his faded vitality. This is comically emblematized by the women, who interrupt the sexual boasting of the two old men by getting between them to fold their sheets, which billow out and then snap into tight folds as the women grunt and strain with effort.

Where *Bushed* focuses on two male immigrants living in a harsh environment, *Operators* is centred on the problems of three women enduring life in a similarly isolated community, a factory in the north of Ontario. They are further cut off by gender from the rest of the workers, relegated to a floor in the factory by themselves, spending their breaks in a garden shed, and feeling themselves aliens in the company for which they do hard, boring, ill-paid work. Hollingsworth deals with none of these factors specifically, however. They are merely part of the texture of the women's lives as they struggle with the anxieties of family life, their immigrant status, loneliness, and the lack of proper communication with each other.

As in many of Pinter's plays, their relationship is seen to be based on power: not the usual social pecking order founded on status or wealth, but a more subtle treatment of power derived from psychological manipulation — hence the title "Operators." Christmas, the eldest of the three women, gains ascendancy over Sara from the aura of mystery she cultivates, and by knowing things about her friend's private life — that her son is on probation, that her husband is "just a Pole." When Jerri, younger and an ex-hippie, appears, this *status quo* is undermined by the sheer casualness with which Jerri volunteers information about her most intimate experiences. Her openness saps Christmas's reticence and authority, until Christmas explodes into a violence which frightens all three into a new level of self-revelation and acceptance. Jerri admits her penchant for destroying and running away; Sara confesses that her son beat a parking lot attendant nearly to death; Christmas admits poignantly in the last moments of the play that she too is "only a Pole" and for the first time reveals her real name.

However, the conclusion of *Operators* strikes a note of ambiguity that has become the hallmark of Hollingsworth's endings. The audience senses that the few moments of insight into their own characters that the women experience will be erased ultimately by their continuing need for external validation in an environment that nullifies them. As Hollingsworth comments: "To be an individual in this place is perhaps the loneliest experience a person can have — it is no wonder that they turn to each other, to their families, and to their children for compensations — anything rather than turn inward."[4]

In both the plays that followed, *Alli Alli Oh* in 1979, and its companion piece, *Islands*, written five years later, the same close psychological scrutiny and basic plotlessness appear, along with a similar concentration on the isolation of women in a remote environment. Hollingsworth intensifies the isolation socially by making one of her characters, Muriel, gay, and the other, Alli, mentally ill. Hollingsworth's focus in *Alli Alli Oh*, however, is neither lesbianism nor mental illness, but the more widely feminist concern of a woman's struggle to find out who she is and what she can do. Like the women in *Operators* who turn to each other "for compensation," Alli turns at the beginning of the play to Muriel for the answers to her sense of emptiness. In one of her soliloquies she says:

> I wasn't a clown, or a ballerina, or a wife or a dinner dispenser. I was alone with someone. But I couldn't tell who she was in relation to me. I didn't know whether I could function. . . .[5]

As with most women, Alli identifies her selfhood and her value as a person with her social functions — her marital, maternal, and domestic services — and when she fails in these, or when they cease to be meaningful, she becomes a nonperson in her own eyes. She despises the sexual and reproductive aspects of her body which she identifies with animals she dislikes: "Bitches, sows. Cows. This female steaminess" (2); whereas Alli's lover, Muriel, is closer in character and personality to Karl, Alli's veternarian husband. Muriel and Karl love and care for animals because they do not identify with them; both are efficient, hard-working, and down-to-earth; and both are admirably patient, if a bit obtuse, about Alli's suffering and outrageous behaviour. Karl put it down to menopause and Muriel calls it being "in a snit." Despite liberated ideas of equality, Muriel tries constantly to pull Alli outside to the barn where the "real" — meaning male — work of the farm goes on. She wants Alli to feel comfortable with animals and not be afraid of the dark, and unintentionally patronizes her by using "we" to share the blame for Alli's ineptitude. Like Karl, Muriel is helping to birth calves, and it is this displaced "male" control over female biology that Alli resists more than Muriel's claims as lover and "husband." Hollingsworth is pointing out that women's relationships, even with other women, are influenced by social function and can be meaningful only when each individual knows and values herself first.

Alli's protest over the vacuum of her inner life is feeble, expressing itself in irritability and childish jokes, and finally her frail hope for an identity in relation to someone else evaporates. She retreats to the mental hospital, "cowed," as the play puns, by timidity, fear, and training.

As *Alli Alli Oh* is Alli's play, *Islands* is Muriel's, with Alli appearing halfway through, just as irritating and destructive as before. The gay theme which is only a minor note in the earlier play, becomes more significant in *Islands* though it is still not the main issue. It is Muriel's lesbianism that gives her strength and definition as an individual, unlike her mother or Alli who only know themselves as subordinates in a male/female relationship. Yet ironically, it is Alli who forces this honesty upon Muriel. Until Alli brings the subject into the open, Muriel's subterfuges are no better than her mother's pretence not to know of her husband's sexual infidelity and involvement in illicit cock fighting. Muriel's strength consciously to choose an unconventional life — as a lesbian and as a farmer — give her the strength to resist the demands of both her mother and Alli and to create her life alone.

Except for Alli's monologues in *Alli Alli Oh*, both these plays are largely realistic in style, set in contemporary time and in familiar space. Only Alli's reminiscences addressed directly to the audience cut across the ordinary dialogue, but even these have a realistic dimension in that, in a way, they are like a mental patient's talking to herself. At one point, when Alli is making animal noises as part of the bitter parody of her earlier life, Muriel actually hears her; and in *Islands* Muriel tells her astonished mother that she "always thought of [Alli's flights] as meditating" (134), suggesting that she has heard many of the monologues. Other soliloquies must be unheard, however, as when Alli tells the audience how revolting she finds Muriel's mode of chewing while Muriel, oblivious, eats in front of her. This overlaying of dialogue with monologue is the verbal equivalent of the "'Gestalt switch' which flickers between two different readings of an image . . . like 'Rubin's Vase.'"[6] The banality of Muriel's and Alli's domestic talk is a foil to Alli's florid soliloquies describing the desperate, insane behaviour which led her to being institutionalized, and this tension between the two levels of language is central to the play's meaning. While Muriel's pedestrian statements relate the pragmatic concerns of their life together, Alli's pyrotechnics encapsulate its subjective and emotional truth. Hollingsworth has said:

> Language is my starting point . . . I've always been interested in making language . . . I think it's got to be elastic, that's all. It becomes something else. It takes the place of music, becomes pure sound or it can become purely visual.[7]

Alli's monologues with their double function are the first evidence of Hollingsworth's stretching of language, but it is not until *Apple of the Eye* six years later that speech attains the elasticity of the "purely visual."

HAVING EXPLORED THE DISLOCATION and insecurity of immigrants in her one-act plays *Bushed* and *Operators*, and the problems of women's identity in *Alli Alli Oh* and *Islands*, in 1980 Hollingsworth's first full-length production, *Mother Country*, appeared using both these themes. The treatment of immigrants, however, is given an entirely new slant in this play. Because they are English, the "immigrants" have the prestige of first settlers, irrespective of when they actually arrived. It is their customs and traditions that underlie the social standards of the new land. Ironically, it is they who feel secure in their sense of continuity, while native Canadians have only a timid sense of national identity and strong feelings of inferiority to the Mother Country. Hollingsworth said in an interview:

> This is the first thing that struck me when I came to Canada, people asking what is a Canadian — who are we? That dribbling question over and over again. . . .[8]

Such a question is, of course, connected with the mind-set of colonialism, its love-hate relationship with the Mother Country. In the play, the mother, Janet, embodies many of the attributes of England that enrage "colonials": imperiousness and arrogance, implacable certainty of rightness, and dismissiveness. At the same time, her three daughters all sense their mother's genuine superiority over them. With such a mother it is impossible for the three girls to survive; to be themselves they need to "kill" her off. Their struggle to do so in the play is an allegory of the Canadian fight for a national identity as well as an insight into the relationship between mother and daughters as women needing to be themselves.

Janet's absurd house, designed as a captain's cabin[9] with portholes kept claustrophobically shut, points symbolically to the meaning of the play. Clearly Janet is the captain; her ship is the island over which she has absolute command. She manipulates the lives of her daughters, her neighbours Maurice and Thea, and even her ex-husband Rory three thousand miles away, with her unassailable conviction of knowing better than anyone else what is for everyone's good. Surrounding the house is a sea of chrysanthemums, their blossoms carefully preserved from the depradations of weather by little red plastic bags which her youngest daughter Fran describes as the "red tide," a fatal pollution of sea water, which refers also to the colour with which English "possessions" have traditionally been indicated on maps. Janet says that the island reminds her of England, and while Janet's notion of England includes only its positive aspects, Hollingsworth simultaneously implies all the pejorative meanings of insularity, parochialism, and snobbery.

The play's action reflects the same centripetal impulse as the setting, focusing on a reunion party to celebrate both Janet's birthday and her retirement. By the end, this birthday marks a new life for her daughters and also the emancipation of her neighbour Maurice; while the retirement, in turn, reflects Janet's extinction

as a power. It is she who supplies the word "anachronism" for Maurice's cross-word in the first act, and in the last she finally accepts from him a present that is also a farewell.

Appropriately, the metaphor of death permeates the whole play. Janet's proposal to call the house *Lusitania*, in memory of the passenger ship torpedoed by the Germans in World War I, foreshadows her own ship's final demise. It was Janet who inculcated Sally, her eldest daughter, with her superstition of May Blossom as a portent of death, and despite her vitality, Janet shivers when Maurice identifies her daughters as doppelgängers. Finally, the chrysanthemums which Janet has so carefully preserved are viciously hacked down, "murdered" in the last moments of the play by Sharon, her ex-husband's young fiancée. Where Fran could only "pick" Janet's chrysanthemums by mockingly disguising a featherduster with a red plastic bag, the American Sharon is able to abolish the "red tide" completely.

To arrive at the culminating paradox of "death" and "birth," Hollingsworth has organized the action around two different kinds of displacement: photographs, and games and play acting based on those photographs. Using pictures of the young Janet as a guide, her daughters dress up in their mother's old clothes, taken from an attic trunk. By impersonating Janet, they become simulacra of their mother, what they all long to be (but fail to achieve) on the one hand, yet hate the idea of being on the other. This mimicry releases the women briefly. Just as George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can only communicate through the medium of games, so here the daughters reveal the truths about themselves they are otherwise afraid to utter while dressed up as their mother and speaking confidently in her voice.

Imitating Janet fails to destroy her, however: she is still Mother (and Mother Country); and her daughters' confessions come out of their belief in Janet's omniscient knowledge of all their "wickedest thoughts and deeds."[10] When the play within the play concludes, the three sisters gather around the full-length mirror looking at the triple image of themselves as Janet and realize that she has blotted them out. Although they are now "depersonalized" (30), they have not become Janets, only a "raw resemblance" (36), just as Canada is but a raw resemblance of England. Maurice identifies the mirrored images of Janet as doppelgängers presaging death, however, and impels a disquieted Janet to break the spell and unknowingly sweep on even closer to "death" by substituting a second displacement, the game which formulates the mode of death itself — Murder in the Dark. In this game Janet's death is inescapable as all the women playing it are images of Janet. As the first act ends, the "murder" of Sally/Janet, although incomplete, is shown to be inevitable.

The murder must not, however, be self-murder. Although Janet tears up the old photographs of herself on which her daughters have patterned their disguises and later leaves her clothes folded on the beach as though she had died by drowning,

neither "suicide" sets her daughters free. Liberation for Fran, Doreen, and Sally will come only when they can liberate themselves.

The ambiguity surrounding Janet's apparent death is one of the play's richest aspects. It is possible to see Janet as an unmitigated tyrant: Hollingsworth herself said in an interview that she saw Janet as a "monster";[11] but there are also indications that Janet may desire her daughters' emancipation as much as they do. She openly confesses her desire to keep contact with her daughters, but insists also that she always wanted them to be free to do what they wished. Only Sally, the most intuitive of the three, recognizes that Janet really wants them "to be like [Sharon Grebnik]," an energetic and independent woman.

Janet's "suicide" reinforces this interpretation. Although her beach robe is folded, she points out contemptuously that since her shoes were not there also, she was obviously not swimming but walking along the beach, a fact that they should have "detected." Seen in this way, the "suicide" is an extension of the game, Murder in the Dark. With the murder game Janet points the way to the emancipation which her daughters could not achieve through imitative play-acting. When Janet is assumed dead, instead of grieving, Fran, Doreen, and Sally toast their new freedom in her medicinal brandy, working out their plans for the future as they drink. Their liberation complete, Janet's return makes no difference.

In the final moments of the last act, Janet accepts the birthday/retirement present from Maurice that she refused at the opening of the play. "To Janet," reads the inscription, "to mark the end of a long career." The colonials have been liberated, but not completely. As usual, Hollingsworth's conclusion has an element of ambiguity. Fran's despairing confession earlier is her realization of how much like her mother she really is, and Janet, though deserted and powerless, has the last word in the play. Referring to the devastated chrysanthemums, she says significantly:

> As long as we have our roots all the weed-eaters in the world won't dislodge us. (80)

Stylistically, *Mother Country* incorporates more surrealistic elements than any of Hollingsworth's previous plays. The strongly symbolic implications of the setting contrast with colloquial flatness in the dialogue to produce the incongruity basic to surrealistic style. Chiefly, though, it is Hollingsworth's unabashed use of the fiancée Sharon as a *deus ex machina* and her bizarrely literal exit in a helicopter, spiriting her away like a chariot from heaven, that shows how much more surrealistic Hollingsworth's technique has become.

The most obvious result of this new imaginative freedom of Hollingsworth's is the liberation of her next play, *Ever Loving*, from claustrophobic settings and temporal plot lines, in ways that mirror an advance in theme as well as technique. In *Ever Loving*, sequences are broken up so that place and time move radically

backwards and forwards in a totally non-representational set that evokes the bewildering spatial expanse of emptiness and fragmentation that European immigrants to Canada have to confront. The action covers the development of three wartime marriages from 1938 to 1970 when Diana, an upper-class English girl, and Ruth, a working-class Scot, with their Canadian husbands, have a reunion in a Niagara Falls restaurant in which Luce and her ex-husband Chuck happen to be entertainers. The parallelism of the Diana/Ruth plots is broken up by the fact that Luce does not come over with the other two brides but arrives earlier from Italy, and her only contact with the others before the final restaurant encounter is a brief scene on the Halifax station platform when Diana and Ruth are taking the train westwards and Luce is longing to escape like them — though even in this the women do not actually meet.

The structure of *Ever Loving* is much more complex than merely switching from one couple to another as they progress through the years. The plot takes a highly imaginative form of disjunction, moving so rapidly backwards and forwards with flashbacks within flashbacks that we never know what direction the next scene will take. Moreover, authentic flashbacks are varied by bizarre "fantasy" sequences in which various characters conjure up what they would like to have happen and imagine a future which is different from what actually occurs or — given the disjunctive time scheme — has sometimes already occurred.

The effect of this fluid use of space/time is to create "rhythms" that Hollingsworth says are all important to the intuitive energy of her work,[12] and which relate further to the clever use of music in the play. Twenty-nine different pop songs are played or sung during the performance, immediately identifying the period of each scene along with changes in costume, and helping to modulate easily from one scene to another. Music is also used to establish the mood of a particular scene, not only directly but also indirectly, as Ann Saddlemyer points out, by playing off the romantic promise of the music with the reality we are witnessing on stage.[13]

The play opens with Chuck singing "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden" and ends ironically with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." As Ruth and Diana set off through the barren countryside, Chuck plays "Sentimental Journey" in the background. This is repeated in scene 12 while Dave and Paul wait with great trepidation at the railroad station for the wives they hardly know, and again as Diana fantasizes about the grey flannels and elegant cravat she imagines Paul will be wearing when he meets her train in Lethbridge.

Related to the complex use of music is the variety of English spoken, revealing both regional and class differences in accents and idiom, while passages of Italian and lines of Ukrainian and German further enrich the text. This "orchestra of voices," as Ann Saddlemyer calls it,[14] is especially complex in long over-lay passages in which two or even three speakers are talking simultaneously, like contrapuntal music, and the effect again is mostly one of ironic contrast.

The play's theme is the problems of adjustment experienced by war brides brought to an alien culture and harsh land. The three husbands all come originally from immigrant families (Ukrainian, Italian, Irish) who have settled in Canada and become part of the Canadian mosaic. The war displaces them to Europe, however, where they are insecure and alien, so that even Chuck feels out of place in Italy, his romanticized ancestral land. Thus marrying represents for them a certain kind of security and survival in this new environment. When their wives come to Canada, however, the roles reverse. Their need for security amidst so much that is frightening is probably the reason that both Ruth and Diana stay in their marriages despite disappointments and the misrepresentations their men have made. All three husbands have in different ways "promised a rose garden," and each young wife has translated the promises into daydreams. Only Luce leaves her husband to create a life of her own when she sees that Chuck has more talk than action or talent, but, ironically, in the end she and Chuck find more satisfaction in their professional relationship than the other couples do in domesticity.

At the end of *Ever Loving*, the sense of alienation and isolation of immigrants is replaced by a feeling of belonging. The ethnic backgrounds of the three husbands are demonstrably less important to them than their Canadian identity, and two of the three wives, though adapting with difficulty, find richer lives in their new home. But Hollingsworth never lets her audience off with a facile happy ending. With her customary double look at things, she combines the final moment of success and love with a barely suppressed act of violence between Ruth and Dave, whose daughter has decided to leave for Scotland, reversing her mother's experience, and the play concludes with Chuck singing "Over the Rainbow," a sweet song of longing that also recognizes that promises are evanescent and dreams ultimately delusive.

Ever Loving is the last of five plays dealing with the immigrant theme, which Hollingsworth has examined from all sides. She has explored the experience of vulnerable ethnic minorities, and dealt with the contradictions of colonialism, and has treated Canada as a land of terrifying size and emptiness, as a doomed refuge, and finally as home. As her immigrant characters became more comfortably Canadian, Hollingsworth's plays have become correspondingly more spacious and fluid, almost as if her confidence in her technique has been the result of her own greater sense of belonging. And with the structural loosening, her imaginative world seems also to have been released as can be seen in the three most clearly surrealist plays that follow: *Diving*, *Apple in the Eye*, and *War Babies*.

With the two mini-dramas that precede the full-length *War Babies*, surreal effects take over completely. In each play the characters are pared down to a sole woman and a "voice off," and the plots are honed to a single

emotional crisis and a few symbols. Although the influence of both Albee and Beckett is evident, these miniatures have Hollingsworth's own flavour, particularly in their focus on women and in the surrealistic use of imagery.

In both *Diving* (1983) and *Apple in the Eye* (1983), the action and all the symbols are so economical that, in *Diving*, Hollingsworth manages to depict the whole life cycle and social evolution of women in four pages, using spawning salmon as her basic symbol. *Apple in the Eye*, only twelve pages long, also concerns women's lives but is, as the title suggests, more complex and ambiguous. Apples have traditional associations with evil, women, and forbidden knowledge. And women are the "apple of [a man's] eye." By altering the preposition, however, from "of" to "in" the meaning shifts to suggest phrases like "fire in your eye," "a mote in your eye," and "mud in your eye," hinting at ambiguities in the text that follows. The play brings in references to Rembrandt's painting of Saskia, Seurat's "Sunday in the Park," Weiss's play about Marat-Sade, artificial intelligence, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, and a quarry of other references and minutiae that give this little drama the collage effect of some surrealist paintings.

On the "story" level the play deals with Martin and Gemma's typical Sunday, spent entirely in bed, she doing crosswords, making breakfast and fetching tea, and he listening to the football game through ear-plugs and reading science fiction. Gemma's monologue during this process is reminiscent of Alli's and takes the play into realms of the subconscious with her hilarious fantasy about sexual intercourse. Alli's speeches, however, were only a pale shadow of the surrealist transformation that Gemma's language shows. The image of the apple rolls through Gemma's soliloquy, splitting into halves with Gemma identifying the halves with the hemispheres of her brain, with the visible parts of her eyes, with Saskia's buttocks — all female symbols yoked together with the ingenuity of a metaphysical poet. The golden spider bites both the apple and Marat (Martin) lying in his bath (bed), spread out like an "oyster-coloured" behemoth. As with all surrealistic art, the comic is tinctured with the sinister. Here the very vitality of Gemma's imagination seems rotten ripe. Like Alli's it is deranged. This is certainly the clue to *Apple in the Eye*, where analysis of the seemingly random symbols and images illuminates a frightening but coherent psychological portrait embedded in the text. What Hollingsworth was attempting to do with the character of Alli, she achieves fully in Gemma.

In *War Babies*, which followed in 1984, the protagonist Esme, though very different from the other two women, shares common psychical anxieties and doubts, now greatly expanded in a full-length play. Like *Alli Alli Oh* and *Apple in the Eye*, *War Babies* examines male-female relationships, but the two-act format allows far greater complexity and depth. As in *Ever Loving*, the dimensions of time and place are very fluid, but where the earlier play is confined to the conscious world of action, memory, and limited daydreaming, now Hollingsworth shifts back and

forth between that conscious world and the realms of imagination and dream. With her knowledge of psychology, Hollingsworth is aware that these two worlds are not always discrete. In *War Babies* the edges between the conscious and subconscious are often blurred, resulting in an enriched perception of reality but also sometimes in confusion.

A further widening of Hollingsworth's technique lies in her expansion of the play-acting and games device from *Mother Country* into a full scale play-within-the-play (hereafter referred to as the PWP) composed by Esme during a late pregnancy about which she is ambivalent. Hollingsworth adapts pop art as a formal device in *War Babies*; rather in the way that Lichtenstein uses the comic strip, the PWP employs soap opera. At first glance it has a cool, hard-edged, low-information appearance typical of comics and soap opera, but behind its varied reflections retreat infinitely dilating metaphors (gun, jail, doll, etc.) for psychological possibility, creating alternative readings like the deliberate confusions and non-sequiturs of surrealism.

Hollingsworth's two plays, nested together with Chinese boxes, show her perception of how the subconscious works. The containing play reveals the anxieties of Esme's impending motherhood, her fear of losing selfhood and independence, and her resentment that Colin's male role in society as a war correspondent is so much clearer and freer than her own identity. The PWP dramatizes the recurrent female terror of being abandoned, "left in this God-forsaken place," along with an atavistic anger that Esme dares not articulate, disguised so that the bizarre events of the PWP are largely symbolic. Even disguised, however, some feelings are so acutely painful that at one point while writing her play about Esme^2 and Colin^2, Esme buries her face in her hands to shut out the vision of them.

Where Hollingsworth's technique is successful Esme shifts from one paradigm to the other by a turn of the head, passing quickly between real life and fantasy. Thus, the two plays float in our minds together, simultaneously arousing different responses to the "real" and to the artifact, but also occasionally merging when a few small items from Esme's absurd and illogical fantasy slide into her everyday reality. For example, at one point in the frame play, Esme bemuses her friends Barb and Jack by asking them about the peacocks which exist only in the PWP and later she remarks to her estranged son Craig, who is a student of creative writing, that she thought he was the policeman from her PWP. The mingling here of two kinds of reality is reminiscent of Alli's monologues in *Alli Alli Oh* by the intercontamination of realism and surrealism. Hollingsworth is warning the audience not to reduce either play to over-simple formulations.

The play centres around babies — three in all. Craig, Esme's first child whom she abandoned when he was three, gave her claustrophobia, a terrifying sense of being imprisoned. In the PWP, from her unborn child, she invents a surrogate for Craig named Matthew, whom she imagines gives her agoraphobia, terror of open

spaces and going out. Clinically these phobias are at opposite poles, of course, yet imaginatively they are curiously related. The transfer from one phobia to the other has come about because of a third child in between — a Sudanese boy whom Colin killed while covering a story for his newspaper in the frame play. This is translated in the PWP into the revulsion and horror Esme[2] feels for war in the untenable world outside. She identifies and condemns war as male aggression, and it is actually this complex of feelings rather than the baby she is expecting that causes her agoraphobia.

In the frame play Esme also condemns war as anti-creative, but at the same time recognizes the element of danger, risk, and even violence in every creative act, artistic as well as biological. As an artist, she too is aggressive, even militant. Both her domestic life with Colin and the "soap opera" she is writing are structured on marital war games: the PWP contains an armed robbery, and in the frame play Esme and Colin continually compete in witty but savage one-upmanship "war games." The title of the play sums up part of the dilemma Esme faces: war *vs.* babies; agoraphobia *vs.* claustrophobia.

In the frame play, Esme has left her macho first husband, Jack, for Colin, a liberal husband of fifteen years who recognizes that their careers are of equal importance and is not "proprietorial," a relationship they laughingly call a "balance of power." All this is altered, however, when Esme gets pregnant. Having experienced the same freedom as Colin, Esme now feels trapped by her biology, and even though Colin attends pre-natal classes with her and agrees to be present at the delivery, she resents his ability to make a choice. Although the play takes Esme's point of view about this, her view is also shown to be frequently illogical and perverse.

A basic contradiction of women's liberation is revealed by her perversity. She claims to want an androgynous relationship with Colin, a role-less domestic life, but is unclear both as to how this can be achieved with a baby and whether it will please her if she gets it. Culture, if not biology, has conditioned women to covet the bravest and strongest, the richest and most successful mates. When Esme claims she wants a man who will stay home and be an ordinary house husband, Colin points out what she also knows to be true — that she would be bored if he were not an adventurer worthy of her pride and interest. Colin says:

> You . . . you're suffocating me, you know that? Years, years I've spent trying to be . . . I dunno, trying to be some kind of Rhett Butler to please you — don't laugh! . . . So what *am* I supposed to be. Some androgynous flunky? Is that it? . . . Why don't you make up your mind what you want? (207)

The dilemma is at the heart of many contemporary relationships, and the war games that Colin and Esme play are symptomatic of it. Even the fact that all the battles are mock heroic enhances their central darkness. The opening scene with the knitting contest is entirely a war game, played with the lights off, as "ignorant armies clash by night." The battles continue with puns and vicious, though laugh-

ing, word play in a series of "rounds," and the first act ends with a ridiculous food war. Esme and Colin laugh as they pun and throw french fries and pieces of chicken at each other as the culmination of Colin's grim relevation that he is going back to cover the war in Lebanon after promising to stay home until the baby is born. Although Esme has not responded verbally to the news, the hostility of the "chicken war" is clear. Even the parts of the chicken — backs, legs, breasts — the female parts most involved in birth — are demeaned by this comic but vicious fight.

The most sinister use of laughter occurs in the pre-natal class where Colin and Esme are compelled to sing "I love to go a-wandering" while Colin pinches her to simulate labour pains. As if the title of the song were not ironical enough for such a couple, the chorus compounds the irony by its repetition of the nonsense word, "Valderee" (translated roughly as "valley of laughter") which degenerated into the false laughter of "Valderah-ha-ha-ha-ha." The nurse sadistically urges Colin to pinch harder and harder until, horrified, he runs out for a cigarette, a macho act disguising vulnerability, as is revealed by Esme's telling the nurse that he does not smoke. This same violence is again only just resisted later when Colin, provoked beyond endurance, raises a chair and barely avoids striking Esme with it.

The violence of the frame play is disguised by games and only erupts sporadically into the open. In the PWP which Esme is writing, however, she can make things happen the way she wants, and just as play acting liberates the three daughters in *Mother Country*, so Esme expresses her frustration and subconscious desires in the PWP by emasculating Colin[2]. Esme's feeling of imprisonment in pregnancy, with the new baby as her jailer, results in a fantasy of Colin[2] in jail, with Craig, her first child, as the jailer. She wants him to "know what it feels like to be me" (181), that is to share female physical and psychical elements, in short, to be pregnant. Consequently she writes him into the PWP cuddling a gun against his stomach as he lies in bed, Esme[2] having changed positions with him in the world. Esme[2] escapes from the agoraphobic limitation of female spaces (bed, kitchen) and invades male space (banks) to perform aggressive action (robbery) with a gun (penis) in order to get self-renewal or transcendence, which is symbolized by the new white silk suit she buys with part of her loot. Simultaneously Colin[2] retreats to bed, where he takes on a female physiological and psychological definition by cradling the gun he has received from Esme[2] in his "womb," the gun now symbolizing the baby.

At this point Esme[2] can leave the house, achieving the male transcendence she desires, but such a resolution is too simple for Esme the playwright. Like Simone de Beauvoir's woman who is "shut up in immanence," she

> endeavours to hold man in the prison also; thus the prison will be confused with the world, and woman will no longer suffer from being confined there: mother, wife, sweet heart are the jailers. Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superior-

> ity. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values. But in doing this she is only defending herself; it was neither a changeless essence nor a mistaken choice that doomed her to immanence, to inferiority. They were imposed upon her. All oppression creates a state of war.[15]

In *War Babies* Esme starts with the same transcendence as Colin but, by wishing to have a child, she begins to lose it; she is trapped by the necessity of putting the well-being of the child before her own, which extends not only to requiring the presence of a father, but to insisting upon his non-presence in places dangerous to him and threatening to life in general — the wars which it is Colin's job to report on. This motivation is complicated, however, not merely by envy of his freedom, but also by a feeling that such independence is synonymous with all aggression and is therefore antipathetic to life. Children are killed in order to get a "story," as Colin killed a boy in the Sudan. This knowledge is underlined by her own guilt for having abandoned Craig in order to achieve male independence.

For both Esme and Colin, however, the crimes of the past are wiped out by the birth of the new baby (the fourth child of the play), Colin's literally by receiving the still blood-smeared infant in his arms, the blood seeming somehow to redress for him the spilled blood of the Sudanese boy. And Esme's guilt is mitigated by her reconciliation with Craig. This final transformation is not entirely a triumph, however. As Craig lays his hand on Esme's now empty abdomen, she describes it as a hollow cave which gave forth a stone, a remark with forboding implications. And the new baby is ominously to be named Cassandra, the doomed oracle whose prophecies of disaster were understood too late. Thus although the play ends in a happy celebration of birth and reunion, the balance of power has been profoundly altered and one senses that the future for Esme and Colin will continue to be as embattled as the past.

Thus, *War Babies* ends on the same note of ambiguity we have found in nearly all of Hollingsworth's previous plays. A seemingly happy resolution is riddled with ominous portent in what Hollingsworth called "that double thing that I do,"[16] a technique in keeping with the surrealist vision which finds disorder in the recesses of the human sensibility and has no confidence in the ultimate triumph of good. Two factors — this disbelief in a providential, linear order, and her interest in depth psychology — have conditioned the development of Hollingsworth's powers as a dramatist from the start.

Out of the loneliness and despair, the rate, the feelings of futility and alienation of immigrants and women, and most recently of writers, Hollingsworth extracts fantastic, absurd, sardonic elements that reveal a dangerously ambiguous psychic world beneath mundane "reality." Her early realistic

plays move formally from beginning to end, but once she abandons temporal co-ordinates, the artistic transaction with the audience can go any direction and include anything. And this liberation, linked with her interest in depth psychology, seems to have stimulated a naturally surrealist predisposition.

As early as *Bushed*, we see the direction of her artistic development in the way she uses the vigorous mime of laundry women to operate like a descant, contrasting and commenting on the feeble duet of the two men in the foreground. By *Alli Alli Oh* the antic side of Holingsworth's imagination takes even greater prominence, as Alli's surrealistic monologues are superimposed on the realistic elements of the play until these latter begin to recede into the background. In *Mother Country* it is the setting and the use of absurd plot devices that the extravagance of Hollingsworth's imagination bursts out. Only after *Ever Loving*, however, in which she first abandons sequential plotting and depends upon the internal rhythm of imagery and music for unity, is she able to give fullest expression to her vision. In her two most surreal works, *Diving* and *Apple in the Eye*, space replaces time; the meaning of the plays lies in the relationship of apparently incongruous images, the juxtaposition of which in different ways produces complex and contradictory patterns of meaning for the audience.

It is this technique which Hollingsworth expands in *War Babies*, where it is both the play's greatest strength but also, in the last analysis, its weakness. The exuberance and density of imagery in *Apple in the Eye* is successful partly because of the shortness of the play, but the same profusion expended to five times the length leads ultimately to confusion. In an interview Hollingsworth made a statement about *Operators* which could even better apply to *War Babies*:

> I have tried to write a play of shades and tones requiring a subtle production and special attention to rhythm and balance. . . . I have deliberately diffused the focus. Rather than concentration, I have attempted to convey multiplicity. This is dangerous ground to tread in the theatre and perhaps it is better tackled in the novel.[17]

The major themes of *War Babies* — relations between the sexes, parenthood, war, the isolation of the artist — are huge for any single play. Instead of treating them with the economy and discipline of her earlier plays, she amplifies them by adding details at oblique angles — the poetry reading scene, the story of Matthew and the hampster, the enigmatic doll which arbitrarily appears from time to time — so that the play suffers from engorgement. The brilliant realization of the surrealist style in *Apple in the Eye* has passed in *War Babies* into the self-consciousness of a style past its fullest expression, a kind of surrealist mannerism. The nine plays from *Bushed* to *War Babies* form a continuum of development of which *War Babies* is certainly the most complex and interesting, but also because of the nature of its faults, a kind of culmination and dead-end. Perhaps it is a corner signalling the need for a new direction in Hollingsworth's playwriting, the invention of a new genre, as she has herself suggested.

This is the next stage, where you let the audience and wait for what effect the audience has on you and the performer in order to make the next step. It's very hard to write. What I'm doing is structuring. It's almost for me like dance, choreographing with an idea I came up with. . . . It's an energy thing . . . that really excites me.[18]

NOTES

[1] Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman, *The Work: Conversations with English Canadian Playwrights* (Toronto: Coach House, 1982), p. 92.

[2] Malcolm Haslem, *The Real World of Surrealism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1978), p. 7. Magic Realism may be identified as native American surrealism. It is a meticulously rendered naturalistic style carrying an unusual intensity of mood despite its hard, clear, detached technique. One of the chief features of Magic Realism is the juxtaposition of incongruous objects which produces a sense of dislocation, but which can also be haunting and/or melancholy.

[3] Wallace and Zimmerman, pp. 93-94.

[4] Margaret Hollingsworth, *Operators*, in *West Coast Plays*, ed. Connie Brissenden (New Play Centre: Fineglow, 1975).

[5] Margaret Hollingsworth, *Alli Alli Oh* (Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1972), p. 19. All further references are to this edition.

[6] Haslem, p. 286. "Rubin's Vase" is a visual illusion which appears at first glance to be a black vase on a white ground but at second glance appears to be two white profiles facing each other across a negative black space.

[7] *What* interview with Jason Sherman (Spring 1986), n.p.

[8] Wallace and Zimmerman, p. 97.

[9] The similarity of this setting to Shaw's in *Heartbreak House* suggests that Hollingsworth was trying to effect the same relation to "ship of state" and "man as an island" that Shaw was trying to create.

[10] Margaret Hollingsworth, *Mother Country*, in *Willful Acts: Five Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Toronto: Coach House, 1985), p. 33. All further references are to this edition.

[11] Wallace and Zimmerman, p. 98.

[12] *What*, n.p.

[13] Hollingsworth, *Willful Acts*, p. 12.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 797.

[16] Wallace and Zimmerman, p. 95.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *What*, n.p.