

‘Swollen with lightning like revolt, bursting anger (...) they dance wild dances’:¹ Theatre as

Transgressive Space in Quebec Women’s Writing in the 1970s

Catherine Scott

University of Leeds

Quebec women’s writing in the 1970s was dominated by the question, what does it mean to be a woman? The Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, which had promised change, had resulted in many institutions with double standards in which women’s roles were inferior to those of men. This, coupled with the strong influence the Catholic church still maintained, condemned women to a similar status in society as their mothers and grandmothers. Frustration at this situation and the emergence of a second wave of feminism in Western Europe and the USA fuelled the desire for change. Women started writing to discredit the repressive images and myths surrounding them, to reveal the reality of their diverse experiences, to gain access to a means of expression and to establish if they have an identity other than that imposed by society. The 1970s saw the emergence of a quest for a female identity in Quebec women’s writing.

Although women had access as writers and performers to theatre in the past, the 1970s saw a change in attitude within this genre. Disillusioned with the roles and approaches adopted in established theatre which consolidated society’s misconceptions, many women set up all-female companies to create women-centred productions. A women’s theatre emerged in Quebec that was particularly radical as theatre and the stage provided women with the forum they desired to express their opinions, feelings and experiences. This burst of theatrical activity by both professionals and amateurs resulted in the establishment of many

collectives like the *Théâtre des cuisines* (kitchen theatre), a Marxist, non-professional group formed in 1973, whose creations focused on women's material situation. Often produced on a small scale these feminist productions were presented in school gyms, YWCAs and small theatres. Experimental in style, they placed an emphasis on improvisation techniques and collective creation. Lacking the structure of traditional theatre they avoid closure, juxtaposing monologue and dialogue, speech and silence, with the central text interspersed with poems, songs, dancing and movement. The emphasis was on the need to overcome women's silence in order that they acquire a means of expression with which to assert their identities.

Why was theatre as a genre so popular in the quest for women's expression and in what ways did it provide a forum and a space for examining questions of female identity? In order to answer these questions and elucidate the appeal of theatre, I have chosen two plays from the wide and diverse corpus of this period which form the foundation of the theatrical activity of women writers in Quebec. Both plays were produced on a large scale and they are two of the first feminist plays which addressed the issues of women's identity radically within mainstream theatre. In a public way they transgressed the norms surrounding women, demanding change, which subsequently provoked quite a mixed reception.

The title of the first play, *La Nef des sorcières*,² is difficult to translate as it contains several different and ambiguous ideas which are not explored in the translated title *A Clash of Symbols*.³ Like *sorcières* or witches, the female characters in this play are social outcasts, who from their excluded position transgress socio-cultural standards. Implicit in the title is the notion of creating a space in which women can express their identities. First performed at the *Théâtre du Nouveau Monde* in 1976, it was a collective production, which brought

together seven women involved in theatre as either actors or writers, some already established, such as Marie-Claire Blais, Nicole Brossard, Luce Guilbeault and France Théoret, and others who were not so well known: Marthe Blackburn, Odette Gagnon and Pol Pelletier.

Innovative in structure, the play consists of eight monologues, spoken by six different female characters, written by seven different writers. Each of the women is not named, but as the title of each monologue implies, they are presented in terms of their positions and roles in society. There is an *Actress* who has forgotten her lines, a *Menopausal Woman* who talks about her coming of age as a woman at a time when society regards her as no longer being one, a working class seamstress, a girl who functions in prostitute-like relationships with men, and two lesbians who have different relationships and attitudes to life. The last monologue, *The Writer* is the most radical and theoretical offering of a new approach to expression for women, which would encompass their bodies and sexuality, and free them from the constraints of patriarchal ideals. Common themes emerge in all the characters's monologues: their lack of a female identity distinct from the patriarchal defined one, the repressive myths which deny the reality of their experiences, and their inability to speak freely. In their own distinct way each of these women or witches is rejecting or changing aspects of their life in order that they can create new female identities

The play received a mixed reaction from the critics. Some criticised it for advocating that women reject society and accept a feminist policy of exclusion, which would perpetuate the isolation of women and the view that men are the enemy. Nicole Brossard, who wrote the final monologue, replied that the play was not against men but against those in power, who just happen to be men.⁴ In contrast some hard-core feminists accused it of not being

radical enough claiming that the transition to main stream theatre had resulted in the dilution of ideas. However, in spite of the critics response, the play was a huge success and is one of the cornerstones of Quebec feminist theatre.

In many ways *Les Fées ont soif* (The Fairies are Thirsty), by Denise Boucher⁵ is the inevitable successor of *La Nef des sorcières*, as it analyses the conclusions reached there and demands change. One of the critics claims that although *La Nef des sorcières* was content with tracing a portrait of the condition of women and marking out the places where future struggles could take place, *Les Fées ont soif* declared war.⁶ The title *Les Fées ont soif*, originates from a quote from Michelet's *Sorcières* (*Witches*, 1862), incorporated as an epigram at the beginning of the printed text, which describes fairies as the Queens of Gaul, proud and fantastical, who impertinently turned their backs on Christ and his apostles and continued to dance. In many ways the fairies described by Michelet are the fore-mothers of the women in this play. *Les Fées ont soif* deconstructs the role played by myth, image and language in the formation of women's socio-cultural identity. Through the use of archetypal women as characters; virgin, mother and whore, Boucher questions the representation of women, presenting them as emerging from their silence to condemn their repression. The fairies in *Les Fées ont soif*, more rebellious than the witches in *La Nef des sorcières*, offer alternative approaches to expression and identity.

Written and performed two years after *La Nef des sorcières*, *Les Fées ont soif* caused a controversy which led to it being banned because of its polemical attacks upon Quebec society, the church, marriage as an institution and the judiciary. The objections to the play were founded on two distinct premises, one cultural and literary, and the other religious. The cultural objection were situated within the more general debate over the

decline in standards of contemporary Quebec literature, due to the increased tendency to use *joual*,⁷ a phonetic transcription of Montreal working class's accent, rather than the *correct French*. The second more vociferous objection, which led to a blasphemy trial, centred on the portrayal of the Virgin Mary as a statue who was disillusioned with the Catholic church, and in particular with the negative influence her position as a role model of virtue had upon women. In some of the more shocking scenes she swears, rejects the church and describes her impregnation by the Holy Spirit as an act of rape. After a long, drawn out trial and much bickering between the church and the intellectuals, *Le Théâtre du Nouveau-Monde* was granted permission to perform the play. Ironically, both the religious and cultural controversies centred upon linguistic and cultural censorship and freedom of expression, all of which are central themes of the play.

In this paper I shall analyse how theatre is used as a transgressive space in these two plays to deconstruct the repressive myths, images and social norms surrounding women and illustrate the extent to which theatre was used as a tool to analyse the nature of representation. Also I will argue that theatre with its physical specificity which incorporates the body and the voice, provided Quebec women writers with a new means of expression which allowed them to break through the silence to which they were reduced by the dominant discourse and develop a new voice which was fundamental to the construction of their identity. Finally I shall consider the national context in which this theatre emerged to establish if it really was a Quebec women's theatre or rather a women's theatre in Quebec.

Both these plays, like many in the 1970s, exploit theatre as an alternative temporal and physical space. Quebec women playwrights saw the huge transgressive potential of such a parallel temporal and spatial domain to deconstruct the socio-cultural position of women in

society from a place both within, in the sense that theatrical time and place functions within social time and space, and yet also outside of society's direct control. Both these plays invert reality by creating worlds in which men are excluded from direct representation, and are portrayed only from a female perspective. In *La Nef des sorcières* each of the characters is presented in her own space. *The Writer* is sitting at her kitchen table in the dead of night, whilst the *Girl* is in front of the mirror getting ready for a night out. Exploiting the spatial dimensions of theatre, Boucher, in *Les Fées ont soif*, divides the stage into four distinct areas: a space representative of each archetype: *Marie*, the mother in a kitchen; *Madeleine*, the prostitute in a bedroom; the *Virgin Mary* or *Statue* raised on a pedestal towards the back of the stage; and a *lieu neutre*, or neutral space, a space free from patriarchal influence. All three characters who are isolated from each other move from their individual spaces to a neutral space, where they can express themselves freely, this is symbolic of their increasing feelings of solidarity and their newly discovered voices. *La Nef des sorcières* celebrates the specificity of women's space whilst *Les Fées ont soif* goes a step further by rejecting women's traditional space and demanding new and different ones. These plays, rooted in the feminist maxim 'the personal is political' launch their attack on patriarchal society from female-centred space. Although they adopt different approaches to the creation of this space, neither are advocating the creation of a parallel female world exclusive of men, rather they propose creating a space within the existing society for women. *Les Fées ont soif* ends with the characters expressing their hopes for a world where people can exist together in equal relationships with neither party rendered inferior. The intention in both plays is to transgress the spatial restrictions for women within society without creating an alternative one.

Theatre's physical and visual nature provided Quebec women writers with the medium necessary to analyse the nature of representation from within. As a stylised representation of society, theatre is able to illustrate the inadequacies of the images and myths surrounding women physically rather than merely stating it. The complex and troubled relationship women have with their socio-cultural image is illustrated effectively by the character of the Virgin Mary in *Les Fées ont soif*, who as a statue, is both a representation of, and the thing represented, indicating how little or no distinction is made between women and their image in society. The *Menopausal Woman* in her monologue in *La Nef des sorcières* supports this view, 'since the beginning of time they have fixed me to a pedestal. Since the beginning of time women have been connected with myths, symbols and images'.⁸ The *Actress*, in *La Nef des sorcières* who has a privileged relationship with representation through her career in theatre, which functions on the manipulation of image and appearance describes female identity as being nothing but the sum of various, different socio-cultural images, none of which are representative of women's specificity:

You look at my face

And you see 100 faces stuck one on top of the other

My face?

No

I give you a face-hole instead.⁹

Boucher's use of archetypes indicates a commitment to the deconstruction of these negative images of women. By portraying the characters as behaving in ways more 'appropriate' to

that of another, the *Statue* or *Virgin Mary* swears and behaves sensuously and the mother figure *Marie* covets the whore's red stiletto boots, Boucher blurs the distinctions between these stereotypes and reveals the extent to which these socio-cultural images are unrepresentative and repressive.

Theatre as a physical space incorporates the body in a way more immediate than a written text. The characters use gesture and movement transgressively in both plays to indicate their rejection of patriarchal society and also to represent their own reality. In *La Nef des sorcières* the *Actress* squats down to urinate and examines her genitals in the mirror, the girl walks around the stage naked to reinforce ironically her status as a sexual object, and the *Writer* acts out childbirth indicating the body's role in the creative process. The characters incorporate their bodies, through gesture, dance and movement. Each of these gestures intends to express the reality of women's bodies and release them from patriarchal control.

For Quebec women writers, the body is also inextricably linked with expression and identity. Theatre provided them with a space from which their corporeal rooted voices could emerge. The *Menopausal Woman* explains how only upon reaching the menopause and being freed from the constraints of the socially defined female body is she able to find her voice: 'I am leaving the world of silence, I am just beginning to learn how to speak'.¹⁰ In *Les Fées ont soif*, the *Statue* or *Virgin Mary* describes herself as being the personification of 'an oppressive silence' as she has no body.¹¹ Echoing Hélène Cixous's theories of writing with the body and the incorporation of women's different libidinal economy, which is founded upon excess with a fluid and fluctuating consciousness that is disruptive, playful and cosmic; Quebec women's theatre in the 1970s was also characterised by *jouissance*.

Boucher highlights this connection between expression and the sexual body when she stated, 'the fact that I orgasm allows me to bring these debates onto a public forum'.¹² In the *avant-propos* she outlines how women have been exiled from their sexual bodies, like their identities, and only when they gain access to and channel their libidinal desires will they find the words to express themselves. This is symbolised in *Lés Fées ont soif* by the *Statue* who is only able to express herself after releasing the snake, representative of sexual desire, upon which she has been standing. The *Statue* describes herself as speaking with her 'chatte' or *pussy*.¹³ The *Writer*, in *La Nef des sorcières*, in a more theoretical approach, describes women's bodies as being tattooed with signs and symbols. For her the body is omnipresent throughout her process of writing, as she searches for words in her pubic hair, between her toes and under her tongue.¹⁴

Since the 1970s, the theme of expression runs central to most of Quebec women's writing, especially theatre. Initially the emphasis was on expression at all cost, but the approach became more refined with writers deconstructing the nature of language and creating an alternative discourse accessible to women. Aware that the structure of the *accepted* form of communication impeded women's expression, Quebec women playwrights attempted to reveal the inadequacies of this language and system of thought. They described it as phallogentric, rooted in sameness, with a meaning which was supposed to be unified, single and true. In both plays phallic analogies illustrate this, 'his head is nothing but a garage in which he parks his precious phallus'¹⁵ and 'Bang, bang, bang in her head, words with the giant penis-hammer'.¹⁶ A plural approach to language was adopted which aimed to undermine these notions of stability, singularity and truth. Recurring, ambiguous imagery and symbolism introduced flexibility and fluidity of meaning, through the use of

word-plays, metaphors and analogies, allowing a diversity of interpretation and a multiplicity of readings.

Although flexibility of meaning is prevalent in both writing and theatre, the latter with its vocal and oral registers introduces rhythm, tone, volume and intonation, which although perceptible in written texts are not as striking. These different elements of expression were exploited in full in women's theatre to transgress the unity of patriarchal discourse and to make a space for women's voice to emerge. Litanies, chants, songs and music are all employed as forms of expression, although they are often regarded as marginal forms of expression. Some of the monologues in *La Nef des sorcières* are written in verse and with rhyme and rhythm playing a central part. In *Les Fées ont soif* the characters find it easier to express themselves through song, the seven songs reveal more about their thoughts and feelings than the monologue and occasional dialogue in the play. Mimetic animal sounds, laughter, screams, howling, pants etc. are also expressive in the plays. The transgressive potential of laughter is examined in *Les Fées ont soif* where it symbolises the rejection of society's repressive norms, 'I will no longer ever be with you, exiled from myself, look at me standing in front of you, laughing'.¹⁷

Quebec women writers used theatre as a space for transgression and expression, yet in spite of the fact that the plays reflect the cultural and linguistic specificity of Quebec, they do not create a Quebec space. Quebec literature in the years during and after the Quiet Revolution, focused on the centrality and importance of asserting national identity. Although this need to understand and to a certain extent express Quebec's socio-cultural specificity was reflected in much contemporary writing in this period, Quebec women's theatre seems less concerned with it. Although both plays have a distinct Quebec feel, in terms of their use

of language, cultural references and location, this is secondary to their location within the world of the feminine. For example the use of *joual* and other vernacular forms of language which characterised the voice emerging from this theatre, was adopted more for its representative and transgressive nature rather than as a nationalist project. Denise Boucher exemplifies this dual quest for identity and expression for Quebec women, when she explained how she writes in both French and in the feminine - the two languages she knows, yet in her play she favours the female identity quest over a national one. The space created and used by Quebec women playwrights in the 1970s was located in Quebec, yet the focus was on creating a space for women rather than for *Québécoise* or Quebec women, and to this extent it would be better described as women's theatre in Quebec rather than Quebec women's theatre.

Not a profoundly national theatre, Quebec women's theatre in the 1970s shared many of the characteristics and traits of feminist theatre throughout the world. It exploited the linguistic, corporeal, visual and vocal elements of theatre in order to question the authenticity and authority of patriarchal norms whilst also establishing the reality of their experiences. The representational specificity of theatre was the perfect genre in which to deconstruct the negative myths and images surrounding women, and provide them with the forum necessary to assert their socio-cultural identities. The additional vocal and oral features of theatre as well as the omnipresence of the body, facilitated Quebec women writers quest for a means of expression which would encompass the physical and sexual difference and yet also function, to a certain extent, within the existing discourse. The marginalised forms of communication central to theatre: gesture, movement, rhythm, tone and intonation proved valuable in their quest to express themselves in the gaps and silences

of the patriarchal discourse, as well as providing tools with which to subvert or rather broaden the focus of this repressive discourse for women. Like the witches, in the title, who were full of revolt and bursting with desire, the fairies and witches of these two plays dance rebelliously within the confines of theatrical space. Theatre provided Quebec women in the 1970s with the space they needed to transgress patriarchal limits, develop a new voice, and assert their female identities.

NOTES

¹ Xavière Gauthier, 'Why Witches?' in E. Marks & I. De Courtivron, *New French Feminisms* (Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp.199-203 (p.199).

² *La Nef des sorcières* (Montréal, L'Héxagone, 1992).

³ The ambiguity lies in the word *nef* which can be translated as either the nave of a church, which questions ecclesiastical authority and attitudes, or as a boat which makes allusion to *La Nef des fous* a legendary, medieval ship upon which suspected witches were placed.

The translation made of the play in the 1970s, *A Clash of Symbols*, which corresponds well to the themes of the play, overlooks or ignores the elements intrinsic in the French title.

⁴ Lori Saint-Martin, 'Introduction' in *La Nef des sorcières* (Montreal, L'Héxagone, 1992), p.39.

⁵ Denise Boucher, *Les Fées ont soif* (Montréal, L'Héxagone, 1989).

⁶ André Dionne, 'Autour des Fées; Le théâtre de la vie', *Lettres Québécoises* (1981), 23, p.39.

- ⁷ The word *joual* comes from the way in which horse, or *cheval*, is pronounced in Montreal working class areas. The adoption of this style of writing was an attempt at asserting Quebec's linguistic specificity, which was quite distinct from that of France.
- ⁸ 'De tous temps on m'a vissée à un piédestal. / de tous temps la femme a été liée à des mythes, / à des symboles, à des images.' *La Nef*, p.60.
- ⁹ 'Vous regardez mon visage / Vous voyez cents visages collés l'un devant l'autre / Mon visage? / Non. / Je vous donne un visage-trou.' *La Nef*, p.48.
- ¹⁰ *La Nef*, pp.51-52: 'Je sors du monde de silence. [...] On vient juste d'apprendre à parler'.
- ¹¹ *Les Fées*, p.50: 'un silence plus opprimant et oppressant que toutes les paroles [...] je suis celle qui n'a pas de corps'.
- ¹² 'Je crois que je jouis [...] ça me permet de porter le débat sur la place publique', Boucher at a press conference on 7th June 1978 ; Lise Gauvin, 'Introduction' in *Les Fées*, p.22.
- ¹³ *Les Fées*, p.97. The use of this slang, vulgar term for women's genitals can also be interpreted as an attempt at incorporating women's bodies in a positive way into a discourse which has previously denigrated them.
- ¹⁴ *La Nef*, p.129.
- ¹⁵ *Les Fées*, p.71: 'Sa tête, c'est rien qu'un garage où il entrepose son précieux phal-lus'.
- ¹⁶ *La Nef*, p.46: 'Bam, bam, bam dans la tête, les mots. Avec le grand marteau pénis'.
- ¹⁷ *Les Fées*, p.100: 'Je ne serai plus jamais nulle part en toi en exil de moi / me voici debout devant toi / riant au milieu de moi.'