

Feminism and Its Discontents: Reviewing *CTR*'s Inaugural Issues

Susan Bennett

Jessica Riley's engagement with the first issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* (*CTR*) in her article "Chauvinism and Its Discontents: Canadian Theatre Review 1 Revisited" (this issue) underscores the always-important task of revisiting our critical pasts. This is precisely the labour that Shannon Jackson proposed through a focus on the "'institutional genealogies' of knowledge formation" (5)—a commitment to examining what "kinds of judgements are made and what kinds of enabling illuminations and disabling blindspots they produce" (4). As the ur-production of a journal that the University of Toronto Press now describes as "[t]he major magazine of record for Canadian theatre," *CTR*1 provides us with fundamental evidence of how, in 1974, knowledge formation came about.

Riley, looking at the issue some fifty years later, rightly observes a closed, white, masculinist world seemingly untroubled by a rapidly shifting cultural landscape. Yet the health and vitality of theatre and performance studies broadly and *CTR* specifically depends, and has depended, on what Alan Filewod, in 2009, usefully described as moves made "generationally through (often stressful, more often exciting) debates over questions of research methods, theoretical models, institutionalization, and academic power" (vii). When we examine those moves—unveiling, then, our institutional genealogies—we inevitably confront, as Jackson suggests we must, both the "enabling illuminations and disabling blindspots" in Canadian theatre history.

The exclusively male purview of *CTR*'s inaugural issue exposes, as Riley correctly identifies, "whiteness and masculinity" (29) as organizing principles through which Canadian theatre would be archived, understood, and

endorsed. Editorial selection of writing by men about men implies an absence of women involved in Canadian theatre of the 1970s, even though there was already a generation of women playwrights whose work had been staged across the country (among them, Carol Bolt, Margaret Hollingsworth, Sharon Pollock, Aviva Ravel, and Beverly Simons) and new feminist theatres in major cities (Winnipeg's Nellie McClung Theatre in 1968, Montreal's Théâtre des Cuisines in 1973, and Toronto's Redlight Theatre in 1974).¹ *CTR* comes into being, then, with a striking and "disenabling blindspot."

Indeed, *CTR* proves slow to include women's voices at all. Volume 2 (Spring 1974) has Mary Kerr's contribution, "A Designer's Portfolio," and a report from New York by Jennifer Merin in the Carte Blanche section (an issue regular that aggregates book and performance reviews along with short, occasional pieces on theatre topics). The inaugural issue's six reports on the theatre scene from Canadian cities are all authored by men. Volume 3 (Summer 1974) has only a report from Berlin by Merin and in volume 4 (Winter 1974), there are two reports (Merin again from New York and Ann Henry from Winnipeg). Volume 5 (Winter 1975) is dedicated to Canadian theatre before the 1960s and introduces the first writing about a woman playwright, Anton Wagner's "Gwen Pharis Ringwood Rediscovered," and the first script by a woman, Ringwood's 1939 play *Dark Harvest: A Tragedy of the Canadian Prairie*. This issue also boasts three women writers in Carte Blanche: Merin from Iran, Geraldine Anthony on the Neptune Theatre and Catherine Itzin (a co-founder and co-editor of the UK's *Theatre Quarterly*) on national theatre and nation. A "casebook" on Beverly Simons (volume 9, Winter 1976) is the first to focus on a woman, although Simons's work is illuminated by five male authors. Her script *Leela Means to Play* is supplemented with an author interview conducted by director John Parker. The scope and tone of *CTR*'s attention to Simons creates a sense of singular exceptionalism achieved by a female playwright, effectively affirming the standard: theatre (studies) populated by men.

Through *CTR*'s first three years of publication (twelve issues), of approximately sixty-six feature pieces with an author byline, 11 per cent were written by women; of approximately 200 contributions with an author byline

¹ In the online Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia, Gaetan Charlebois provides a thumbnail history of feminist theatre.

(essays, reviews, Carte Blanche), 16 per cent were written by women. Jennifer Merin was by far the most published woman author, regularly posting reports of theatre activity internationally in Carte Blanche.² Thus, *CTR*, as these data show, performed as a mirror to gender inequities across Canadian theatre rather than as the stage for generational debates concerned with the full range of contemporary Canadian work. It took the federal government's commission on The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre to address such issues and Rina Fraticelli's unpublished 1982 report, a survey of 104 Canadian theatres between 1978 and 1981, produced results for women that closely resemble the data above: playwrights, 10 per cent; artistic directors, 11 per cent; and directors, 13 per cent.

In his introduction to *CTR* 43 (Summer 1985), editor Robert Wallace wrote: "The genesis of this issue was my discovery last year that Rina Fraticelli's invaluable report ... had never been published. When I proposed to her that *CTR* published parts of this report, she suggested that, at this late date, it would be more constructive to address the current status of women in Canadian theatre" (4).³ "Feminism & Canadian Theatre" collects seventeen women-authored contributions along with Banuta Rubess's script of The Anna Project's collective creation, *This Is for You, Anna: A Spectacle of Revenge*. If this issue was an occasion to illuminate and celebrate women's voices, it did nothing to address a tenacious neglect of matters of race. It is only in the next decade of *CTR* that issue topics begin to redress historical omissions and absences: Theatre and Ethnicity (volume 56, Fall 1988), Native Theatre (volume 68, Fall 1991), Arctic Theatre Makers (volume 73, Winter 1992), and Black Theatre in Canada/African Canadian Theatre (volume 83, Summer 1995).

In the last paragraph of her essay, Jessica Riley writes: "My hope for *CTR*, and for all theatre institutions we inherit, is that we continue to change, in the present and in the future, even, indeed especially, when that change it is not easy; and that we experience growth that flourishes in all directions" (40).

² It was fitting to discover that Merin was a founder in 2006 of the Alliance of Women Film Journalists, whose "purpose is to amplify the voices of women critics, provide a platform for the expression of women's perspectives on film and support work by and about women—both in front of and behind the cameras." She is the Alliance's current president.

³ I discuss Fraticelli's report and Wallace's issue in my introduction to *Feminist Theatre and Performance* (see esp. viii–ix).

This is a project that insists on relentless examination of the processes of knowledge formation. It requires from us a generosity of spirit in our commitment to work toward more expansive and inclusive futures as well as to provide a more thorough audit of the *CTR* archive undertaken with a willingness to recognize the imperative of change.

References

- Alliance of Women Film Journalists. "About." Alliance of Women Film Journalists, n.d., awfj.org/about-2/. Accessed 24 Feb. 2026.
- Anthony, Geraldine. "Neptune's New Messiah?" *CTR* 5 (Winter 1975): 143–44.
- Bennett, Susan. *Feminist Theatre and Performance*. Playwrights Canada Press, 2006.
- Charlebois, Gaetan. "Feminist Theatre." *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*, last updated 2 Dec. 2020, www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Feminist%20Theatre. Accessed 28 Mar. 2026.
- Filewod, Alan. "Introduction: The Histories of Theatre History." *Theatre Histories*, edited by Alan Filewod, Playwrights Canada Press, 2009, pp. vii–xii.
- Fratlicelli, Rina. "The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre." Unpublished report prepared for Status of Women Canada, 1982.
- Henry, Ann. "Winnipeg." *CTR* 4 (Fall 1974): 138–42.
- Itzin, Catherine. "The National and the Nation." *CTR* 5 (Winter 1975): 152–54.
- Jackson, Shannon. *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*. Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Kerr, Mary. "A Designer's Portfolio." *CTR* 2 (Spring 1974): 34–39.
- Merin, Jennifer. "Berlin." *CTR* 3 (Summer 1974): 126–28.
- . "Cultural Reclamation in Iran." *CTR* 5 (Winter 1975): 149–51.
- . "New York." *CTR* 2 (Spring 1974): 131–35.
- . "New York." *CTR* 4 (Fall 1974): 144–46.
- Ringwood, Gwen Pharis. "Dark Harvest." *CTR* 5 (Winter 1975): 70–128.
- Simons, Beverly. "Towards Leela." *CTR* 9 (Winter 1976): 21–27.
- "*This Is for You, Anna*." *CTR* 43 (Summer 1985): 127–166.
- University of Toronto Press. "Canadian Theatre Review." University of Toronto Press, n.d., utppublishing.com/journal/ctr. Accessed 24 February 2026.
- Wagner, Anton. "Gwen Pharis Ringwood Rediscovered." *CTR* 5 (Winter 1975): 63–69.
- Wallace, Robert. "Feminism and Canadian Theatre." *CTR* 43 (Summer 1985): 4.