

WILLFUL ACTS

Margaret Hollingsworth. Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1985.

DOC

Sharon Pollock. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1984.

THE FIGHTING DAYS

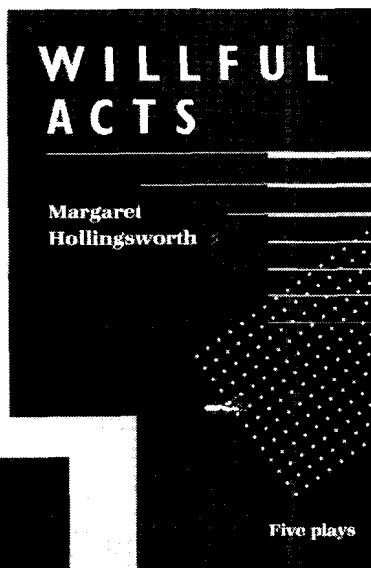
Wendy Lill. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1985.

WHITE BITING DOG

Judith Thompson. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1984.

By Ann M. Hutchison

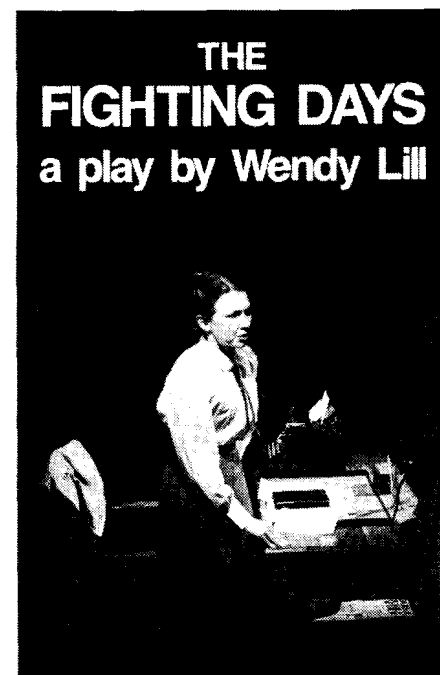
"A woman who writes plays is considered eccentric. She doesn't even have the support of writers in other genres who, in this country at least, don't seem to consider drama as a form of writing, and exclude her from anthologies, surveys, and conferences on women's writing." Since Margaret Hollingsworth (herself a short story writer and one-time journalist) wrote these words in the *Canadian Theatre Review* (Summer 1985), the situation has been improving; women playwrights are being taken seriously. The past year's winner of the Governor General's Award, for example, was once again Sharon Pollock, this time for her play *Doc*. Anne



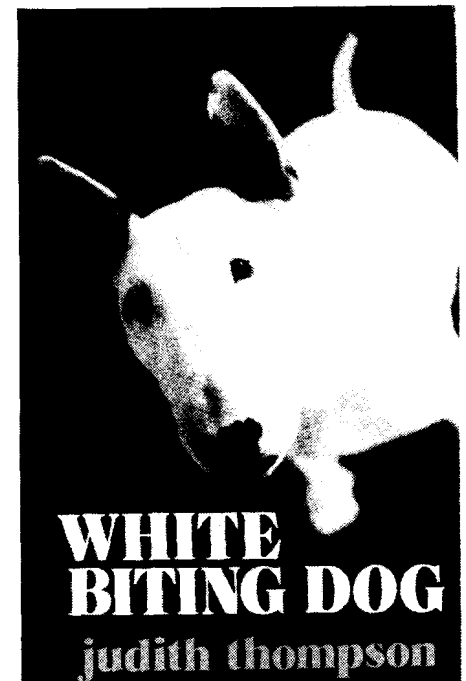
Chislett's *Another Season's Promise*, which opened at the Blyth Festival in 1986, was back there again this summer and is now on tour, and Joan MacLeod's new play, *Toronto, Mississippi*, opened the 1987-88 season at Toronto's Tarragon

Theatre. Moreover, plays are now becoming available as published texts. The Playwrights Union of Canada, through its annual publications of members' works, has helped to bring plays by both men and women before a wider audience, and recently the Union has begun to keep a computer file of all new scripts by its members. In addition, Talonbooks of Vancouver has been publishing plays for some time, and Toronto's Coach House Press usually produces a collection each year.

One such collection is *Willful Acts*, five plays by Margaret Hollingsworth: *The Apple in the Eye*, *Ever Loving*, *Diving, Islands* and *War Babies*. These



plays deal with women and their relationships: with other women, including mothers (*Diving, Islands*), with husbands or other men (*The Apple in the Eye*, *Ever Loving*, *War Babies*), and with the environment, social, political and natural. To show the inner life of her protagonists, Hollingsworth experiments by manipulating time, place and action in her plays. Gemma in *The Apple in the Eye* creates her own scenarios in the "arcane half" of "the apple of her mind" in counterpoint to the outside stimulus provided by the actual words of her husband Martin, or by her memory of them. In *War Babies*, Esme also creates scenes, but she does this in the guise of a playwright through the medium of a typewriter. *Diving*, in a deft blend, juxtaposes the inner world of Viveca with the events of her outer life, thus mingling her perceptions of male instruction with memories of a dominating mother. In *Islands*, a sequel to *Alli Alli Oh* (not included in this volume), Hollingsworth uses external objects, such as a partially assembled drawing table that falls apart when no one is holding it, or unfinished blueprints, as metaphors indicating Muriel's state of being. The force of these images, in fact, undercuts Muriel's own assurances that, having discovered that "Relationships don't make sense any more," she feels "centred for the first time in years." Thus, at the end



of the play, when her mother, Rose, and her former lover, Alli, leave Muriel alone in the unfinished house to pursue her work, one feels uneasy. Perhaps *Islands* too should have a sequel.

Ever Loving, a full-length play and the earliest in the collection (first performed in Victoria in 1980), deals with the attempts of three war brides — Ruth from Scotland, Diana from England and Luce from Italy — to adjust to a new environment and to the men they have married. "Feeling out of context, out of place, motivates me and informs my work... it's something I have to constantly keep exploring,"¹ Hollingsworth has remarked in discussing her plays. This play not only deals with the displacement of the women, but also touches on the problems of their husbands who, no longer war heroes, have trouble themselves adjusting to civilian life, and its responsibilities, which are often incompatible with marriage. The play follows the couples over a period of 32 years and ends in a musical resolution that is, for the reader at least, not entirely convincing.

War Babies, the most recent of the five plays (first performed in Victoria in 1984), deals on a variety of levels with relationships and war. As the play opens, Esme and Colin are engaged in an elaborate competition, and we are somewhat non-plussed to discover that its purpose is to see who can knit the most perfect scarf for their expected infant. Esme's efforts to exchange this relationship for a more natural one are continually foiled by Colin, a correspondent who thrives on war and competition:

Esme: — can't we can the war games?

Colin: What?

Esme: Can't we make out without playing games? I mean — we're grown up mummies and daddies now. When the kid comes —

Colin: We'll roast him and feed him to the poor. You can write about it.

Esme, picking up on this suggestion, begins what she vaguely sees is to be "some kind of a journey" via her type-writer. Her play, presented as a play within a play, develops in scenes which alternate with the play's present action. By the end of the play — the most intricate and well balanced in the volume — Esme has become reconciled to her past and to the son she has abandoned, and Colin has discovered that the blood and excitement of new birth more than compensate for war; he is at last ready to seek time "to enjoy the peace," or as he restates it more realistically, the "ceasefire."

Though Hollingsworth's plays, as many critics have remarked, cry out to be acted, her ability to portray and develop

character, and above all her skill with words, give them value on a purely literary level as well.

In *Blood Relations*, the play for which she won her first Governor General's Award (1981), Sharon Pollock used the play-within-a-play technique to reenact and explore retrospectively the events of Lizzie Borden's life that led to the charge of murder of her father and step-mother. In *Doc* (first produced in Calgary, 1984), Pollock also explores character through the past, but in this play she focuses on a fictional family and presents the past through the consciousness of Ev, a former workaholic doctor who now at age 73 lives alone in the family house, and Catherine, his daughter, a writer in her mid-30s who has returned home for the first time in years. As the family portrait, which includes Catherine as a young girl, a mother who through neglect and lack of personal fulfillment has become an alcoholic, and Oscar, a long-time friend (and competitor) of Ev's, becomes more clearly realized, the implications of the similarities between father and daughter become more and more chilling. Ev, who has all his life traded family for his patients, is about to be honoured in the sod-turning ceremony of a hospital which will bear his name. Though his career is being rewarded, Ev finds the achievement hollow, for he fears there will be no family there to witness his honour. Even worse for Ev, a man who has held the hands and saved the lives of countless patients, there has been no family member to hold his own hand when recently he himself was near death. This pattern, we discover, is about to be repeated by Catherine. Concerned to have more time to work, she is on the point of "calling it quits with whosits," as she refers to her companion, parodying her father's inability to remember the man's name — and at the same time suggesting the insignificance of such a relationship to her as well. Unlike Pollock's other plays in which social or political circumstances play a crucial part, *Doc* is an intensely personal play which depends mainly on the character traits of its protagonists and the choices they make.

The Fighting Days is the second play by Wendy Lill, originally from Winnipeg and now based in Nova Scotia. Influenced by the work of feminist historians, Lill uses history to approach feminism for her work in film (a mini-series for the NFB on the Métis called "Daughters of the Country") and stage. A recent strike in the Winnipeg garment industry was the starting point for her first play, *On the Line*, which dealt with the ethnic and work

problems of Winnipeg women garment workers seeking solidarity in their struggle for fair wages. In *The Fighting Days*, Lill turns back to Manitoba in the suffragist era and focuses on the early career of Francis Marion Beynon, who at 18 was just beginning her work as journalist, feminist and social reformer in Winnipeg. All goes well as long as the "fight" concerns democratic rights for women, but when World War I intervenes, there is more at stake — views change, and even Nellie McClung, formerly the moving spirit of the suffragettes, finds it necessary to compromise her views on democracy for women and women for peace. Finally, unable to accept compromise and unwilling to give up her ideals for democratic rights for all women and for peace, Francis sacrifices her career as a journalist and her potential personal happiness. In her last editorial, Francis expresses the hope that in the future "it will come to be recognized that there is no crime in being different, in doing one's own thinking." Though less exciting dramatically than some of the plays discussed here, *The Fighting Days* raises important issues and introduces a previously little-known feminist role model.

White Biting Dog, winner of the 1984 Governor General's Award for drama, is the second play of Judith Thompson. Perhaps the least naturalistic of the plays under consideration, *White Biting Dog* concerns the fantasies, dreams, perceptions and social interaction of a family composed of father, mother and son, all of whom are in some way "disturbed." Two outsiders are drawn into the family circle. The first is Pony, who through a song about her dog Queenie becomes associated in Cape's mind with the voice of a white dog who "saved" him from jumping over the Bloor Street bridge by pointing out that he hadn't done his "mission" of saving his father from death. Pony, who, as it happens, is a psychic, leads Cape to the discovery that the return of his mother is the only way to save his father. When almost immediately after this revelation the door bell rings, Cape is shocked to find his mother and her lover, Pascal (the second outsider), who at 4 in the morning have been forced by a fire to leave their home. The father, awakened by these events, takes charge by assuming the role of host. The contrast between the stereotypical social behaviour and the bizarre circumstances, words, and feelings of the participants, becomes more and more marked as the play unfolds. Thompson's forte is in being able to give verbal expression to individual experiences of the para-

normal. Her characters are viable, and even — to some extent — sympathetic.

Fortunately, through the efforts of small theatres across the country, more Canadian plays are being performed — Wendy Lill and Judith Thompson both have new plays at the Tarragon this sea-

son — and fortunately too more scripts are being published and preserved. As in other areas of Canadian literature, some of the most interesting and innovative drama is being written and produced by women. Women playwrights in Canada are at last, *pace* Hollingsworth, becoming

a serious literary voice.

¹ Interview in *The Work: Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights*, eds. Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1982), p. 93.

A MAZING SPACE: Writing Canadian Women Writing

Edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli. Edmonton: Longspoon/Newest, 1987.

Julie Beddoes

The thirty-eight articles (plus editor's preface) in this great big book (427 large pages) are a long-overdue acknowledgment of the work in feminist literary criticism and theory that has been done in Canada for the past several years. As well, they are a good survey of the sorts of criticism going on in Canadian literature in general. That a book can be both at once is welcome evidence of the extent to which women writers and their work are becoming central to the Canadian canons, both of "primary" and critical texts. The contributors form almost a checklist of who are the critics to watch these days (with some important omissions of course) and it is heartening to see that so many of them are women and also that male readers are interested in women's texts.

In their introduction, Neuman and Kamboureli say that their collection, *reflects the eagerness of many Canadian writers and critics to re-read our literary tradition in the context of insights from feminist criticism and to bring recent theoretical formulations to bear on the question of women's place in our culture and our writing... In order to draw attention to the range of women's writing beyond that most commonly discussed in academic journals... we asked contributors to extend their discussion beyond Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence... Their texts are not those of the literary histories with their binary model of center and margin... Out of the margin they have made many centers... this does not mean that these critics speak with a unified voice: their methodologies range from thematics to deconstruction...*

The editors should be congratulated on their breadth of mind in including articles which, in their diversity, survey the possi-

bilities open to feminist literary criticism, that is to criticism as a whole. The book begins with Sarah Murphy's generically unclassifiable "Putting the Great Mother together again or how the cunt lost its tongue," which might have appeared in a collection of fiction, followed by two more conventional essays discussing works which thematize female physicality. There are articles on drama, poetry, fiction, covering all possible periods and some possible origins, including Anglophone, Québécois and native women's work. There are contributions which, in my opinion, exemplify what is most valuable in the feminist literary project — and some which exemplify what I find most dismaying in criticism as a whole and which is by no means justified on the grounds that the authors and critics involved are women.

This is not a fair review. Only an essay-by-essay discussion could be fair to a book too long and diverse for summary. Here I can only talk about the contributions which reinforced or confronted my own critical concerns, with apologies to the many contributors whose work is not mentioned, and exhortations to readers to buy the book.

As the editors' preface implies, the obstacles which have been put in the way of women as professional writers have had the doubly marginalizing effect of keeping their work from view not only because of the gender of its authors but because they were obliged to write in such "nonprofessional" genres as diaries, letters and autobiographies. Criticism which brings to notice unjustly neglected writers in the conventional genres, and which insists on paying attention to the nonconventional ones, is almost by definition going to spend most of its time considering texts by women. My favorite group of articles in this book contains Marni Stanley's "Travelers' Tales; showing and telling, slamming and questing;" Bina Friewald's "'Feminely Speaking': Anna Jameson's Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada;" Heather Murray's "Women in the Wilderness." All three (as do many others in this large collection) pay attention to neglected writing in a way that makes clear the loss involved in such

neglect. They, and other contributors, notably E.D. Blodgett, Linda Hutcheon, Janet Paterson and Fred Wah, also incorporate their theoretical underpinnings gracefully: these critics' knowledge of "recent theoretical formulations" has enriched the way they read and discuss texts and makes their discussion more valuable to other readers.

But can feminist literary criticism have any project of its own beyond the reformation of the canon? There is certainly consciousness-raising usefulness in thematic analysis from a feminist perspective but I would argue that it belongs under the heading "social science," not literary criticism — in spite of the damage done to the social sciences' claims of methodological rigour. But this kind of reading also refuses to see language as being capable of more than describing situations that exist independently of it. If there is a radical difference between thematic and deconstructive criticism, as Neuman and Kamboureli suggest, and if one espouses "recent theoretical formulations," how can one then continue to write, read and justify the old kind of "images of women" criticism that still slips by, even when introduced with an epigraph from Luce Irigaray and with quotes from Roland Barthes in the first paragraph? Personally, I prefer articles which launch straight into paraphrase without the trendy intro. *A Mazing Grace* has articles of both kinds and I will leave further identification of them to other readers.

In spite of the editors' claim that they told potential contributors of a "preference for essays that addressed questions of language in women's writing," very few articles claim that there is a "women's language." I have never been persuaded to believe that such a language exists, although the French writer Luce Irigaray claimed in a recent interview in *Border/Line* that she would shortly produce some. The amazing thing to me is that, given the immense difference in the experiences of those reared as women and those reared as men, gender-specific differences are not as obvious as those relating to class. This might be evidence of the