

The Stage as a Documentary Arena: Dramatizing the Psychological Murder Mystery
in Sharon Pollack's *Blood Relations*

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Abstract:

Sharon Pollock managed to incorporate elements of elementary theatre in her play *Blood Relations*. She did that by merging real historical events with an artistic theatrical storytelling as well as structure narrative techniques and character's dialogues and interactions. By doing so, Pollock succeeded to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction to enhance the audience's involvement and comprehension the truth surrounding Lizzie Borden's murder. Pollock used real documents, newspaper clippings, and courtroom recordings and real witnesses in a documentary style. This innovative style enabled Pollock to bring Lizzie's case back to life.

Keywords: Documentary Theatre, Sharon Pollock, Blood Relations.

المسرح كساحة وثائقية:

تجسيد الغموض النفسي الجنائي في مسرحية علاقات الدم لشارون بولاك

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الملخص:

تمكنت شارون بولاك من دمج عناصر المسرح الابتدائي في مسرحيتها علاقات الدم. فعلت ذلك من خلال دمج الاحداث التاريخية الحقيقية مع السرد المسرحي الفني بالاضافة الى تقنيات السرد الهيكلي وحوارات الشخصيات وتفاعلاتها. ومن خلال القيام بذلك، نجحت بولاك في طمس الحدود بين الواقع والخيال لتعزيز مشاركة الجمهور وفهم الحقيقة المحيطة بمقتل ليزي بوردن. استخدمت بولاك وثائق حقيقية ومقتطفات من الصحف وتسجيلات قاعة المحكمة وشهود حقيقيين بأسلوب وثائقي. مكن هذا الاسلوب بولاك من اعادة قضية ليزي الى الحياة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : المسرح الوثائقي، شارون بولاك، علاقات الدم.

To reveal the hidden truth behind existent facts, playwrights used forms of Documentary Theatre. It offers an unblemished view of what has really happened by giving the audience a closer look to their lives, and not to distract themselves in order to have a better understanding of how this life can be affected. Martin C. explains that documentary theatre denotes "a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history_ the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscapes of their lives".(2015, 9)

Documentary theatre is written using transcripts, police archives, visual images and videos, recorded interviews and reports, as well as newspapers. David Weiss defines documentary theatre as

A theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films and other contemporary documents are the basis of the performance. (1971, 41)

It is a fact-based performance that deals with social and political issues. It emerges to evoke certain political or social and personal issues to make the audience think and ask questions. The theatre in this case does not offer solutions rather underline the reasons behind the problems. (Hammond, 2008, 5)

The term Documentary theatre can be defined as:

a play or film in which not only did all the events occur in reality, but also almost everything spoken in documentary as well- the exact words coming either from tape-recorded and transcribed interviews or from written sources such as letters, report, council minutes, newspapers, official records or school logs. With minimal alterations and very few additions, the words from the sources or a variety of sources are knitted together rather like a patchwork, to form a drama. (Davis, 2016, 202)

The playwright transfers the information as it is. In his *The Investigation*, Peter Weiss explains this method of writing dealing with the Nazi regime Crimes in Germany. He himself was an observer of the trials that he used to compose the play depending on the court sessions and the questioning of the charged soldiers. (Megson, (2009, 5) To him, documentary drama gives the writer the freedom to reflect what is banned in an honest way. It is a "category of staged performance in which the actual words of real people are edited into a script and performed on staged by actors" (Long, 2015, 305)

Documentary theatre went through many developments and is known as "Documentary Theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theater, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre. ", (Martin, 2013, 5) and they are all used as a vehicle to reflect the truth as it is to the audience. Though they differ, yet they are based on facts. William Stott states that" this is how documentary- [of all kinds] works. It defines comment; it imposes meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak...." (Stott, 1986, 26).

In her version of documentary theatre, Sharon Pollock (1939-2021), a Canadian playwright, who is known as Canada's finest dramatist, (Pearse, 2019, 2), tried to reflect this change in society through her plays of social awareness. In her literary works Pollock uses the documentary approach as a tool to reveal social dilemmas and employs the documentary mode as a means of exploring social issues to reevaluate them. (Stringer, 1996, 538) Pollock worked as a teacher, actor, director, playwright, theatre creator. She wrote and published plays and received many awards. Most of her works pinpoint political and social concerns designating social

injustice, moral choice, and reassessment of several happenings in the past. She criticizes political and social issues by reexamining events that took place in the past. She uses the theatre as a tool of moral inquiry in order to present a set of values to achieve a better world. (Salter, 2008, xi)

Pollock remarks that she does not mean to write a biography or documentary: "I think of biography as an aspect of my research, a means to some other end in which the life and times provides bits or chunks of raw material" (Pollock, 2006, 297). Her plays do not propose any final answers, yet they present the reasons and the circumstances that led to these answers giving a chance for the audience to educate itself and raise their self-awareness about their political, social and personal issues.

In most of her plays, a crime or a bad action is done and one of the characters would later try to comprehend, explain or even accept his/her past. Who did the action and why is not what Pollock is trying to prove rather exploring the political, social and domestic viciousness that led to this action. Her work in general is concerned with personal subjugation and political issues rather than women issues. (Gale, 2002, 12)

Coates in her *Sharon Pollock: First Woman of Canadian Theatre* explains that Documentary theatre allows Pollock to "use the documentary material as a springboard from which to explore the larger political and cultural dilemmas, while still remaining tethered to the actual events around which the play is written". (2015, 150)

In her *Blood Relations* Pollock moved her concern from the public matters to a more private and personal, family issues. Her concern here is to make the audience concentrate on the political, social, domestic and moral matters. The play entirely includes matters of personal conflicts. (Bessai, 1986, 127) In this play, Pollock

develops her employment of characterization. She presents Lezzie Borden's character in three reflections: Miss Lizzie, the Actress and the maid, Bridget. Within the end of the play the audience is left with a question: Did Lizzie really killed her parents? Didn't she have any other choice? The audience should even go deeper to choose between the real Lizzie of the local bias or the one who was sentenced of not being guilty. Pollock leaves a universal question here: are we proficient of murder if given the right circumstances? (Wallace, 1982, 123) meaning under political, social and domestic pressure one may reach a breaking point leading him to his self-awareness.

Blood relations is a two acts play in the form of a play within a play, based on a true story. Though set in 1902, most of the events take place in 1892. In the frame of memory plays, Pollock presents the events through the Actress, Miss Lizzie and the maid, Bridget, to relive Lizzie Borden's past. In the play Lizzie suggest that they play a game in which Lizzie would cover the role of Bridget, the maid, and The Actress would play the role of Lizzie. The relationship between Lizzie and her father and stepmother was fraught with problems. Because of their stepmother and her brother, Harry's greed for money, Lizzie could not stand the idea of being deprived of her inheritance because of them. They, in return tried their best to get rid of her by persuading her father, Mr. Borden, to make her marry anyone who asks for her hand. The events culminate moving to the court scene in which the Defense asks Lizzie about the crime at that day. She says that she was out and when she returned she found her father and her stepmother killed. In a flash back mode, the events shifts back to the day of the murder, the day that her father was supposed to go to town to sign the farm's selling papers. She had a conversation with her stepmother about how her father killed her pigeons with an axe then heading after her upstairs to kill her. Later her father arrives and she also had a conversation with him about how much she loves him and after encouraging him to sleep, she kills him with the same axe.

The play ends with the Actress accusing Lizzie for committing the murder yet Lizzie gestures her finger towards The Actress and the audience. The citizens of Massachusetts and the whole nation in general were stunned by the crime and were into the reports and trials of the crime. Lizzie was acquitted and the crime was not solved.

Even though Lizzie was acquitted, questions about the case still captivate the writers ever since and in the frame of documentary theatre specifically of historical events, playwright rely on special archived material such as "interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, and the like." (Martin, 2010, 18) Pollock makes sure that the form of her works parallels the content so as to make the audience attentive to gather the fragments of the work and to make them realize the importance of the recorded material to see the truth. She blends the document with her invented characters and makes them do and say things that had really happened. In *Blood Relations*, Pollock explores political, social, domestic dilemmas. In a jigsaw puzzle, Pollock explores the relationship of the individual with the community and the family.

Lizzie Borden was accused for the double axe-murder of her father and step mother. Later on, an investigation and trials were held covered by the media. For fourteen days, Lizzie was tried and imprisoned until her attorneys managed to acquit her for the circumstantiality of the evidence. Rejected by the community, she lived with her sister, Emma, in Fall River. In 1927, she died because of lung infection leaving the question of whether she did it or not unsolved. In Pollok's *Blood Relation*, the playwright retells the stories in a ten years scope of time after the endeavors of the real murder. Lizzie with her friend, The Actress renovates some of the events during and after the murder. In the style of a play within a play, "the actor

of the outer drama from an integral part of the inner play. Lizzie... stage[s] and perform[s] the drama of [her] own existence" as Andre Loisele puts it. (1992, 97)

The play opens with a reunion between Lizzie and The Actress. She tried to remind her of the murder telling her that while she was on her way, she heard few young boys singing:

Lizzie Borden took an axe,
Gave her mother thirty whacks.
When the job was nicely done,
She gave her father forty-one. (Pollock, 2002, 8)

Lizzie tries to neglect any question that concerns the murder by changing the subject. Pollock tries to add more strength to the scenes by making the actors adopt some real evidences like police reports in order to probe Lizzie and take some information from her. The actress asks Lizzie "...Do you think your jawline's heavy?" (BR, 10), "the reports of the day said you were definitely jowly." (BR, 10) Pollock means, depending on the real reports of the trial. The Actress tries to provoke Lizzie and put her under a pressure of questions. She protests that Lizzie is not telling her what really happened after failing to answer the unceasing question "Did-you-Lizzie—Lizzie-did-you.?" Lizzie resents the situation explaining that after ten years people still ask this question whether she did it or not, even her sister Emma. Pollock in her play raises so many questions without answering them.(Gale, 2002, 37) The actress managed to convince Lizzie that if she tells the truth about what happened that day, they will "dine out on.". Lizzie agreed and suggested that they play out the events of that day; The Actress would play the role of Miss Lizzie and Lizzie would play the role of the family's maid, Bridget.

Pollock reflects the inner conflict of Lizzie or as Bessai expresses it that the play "subsumes its issues entirely within personal character conflicts" (1986, 127).

She chains her drama with features of the documentary genre in order to add a sense of uniqueness and to conflate life with imagination. Lizzie would mirror the happenings of the crime but from Bridget perspective. The play would be set as a jigsaw game, in which the actors would play several roles. The historical events would also shift to the day of trial while the defense was questioning Lizzie about ten years earlier. Documents, official meetings and substations, newspapers and other features Pollock used to provide more gradation and complication to the play so as to give the audience a chance to partake.

To renovate the past, real historical documents knitted into the dialogue and events of the play such as newspaper clippings, articles, records, transcripts and actual letters as well as to enhance the play's originality and support its general documentary vibe. (Bessai, 1980, 12) In addition, Pollock blurs the line between reality and fiction even more by alluding to actual incidents and figures such as the trial itself and the Borden family. In Act One, Lizzie reads from newspaper clippings about the murders.

She speaks:

Since what I am about to say must be but that
Which contradicts my accusation, and
The testimony on my part no other
But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
To say "Not Guilty."..."

*She wiggles the fingers of an outstretched hand searching for the word.
"Aaaat"... Bollocks!! (BR, 5)*

The audience is immersed in the historical events to contribute to the overall documentary scope of the play. This realistic style doesn't merely imitate life's tragedies, yet it reevaluates and redefines it so as to comprehend life as it is. (Ghazi, 496) The use of clippings offers a sight to the media surrounding the events adding more realistic touch to the text. In in the same Act, Lizzie recalls a dialogue based on

a real conversation with her sister Emma revealing some of their family's underlying forces shedding lights on the events leading to the murders.

Emma: if mother heard you, you know what she'd say.

Lizzie: she's not my mother or yours.

Emma: well she married our father twenty-seven years ago, if that doesn't make her our mother_

Lizzie: it doesn't. (BR, 19)

They both continue to argue until Lizzie comments on the visit of her step mother's brother, Harry. She says:

... **Lizzie:** Did you know Harry Wingate's back for a visit?...he must have snuck in late last night so I wouldn't hear him....

Lizzie: that's not the point. You know what happened last time he was here. Papa was signing property over to her....

Lizzie: ... it's bad enough Papa's worth thousands of dollars, and here we are, stuck in this tiny bit of a house on second street, when we should be up on the hill and that's her doing. Or her's and Harry's. (BR, 21)

Here Emma tried to silence her sister but Lizzie was furious enough to predict the family's future in case her father will continue to neglect the them and listens to his second wife. She says:

Lizzie: and neither will her if he keeps signing things over to her.

... **Lizzie:** Not a threat, a simple statement of fact. Someday Papa will die_

Emma: don't say that.

Lizzie: someday Papa will die. And I don't intend to spend the rest of my life licking Harry's Wingate's boots, or toadying to his sister. (BR, 21)

Sharon brought Lizzie Borden's case back to life also by making the characters use a documentary style kind of speech, for instance they use direct addresses, monologues and interviews to enable the audience to grasp various perceptions

concerning the events and the characters involved which in its part adds depth and complexity to the play in general. As in Act one, when Lizzie started to remake the events of the true trial saying:

Let me think... Bridget... Bridget. We had a maid then. And her name was Bridget. Oh, she was a great one for stories, stood like this, very straight back, and her hair... and there she was in the courtroom in her new dress on the stand. "DO you swear to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Imitates Irish accent.

"I do sir," she said.

"Would you give the court your name."

Bridget O'Sulliivan, sir."

Very faint echo of the voice of the Defense under Miss Lizzie's next line.

"And occupation."

"I'm like what you'd call a maid, sir. I do a bit of everything, cleanin' and cookin."

The actual voice of the Defense is heard alone; he may also be seen. (BR, 13-14)

The discussion continues between Lizzie and the Defense based on the real historical context in which the trial was held, discussing the details of the Borden's murder. Another conversation between Lizzie and her friend, Dr. Patrick, revolves around some evidences and speculations about what might have happened at the night of murder, adding more realistic touch to the events.

Dr. Patrick: what I do is try to save lives.

Lizzie: but you put poison out for the slugs in your garden.

Dr. Patrick: you got something mixed up.

Lizzie: I've never been clearer. ... if war were declared, would you serve?

Dr. Patrick: I would fight in a war.

Lizzie: you wouldn't fight, you would kill_ you'd take a gun and shoot people, people who'd done nothing to you, people who were trying to be good, you'd kill them! And you say you wouldn't kill Attila the Hun, or that the stupid cow's life is precious_ *My life is precious!!*

Dr. Patrick: to you.

Lizzie: yes to me, are you stupid?

Dr. Patrick: and hers is to her. (BR, 63)

In addition to the manuscripts and newspaper clippings along with dialogues, Pollock incorporate other documentary elements in this play, when the events shift into the courtroom where the trial takes place and Lizzie being questioned by an investigator. The conversations held between the attorneys, witnesses and the judge portraying the legal processes and testimonies providing a deeper realistic consideration of the murder.

Defense: Miss Bordon.

Both Lizzies turn.

Defense: could you describe the sequence of events upon your father's arrival home?

Lizzie: *With no animation.* Papa came in... we exchanged a few words... Bridget and I spoke of the yard goods sale downtown, whether she would buy some. She went up to her room...

Defense: And then?

Lizzie: I went out back... through the yard... I picked up several pears from the ground....

Defense: Go on.

Lizzie: I returned to the house. I found Papa. I called for Bridget. (BR, 53)

Including actual words spoken during the trial adds a layer of genuineness to the play. In the above quotation, Pollock dived deeper into Lizzie Borden's character and gain further intimate sympathy of her real experience.

The courtroom proceedings continue by both the prosecution and the defense, they both add to the suspense of the play. With legal aspects along with witnesses being questioned providing more tension to the trial.

The Defense: gentlemen of the jury! I ask you to look at the defendant, Miss Lizzie Borden, I ask you to recall the nature of the crime of which she is accused. I ask you _ do you believe Miss Lizzie Borden.... Capable of wielding the murder weapon_ thirty two blows, gentlemen, thirty two blows _fracturing Abigail Borden's skull, leaving her bloody and broken body in an upstairs room... gentlemen, Lizzie Borden is not mad. Gentlemen, Lizzie Borden is not guilty. (BR, 32-33)

Knowing if Lizzie committed the murder or not is not Pollock's main concern rather to show why she did it. Defying the traditional philosophy of her age, Lizzie shows the influence of family relations and gender roles. In this play, Pollock reflected, through Lizzie, how people, specifically females, are victimized by the malpractices and inequality of the society. Denis Salter states how Pollock uses theatre. He states that she uses theatre "as an instrument of moral inquiry, to project (though seldom to achieve) a better world with a better set of values by which to live. (2008, 149) Using documentary elements Pollock managed to combine real historical events with an artistic storytelling which creates a unique theatrical experience. Clouding the sphere between fact and fiction makes the audience raise questions about truth, retention, and the trustworthiness of historical interpretations.

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