

(Im)possible Spaces in the Plays of Sharon Pollock

By Wes D. Pearce

Abstract

With close to two dozen published plays to her name Sharon Pollock is one of Canada's best-known playwrights. Yet despite her substantial body of work, the wealth of critical and academic discourse around her work, the fact that many of her plays involve explorations of family, and the fact that currently Pollock is read, first and foremost, as a feminist playwright, nothing has been written about how Pollock uses domestic space(s) within her plays. This essay is a preliminary step in addressing the lack of critical discourse around understanding domestic spaces in Pollock's plays.

This essay examines the use of domestic spaces in three plays from the first decade of Pollock's career: *Walsh* (1973), *Generations* (1980) and *Blood Relations* (1980). Not only do these plays present domestic spaces in three radically different ways (tipi, contemporary kitchen, and Victorian home) but these spaces also serve a different function in each play. In *Walsh*, Pollock contrasts the failed domestic spaces of settler communities with the stable and fulfilling domestic spaces of the Lakota Sioux. In *Generations* the kitchen is not just the heart of the family but represents "progress", a gendered assault against the land. This domestic space is familiar, expected and comforting but temporal. The play might be about the Nurlin family trying to save the land, but Pollock makes clear this domestic space will inevitably disappear back into the landscape. In *Blood Relations*, Pollock's meta-theatrical re-imagining of the Lizzie Borden story, the Borden home is the site of extreme patriarchal resistance. It is a complex space offering multiple simultaneous readings: carefully constructed Victorian normalcy, the foundation of patriarchal expectations, a site of patriarchal resistance as well as a metaphoric glimpse into Lizzie Borden's state of mind. This reconsideration of Pollock's use of domestic spaces furthers an understanding of how space means within her plays.

(Im)possible Spaces in the Plays of Sharon Pollock

By Wes Pearce

Sharon Pollock is considered “Canada’s best-known woman playwright” (Zimmerman, *Anatomizing* 1) and might well be considered English Canada’s best-known playwright. Her first play, *A Compulsory Option*, premiered in Vancouver in 1972 and in 2017 her most recent play, *Blow Wind High Water*, launched Theatre Calgary’s 50th season. Between these two notable moments, Sharon Pollock wrote another sixteen produced and published plays, close to twenty produced but unpublished plays, and at least eighteen produced but unpublished radio and television dramas. In those forty-five years she also worked as an actor, director, and dramaturge, served as artistic director of three major regional theatre companies, ran her own theatre company (and space) for five years, has taught playwriting at a variety of institutions, and has been the recipient of many awards. She remains a vital and highly critical voice of Canadian theatre and Canadian theatrical practices. Pollock and her plays are the subject of three collections of essays (*Sharon Pollock: Essays on Her Work* [2000], *Sharon Pollock: Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* [2008] and *Sharon Pollock: First Woman of Canadian Theatre* [2015]); the subject of numerous academic articles; as well as the subject of the engaging biography *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock* (2008), making her one of Canada’s most written about playwrights.

Today Pollock is considered one of the leading feminist voices in Canadian theatre, but she, as a playwright, actively resisted the term feminist playwright and it was only later in her career and with some reluctance that she embraced the term (see Bessai, “Process”, Kerr, Pollock, “Playwright” and Munch). The award-winning *Blood Relations* (1980) is often cited as a watershed play in Pollock’s development as a feminist

playwright. Robert Nunn argues this is the play where Pollock moves “from big issues to the characters on whom...these issues have real impact” (81). Diane Bessai furthers Nunn’s thesis by arguing that the play with its “unusual manipulation of the play-within-a-play structure,” its “entirely feminine point of view,” and its “change in emphasis from public to domestic worlds” means *Blood Relations* can only be read as a feminist play (46). This shift in focus and intent from outside/public worlds to interior/domestic spaces, is crucial to reading Pollock as a feminist playwright (Zimmerman, “Warriors”, 73). Yet despite her substantial body of work, the significant critical discourse situating Pollock as a feminist playwright, and the considerable number of scholars who have written on or about her plays, nothing has been written about how Pollock uses domestic space(s) within her plays. As someone who has written about Pollock’s scenographic imagination as evidenced in a number of her plays and as a scenographer who has designed a production of *Blood Relations*, I want to end this silence.

Possibly because she is not just a playwright but also an award-winning actor and a successful director, Pollock embraces the many languages of play production: “[w]ords are...only one of the tools you have. Meaning is conveyed...by...the lighting..., the placement of people and things, what critical space is there, the movement, the design, the colour of everything...all of those elements of production...” (Zimmerman, “Anatomizing” 9). By her own admission her writing process is unusual, insofar as before she begins to write she must “have a clear sense of the scenic design on which the play takes place, and that design must be a metaphor both for the content and the structure of the work” (“Afterword” 123), and this often means “an early draft of a play is shared with a designer before the director or dramaturg” (Designers). Given the very specific theatrical environments that her scripts demand, this lack of critical

attention given to reading and understanding the domestic spaces within her work is unexpected. This is particularly surprising given the critical attention that has been given to *Blood Relations*, *Generations* (1980), *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), and *Doc* (1986), commonly referred to as the family plays (Zimmerman, "Warriors" 94 and Walker, *Astrolabe* 153) because it is hard to imagine a thoughtful discussion of family without some attention to the domestic world(s) these families inhabit. This essay becomes the starting point of a new conversation.

In a previously published essay, "Fragmented Scenography in Sharon Pollock's Plays," I focused on Pollock's use and manipulation of scenographic elements in her plays and suggested that fragmented scenography is a highly personalized style that dominates all of Pollock's plays. Fragmented scenography, I argued, was Pollock's way of bridging the two prominent styles of theatre that emerged following the 1967 premiere of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.¹ *Rita Joe* was a significant moment in the development of Canadian theatre, but it did not annihilate what had come before. Realism, as popularized by playwrights David French and David Freeman, remained the dominant style of writing and production, but theatre artists such as Paul Thompson and playwrights like James Reaney rejected realism and moved towards a style of theatre that was actor driven, muscular, poetic, imaginative, and highly theatrical. Pollock conflates these two radically different theatrical styles, presenting them in a unified, highly theatrical, but possible, world. In terms of her body of work, fragmented scenography allows the realistic spaces and locations that are found in many of Pollock's plays to successfully co-exist and share the same space with the highly theatrical; non-realistic; and super-natural actions, characters, and events that are also found in almost all of her plays. Having designed a

¹ For further information about the significance of the opening of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (November 23, 1967) and the development of Canadian theatre, see Wasserman, "Introduction" & Wallace "Transformation."

production of *Blood Relations*, I would argue that fragmented scenography requires a great deal from the design (and the designer), which is why Pollock enjoys working with a select and limited number of designers. Richard Roberts and Terry Gunvordahl have often collaborated with Pollock on first productions and it is not uncommon to find aspects of their scenography incorporated into the published text.

Pollock writes plays that challenge societal norms and it is not surprising that domestic spaces, particularly interior domestic spaces, feature prominently in many of Pollock's plays. Gendered domestic spaces, though seldom referenced or acknowledged as such within the plays, are often sites of matriarchal control and sites of patriarchal confrontation. Generally, the domestic interiors featured in Pollock's plays are variations on the family home and that will be the focus of this essay. What follows is not an exhaustive analysis of the 'domestic home' within Pollock's major works, but rather the three plays were chosen because their spaces serve different dramatic functions in each of the three plays and present radically different understandings and visions of home and domestic spaces. In *Walsh* (1973) domestic spaces are presented as racialized, gendered, and political. Set in the years immediately following the Battle of Little Bighorn and primarily situated close to the Canadian-American border in southern Saskatchewan, Pollock contrasts the un-natural and institutionalized space of the colonial settlers with the natural and organic domestic space of the First Nations peoples, further developing the play's critique of Canada's long-accepted historical narrative. At first glance, *Generations* (1980), where the principle action takes place in the detailed and functioning kitchen of the Nurlin's ranch home, seems like a rejection (or at least a contradiction) of the anti-realist and highly theatrical dramas that Pollock has previously written. While much of the action occurs in the Nurlin's kitchen, the kitchen itself is placed within a larger visual context of the

mythic landscape of Southern Alberta, which problematizes attempts to view this space, and the play, as just another kitchen-sink drama. Unlike the didactic use of domestic space in *Walsh*, in *Generations* Pollock is more subtle as she juxtaposes domestic and mythic spaces within the same stage picture and in doing so, not only presents a strong critique of the “man versus nature” settler narrative, but also questions the notion of progress. In *Blood Relations* (1980) Pollock furthers the exploration of domestic space and extends the dramatic function of it; in Pollock’s dramatization of the Lizzie Borden murders, the family home serves primarily as a metaphoric space.

There is general agreement² that Pollock’s first three major plays *Walsh* (1973), *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976), and *One Tiger to a Hill* (1979) are best described as outward-looking public dramas primarily concerned with “offering perspectives on historical events...directly related to contemporary problems [employing] informational dramatic techniques aimed at direct audience engagement” (Bessai, *Women* 127). The focus of these works is on the public not the private, and all three plays share Pollock’s interest in interrogating and documenting history. All three published texts are, even after substantial revisions, often criticized for being filled with too much exposition, too much historical detail, and suffer from theatrical structures at odds with each other (see Page, Salter, and Bessai). Despite the outward-looking political focus and the use of large-scale epic narratives, both *Walsh* and *The Komagata Maru Incident* feature surprising, if brief, sojourns into domestic spaces. In both plays, the domestic spaces are non-traditional³ and Pollock uses these spaces to

² See particularly Robert Nunn, “Sharon Pollock’s Plays,” Malcolm Page, “Committed Playwright,” Denis Salter, “(Im)possible Worlds,” Anne Northof, and Dianne Bessai.

³ Characters in *The Komagata Maru Incident* create domestic spaces within the cargo hold of a stranded steam ship and the interior of a seedy brothel. Sites of maternal affection, both spaces are quasi-private, and contrast with the racist, misogynistic and very public spaces that occupy the rest of the narrative.

challenge a presumed heteronormative white middle class understanding of home, and in doing so, these visual spaces provide foundational support to the larger themes of the play texts.

Walsh is set primarily in and around the North West Mounted Police barracks in the Wood Mountain and Cypress Hills regions of present-day Saskatchewan/Alberta. It is a factually inspired story about the unlikely friendship that developed between Major James Walsh (of the NWMP) and Chief Sitting Bull. After the Battle of Little Bighorn and the Sioux's pyrrhic victory over General Custer and the United States Army, in the spring of 1877 Sitting Bull, his wife Pretty Plume, and son Crowfoot joined a group of nearly 5000 Lakota Sioux seeking asylum in Canada.⁴ Initially, the Sioux were accommodated by the NWMP and the Canadian government, but newly elected President Hayes exerted more and more political pressure on Prime Minister John A MacDonal and the Canadian government as a means of forcing the Sioux to return to the US to face "justice." Walsh's logical arguments and negotiations soon turn to entreaties and pleas towards the Canadian government as he is inevitably placed in a position of conflict "between obedience to orders and adherence to what he knows is right and humane" (Zimmerman, *Warriors* 67). Not surprisingly, Walsh's call to duty wins, but this decision, and his betrayal of Sitting Bull and the Sioux, also destroys him. Again, while not the focus of the play, Pollock suggests three domestic spaces within her sweeping historical narrative.

Much of the play is dominated by the very male space of the NWMP barracks, but unlike more traditional historical narratives, Pollock depicts the barracks not as a site of heroic adventure but of a "domestic" space of boredom, a space made slightly dangerous by the tedium. Act two opens

⁴ The Sioux had fought for the British during the War of Independence and the War of 1812. As a thank you for such sacrifices British agents had made promises on behalf of the British monarch to "always look after your red children." In *Walsh* this promise is visualized by a George III medal which Sitting Bull believes functions as a living contract.

with several of the men killing time within the confines of “home,” but also lamenting home.

The lights come up on HARRY, CLARENCE, LOUIS and McCUTCHEON. The lights are punctuated by LOUIS throwing his knife into the floor of the stage. A dull thud is heard. LOUIS sits with his rifle unslung; McCUTCHEON sits cleaning his saddle. CLARENCE is attempting to thread a needle. As HARRY watches the three of them, McCUTCHEON leans over, picks up the needle from CLARENCE, threads it efficiently and passes it back.

CLARENCE Thanks...

He begins to mend a sock. HARRY and McCUTCHEON exchange a look of amusement.

HARRY Sewin' detail, eh?

He begins to roll a cigarette as he watches CLARENCE.

CLARENCE (*intent on his sewing*) Yeah...I wish me mum were here...

...

HARRY Jesus Christ, Clarence, you had a good thing there, boy, your mum waitin' on you hand an' foot. What'd you want to go and join up for? You could have had it easy in the east.

CLARENCE My dad was a soldier.

...

McCUTCHEON No brothers or sisters, laddie?

CLARENCE Nope....Mum's all alone back east.

HARRY You ain't told us why you joined?

CLARENCE Well...me mum, she said I was a man like my dad...and I had to find my own place...couldn't sit in Glengarry growin'

potatoes and tendin' to her. An she was right... (70-71)

Pollock contrasts this masculine space with suggestions of a transient yet welcoming and warm feminine space when she introduces the tipi shared by Sitting Bull, Pretty Plume, and Crowfoot:

[LOUIS] looks in the direction of SITTING BULL's tipi. McCUTCHEON and CLARENCE follow suit. As the lights dim on them, they begin to come up on the tipi. There is a soft background sound of Indian rattles and bells, which continues in the background until the scene with SITTING BULL and WALSH is established. WALSH and SITTING BULL are eating (55).

Later, as Sitting Bull is teaching Crowfoot (and Clarence) the spiritual meaning and importance of the Medicine Wheel, Pollock establishes the tipi as the aesthetic and moral heart/home of the play:

SITTING BULL (*urging CROWFOOT on*) Four things above the earth –
the sun...the moon
CROWFOOT The sky, the stars!
SITTING BULL smiles and nods at CROWFOOT
SITTING BULL Good...All of the universe is enclosed and revealed in
the sacred circle.
He traces the circle.
Do you see how the sundance is a sacred hoop...and the
sundance pole, the sacred centre? What else?
CLARENCE (*caught up in it all, breaking in*) The tipi! (62-3)

Finally, Pollock also makes evident that the tipi is also a site of traditional domestic happiness:

PRETTY PLUME Tatanka Yotanka!

CROWFOOT runs toward SITTING BULL and SITTING BULL picks him up, laughing. As he swings him in the air, PRETTY PLUME approaches him and holds out a rawhide bag which contains sacred stones. (62)

This happy domestic space is held up in contrast against the disrupted domestic spaces given to Walsh and his wife Mary. Midway through Act Two, as Major Walsh nears a breaking point from the pressures he is facing from numerous forces to return Sitting Bull to the American authorities, there is a pause in the psychological and verbal assaults he is under:

The lights black out. About four bars of the calliope music is heard. The lights come back up. MARY is sitting there embroidering. WALSH is a distance away from her...

WALSH My...dearest...Mary....My dearest Mary.

MARY Jim.

WALSH Two letters came today...along with a load of supplies. I don't know which I was happier to see.

MARY The girls are fine...It's been a long time since they've seen you.

WALSH You'll think I've got a touch of prairie fever, but with the solitude here, the emptiness of these Great Plains, fills me with a sense of timelessness.

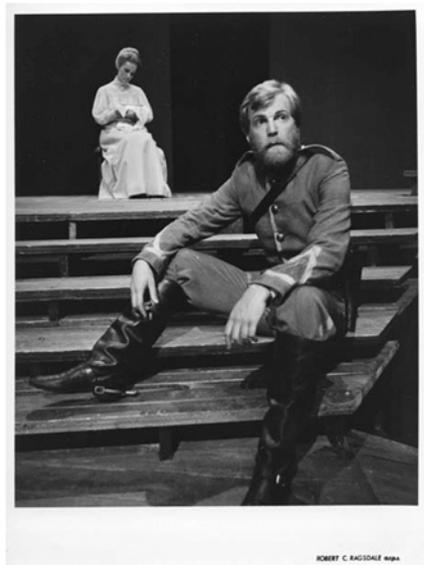
MARY Both send their love.

WALSH Remember the day we picnicked on the river? Cora, plump and placid on the little blanket; little Mary showing me

her hands stained with the juice of flowers...and you bent over the basket, your hair hanging loose and laughing...You looked eighteen.

MARY I hope you're looking after yourself. (73)

The short but effective scene is the only time we are introduced to Mary Walsh and the domestic life and space Walsh has given up. The scene speaks to the physical, emotional and temporal distances that separate husband and wife; distances that Mary and Walsh are obviously dealing with quite differently. The contrast between the happy domestic space of *Sitting Bull* and *Pretty Plume* and the fractured and isolated domestic spaces of Mary and James Walsh can be read as not just about domestic space but rather as a generalized (re)-assessment of both cultures. These brief glimpses of domestic spaces reinforce the political aims of the play by further questioning and disrupting the assumed colonial settler narrative.



With the set designed by John Ferguson, the emotional and physical distance between James Walsh (Michael Ball) and Mary is made clear in the 1974 production at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Photo by Robert Ragsdale, courtesy of the Stratford Festival Archives

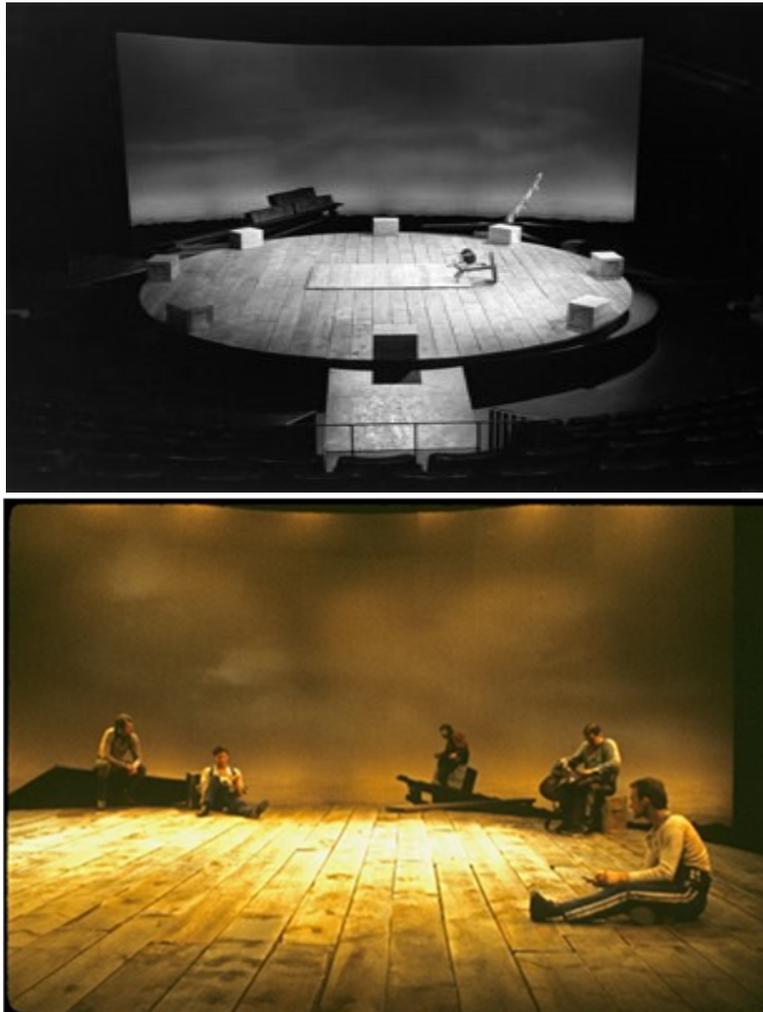
To further support my argument that the domestic spaces in *Walsh* are an important element of the play one needs only look at the reception that the four major productions of the play has received. Given the importance of the play in terms of Canadian theatre history it is worth noting that there have only been four major productions of the play: Theatre Calgary (1973), Stratford Shakespeare Festival (1974), National Arts Centre, Ottawa (1983), and Theatre Calgary (1988). The two Theatre Calgary and the National Arts Centre productions all had designs that focused on the epic nature of the play and each design made some attempt to capture the vastness and isolation of the Canadian prairies. Critics have had problems with the play when the focus of the production and the design is primarily upon this notion of the epic Western. On the other hand, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival's 1974 production, directed by John Wood and designed by John Ferguson, received glowing reviews.⁵ Produced in the intimate Third Stage Theatre, this production, by nature of the thrust staging and the scale of the theatrical space itself, took a radically different approach to *Walsh*. In his review of the production, Herbert Whittaker wrote, "the variable space of the Third Stage finds the audience aloft on banks of grandstands...Below, a long irregular bridge of a stage has been thrown by John Ferguson... to carry us back into the last century, out to the prairies, into tepees and barracks. Having no character save roughness, it suits all the settings of this rough tale." In her analysis of the Stratford Festival and Pollock, Anne Nothof echoes Whittaker's assessment of the production and she also returns to the importance of Ferguson's design: "The central playing space was connected to the audience with stairs and ramps...Tiered levels on the stage located other places and times..." ("Images" 22), and ultimately these intimate theatrical (and by extension

⁵ The Third Stage has become known as the Tom Patterson Theatre and is famous for its intimate thrust design, but "In 1974, the Third Stage was an arena theatre that accommodated 250 people on wooden folding seats at \$3.00 a ticket" (Nothof, "Images" 21).

domestic) spaces, enabled by Ferguson's design, allowed this production to explore the text rather than having to worry about how to fill the space. The production shifted the focus of the narrative away from the epic towards the very personal story of James Walsh, which resulted in a small, intimate, domestic play set in a tumultuous moment in history. There is little doubt that Pollock's depictions of domestic space(s) within *Walsh* are freely adapted dramatized aspects of historic truths, and in constructing Indigenous domestic space as stable and happy, and contrasting it with critical depictions of the settler spaces, she furthers her critique of the settler narrative, including the arguments about the inhumane treatment of the Sioux by both the American and the Canadian governments.



The 1974 Stratford Festival of Canada production was an intimate production very much seen through the eyes of James Walsh (as played by Michael Ball). Photo by Robert Ragsdale, courtesy of the Stratford Festival Archives.



Sue LePage's design for a more epic interpretation of the script as produced by the National Arts Centre (Ottawa) in 1983. The scene on the bottom is the barracks scene discussed earlier in this section. Photos courtesy NAC Archives.

As suggested earlier, Pollock has never been a playwright satisfied or content to write a singular style of play. Sherrill Grace has argued that Pollock was always searching for “the appropriate way (the structure or ‘theatrical envelope’) to present...a story” (150). In terms of aesthetics and the theatrical envelope used, Pollock never wrote another play like *Walsh*.

Furthering Grace's argument, I understand Pollock's use of fragmented scenography is also ever-changing and she "manipulat[ed] and exploit[ed] the visual world of the play and its scenography in order to support and the serve the play's subject" (Pearce 90). Domestic spaces are understood, constructed, and used in a variety of ways in order to support and serve the play's subject. It can be argued that in *Generations*, the Nurlin's kitchen echoes the role of the tipi. In *Generations*, however, the play expands upon the use of domestic space and the meaning of kitchen within the production, and the meaning of the same domestic space as understood by the audience. The domestic space in *Generations* often carries contradictory meanings simultaneously.

Commissioned by Alberta Theatre Projects and adapted from her radio play of the same name, Pollock's *Generations* premiered in Calgary in 1980 with a subsequent production at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre the following year. "[After writing *The Komagata Maru Incident*] I started to explore structure, and it was exhilarating, and I decided that I never wanted to write a naturalistic play again" (Council of Education Ministers 139). *Generations* is unusual, insofar as it seems to abandon the aesthetics of anti-naturalism that Pollock had championed. Set in the late 1970s, *Generations* is about the survival of the family farm and focuses on the land and the conflicts within the Nurlin family over the land. The central conflict is between the youngest generation of Nurlin siblings – Young Eddy and his brother David – who are the third generation to occupy the family farm. Young Eddy wants Eddy (his grandfather), Alfred (his father), and David to sell off "his part of the farm" so he can have the capital to buy into the big city law firm he currently works for. David, who can't imagine doing anything but farming the land and is happily taking over the farm from both Eddy and Alfred, is opposed to his brother's request. The play moves beyond the familial and introduces conflicts between Western Canadian

farmers and Federal Government policy, conflicts between the farmers of Alberta's Medicine Hat area and the local Indigenous populations around resource management (specifically water), and the conflicts between humankind and the land. Almost all the central action, and the place where most of the conflict is made manifest, is contained within:

the kitchen of the Nurlins' "New Place" which is what they call the house built in the fifties when Alfred and Margaret were married. It has all the usual accoutrements of a kitchen. The back door of the kitchen...opens on a back veranda or porch which runs the width of the house. There is a pump in the yard. (280)

The "New Place" sits within "the omniscient presence and mythic proportion of THE LAND" (280). The most traditional of domestic spaces also proved to be the most challenging for the playwright: "If I had had my druthers...the play would not have happened in the house. There would be no kitchen because once you're in the kitchen, you've got to do all the stinking things you've got to do in the kitchen, like cook the food" (Wallace & Zimmerman 120). After seeing the Tarragon Theatre production Dennis Salter extends this argument, drilling into the aesthetics and meaning of naturalism:

I was struck by how every aspect of the naturalistic style contributed effortlessly to the pervasive lifelike impression. Nothing seemed old-fashioned or contrived. Even something as ordinary as making the morning coffee managed to convey something small but important about the characters.... I could readily understand why naturalism, even now, can have [a] kind of radical impact. (23)

Yet in the same article, Salter seems to confirm Pollock's own reservations about the 'theatrical envelope,' suggesting that, "[t]he only drawback was that the apparent naturalness sometimes verged on the prosaic, and once

the basic dramatic situation had been established, some of the developments...seemed entirely predictable" (23).

Pollock is aware of the challenges that her opening stage directions created (and continue to create) in terms of putting *Generations* into production, and yet it is because the domestic and the mythic occupy the same space simultaneously that Pollock's play transcends naturalism (Nunn 41). Without a doubt, the Nurlin kitchen assumes the role of the traditional domestic space within a domestic drama, reflecting, as Grene argues, "both the outer world that surrounds it and the interiority of the private lives is houses" (2). Yet unlike the Helmers' apartment or the villa shared by Hedda Gabler and Tesman or even the Bordens' tiny house on Second Street, Pollock is not interested in the Nurlins' kitchen representing the mindset of David or Old Eddy or Margaret. Rather, echoing *Death of a Salesman* and *The Skin of our Teeth*, and despite all appearances to the contrary, the domestic space in *Generations* is never stable. Although completely different in style, at the centre of the plays by Miller and Wilder is an understanding of the domestic home falling apart and the revelation of the forces beyond.⁶ Similarly, Pollock reimagines the familiar domestic scene and locates it in a world in which the domestic is ever threatened to be consumed by the vast, relentless, and merciless prairie landscape. To an extent, this liminal space between interior and exterior, between masculine space and feminine space, echoes the use of domestic spaces in *Walsh*, but in a manner that is both more poetical and less didactic. Unlike *Blood Relations* or *Doc*, in *Generations*, domestic space is not specifically the site of patriarchal resistance, but rather can be read as a generational and gendered response to the land (Nothof, *Landscapes* 127). In this reading, the kitchen can be read as an aggressive taming of the land.

⁶ This point of comparison was suggested by one of the reviewers of this essay. Although more analysis needs to be done I felt it was valuable and helps create a broader context for my reading of *Generations*.

Pollock will not, however let the story be simply a Canadian version of manifest destiny. Her stage directions also indicate that:

some distance from the "New Place," a portion of the "Old Place" can be seen. This is the original homestead; it is extremely weathered, grey tumbled, but still standing. It has the remnants of the porch, the steps, a couple of posts. The flooring of the exterior area, that is everything outside the kitchen and the porch of the "New Place," resembles the packed dirt and yellow-brown vegetation of the west. (280)

The audience, if not the Nurlins, are aware that whatever progress Eddy, Alfred, and David have made in terms of "taming" the land is temporary at best. The "New Place," with all its modern comforts and conveniences, its familiarity (to the Nurlins and to spectators), and its establishment as the heart of the family, is all very temporary. Soon, Pollock suggests, the "New Place" will give way, abandoned because of forces larger than the Nurlins can comprehend, and this domestic space will be lost, reclaimed by the land that will always be there.

Like *Walsh*, Sharon Pollock never wrote another play like *Generations*. *Blood Relations* and *Generations* were both premiered in 1980 and both domestic spaces rely upon aspects of realism to create the illusion of stability in the family home, but that is where the similarities end. *Blood Relations* is considered one of Pollock's most thematically sophisticated, dramaturgically complex, and troubling plays. Originally entitled *My Name is Lisbeth*, and workshopped at Vancouver's Douglas College in 1976, *Blood Relations* premiered four years later at Edmonton's Theatre 3. The new play enjoyed critical and popular success: in 1981 the published play won the inaugural Governor General's Award for English Drama; over the last forty years the play has had numerous professional, amateur, and university productions both inside and outside of Canada;

and has been translated into several languages including Albanian, French, and Japanese, and while there is no hard evidence, it is accepted that *Blood Relations* is Pollock's most popular work.

Whereas *My Name is Lisbeth* is a straightforward retelling of the events that led Lizzie Borden to kill her father and stepmother – a play in which “Lizzie's guilt [is] never in doubt” (Salter 25) – *Blood Relations* is Pollock's post-modern re-thinking of the Lizzie Borden story. Pollock's revised work is all about ambiguity; Lizzie is no more innocent nor guilty at the end of the play than she was in the beginning of the play. Pollock's larger play takes place in 1902 (ten years after Lizzie's acquittal) and is set in the Borden House in Fall River. On no particular Sunday afternoon in the fall of 1902, Lizzie is entertaining an Actress, an unnamed woman who is Lizzie's lover and has a successful stage career in Boston. The Actress, perhaps preparing for an upcoming role, probes Lizzie:

ACTRESS (*Dropping her EMMA imitation*) Well, did you?
 MISS LIZZIE Is it important?
 ACTRESS Yes.
 MISS LIZZIE Why?
 ACTRESS I have...a compulsion to know the truth.

Not surprisingly, Lizzie does not answer the question but instead proposes something more intriguing:

MISS LIZZIE A game.
 ACTRESS What?
 MISS LIZZIE A game?...And you'll play me.
 ACTRESS Oh—
 MISS LIZZIE It's your stock and trade, my love.

ACTRESS Alright....A game!

Miss Lizzie paints the background for the Actress and assumes the role of Bridget, the Bordens' Irish maid. The game, or to use Pollock's words, "dream thesis," takes place in the same domestic space but ten years earlier, just before the Bordens were murdered. Salter suggests that "[t]he psychodramatic game is not...a play-within-a-play. Instead, the events of *both* 1902 and 1892 are juxtaposed throughout, to create a number of concurrent and interactive blood relations..." (25). As the play progresses, ACTRESS/LIZZIE comes to understand that her father Andrew intended to sign over the Borden farm to his wife Abigail (Lizzie and Emma's stepmother) and her brother Harry. This act would deprive the Borden daughters of their expected inheritance and make them informal wards of Abigail and Harry; the humiliation of being "looked after" is something ACTRESS/LIZZIE cannot stand. Guided by MISS LIZZIE/BRIDGET's coaching and suggestions, the narrative unfolds in such a way that ACTRESS/LIZZIE sees a future in which she is completely and totally trapped by familial, societal, and cultural expectations, totally divorced from the world she aspires to. ACTRESS/LIZZIE attempts to create workable solutions with Andrew and Abigail and even Dr. Patrick (the married doctor that Lizzie often flirts with), but time and time again she is thwarted. Fearing for her sanity, if not her life, ACTRESS/LIZZIE murders Abigail (an act discovered by LIZZIE/BRIDGET), and then seeks forgiveness from her father, gently hums him to sleep, and prepares to finish her plan:

LIZZIE still humming, moves to the table, slips her hand under the clothes, withdraws the hatchet. She approaches her father with the hatchet behind her back. She stops humming. A pause, then she slowly raises the hatchet very high to strike him.

For all intents and purposes, the audience has borne witness to Lizzie Borden murdering her parents but the double timeline and double casting within the play and the dream thesis disrupt such a reading:

ACTRESS Lizzie (*She takes the hatchet from MISS LIZZIE.*) Lizzie,
 you did.

MISS LIZZIE I didn't. You did. (*The ACTRESS looks to the hatchet
 then to the audience.*)

Blood Relations is the Pollock play that most clearly aligns itself with Grene's suggestion that "[w]omen are...at the centre of domestic spaces...when this was first established as their distinctly separate space" (12). While Abigail is clearly in charge of this space, it is not a matriarchal or feminist space; it is evident that while she controls the Borden household, Andrew controls the family finances (including the revenue generating farm). It is in part the fact that Abigail and Harry are trying to wrest control of both the public and domestic Borden worlds that sets Lizzie into action. Abigail, Lizzie, Emma, and Bridget are all subjected to physical and emotional abuse when they fail to meet various patriarchal expectations. Throughout the play, the women (to varying degrees) resist these prospects but are repeatedly forced to reject personal goals and ambitions to the demands of societal beliefs. Abigail, we learn, married Andrew because she had no other prospects, and truly is in no better situation than her step-daughters: "You know Lizzie...deal with the facts. I did" (368). Women might be at the centre of this domestic space, but legally, physiologically, and pragmatically it is NOT their space. Zimmerman argues, "the father represents the whole oppressive Victorian patriarchy [and] he remains the powerful figure his daughter must combat" (*Warriors* 73).



Women might be at the centre of this domestic space, but legally, physiologically and pragmatically it is not their space. Company members from *Blood Relations*, Set and Costume Design Wes D. Pearce, Lighting Design Kennedy Sambaliuk. Photo courtesy of Trevor Hopkin, University of Regina (2018).



Zimmerman argues, “the father represents the whole oppressive Victorian patriarchy (“Warriors”). Company members from *Blood Relations*, Set and Costume Design Wes D. Pearce, Lighting Design Kennedy Sambaliuk. Photo courtesy of Trevor Hopkin, University of Regina.

Domestic space within *Blood Relations* becomes a battle site. Given the patricide that occurs, it is more than just a site of patriarchal *resistance*, and yet the play is ambiguous (at best) in terms of resolution. Lizzie (or at least ACTRESS/LIZZIE) removes the obstacles she believes are preventing her from fulfilling her dreams, and yet ten years after the murder and Lizzie's acquittal, she and Emma remain prisoners in their small, unhappy home. Without a doubt, the sisters are victims of the notoriety brought upon them by the murders, and they are further isolated by a society that continues to be wary of strong, independent women. However, the effects of societal pressures on the Borden sisters is further complicated by their unhealthy and totally dysfunctional co-dependent relationship. The view of the "tiny" Borden home is limited to what Pollock suggests with the stage directions: "the dining room from which there is an exit to the kitchen, the parlour; a flight of stairs leading to the second floor" (340). A domestic space, Salter suggests, that reflects the "Victorian faith in normalcy, family life and traditional roles for women" (26). The script suggests that it is not a comfortable domestic space; it is overheated ("It's the heat you know....It's too hot for a good sleep" (354)) and claustrophobic ("stuck in this tiny bit of a house" (353)). The heat and the tiny⁷ living quarters trap the family in a way that mirrors the pet pigeons Lizzie keeps in cages in the back shed. This living space creates a dangerous world in which none of the family members can escape each other nor societal expectations. The domestic space in *Blood Relations* is a space in which no one is comfortable. It can be read as a reflection of patriarchal repression, but simultaneously the space also refracts aspects of Lizzie's psychological state of mind.⁸ That being said, it is unreasonable to claim that architecture made Lizzie Borden kill her father

⁷ The actual Borden house is not a mansion, but in 1892 it would have been one of the better and larger houses in Fall River. I remain deeply suspicious of ACTRESS/LIZZIE's comments and constant criticisms of the size of the Borden house.

⁸ In *Whiskey Six Cadenza* and *Doc*, domestic spaces are representative of a character's state of mind.

and stepmother. Yet in various interviews Pollock, recalling her own abusive marriage, suggests that one's environment(s) and personal situations have an enormous impact on physical and psychological well-being: "I'm saying that all of us are capable of murder given the right situation" (Wallace & Zimmerman 120). When domestic spaces are not just domestic spaces, but become spaces that represent everything a character, such as Lizzie, is trying to resist while simultaneously also reflecting her state of mind, understanding and mapping this space in terms of affect and consequence is valuable.

In November 2018, I designed a production of *Blood Relations* for the University of Regina Theatre Department which was produced in our relatively large black box theatre. As mentioned, the set needed to portray the surface of Victorian sensibility, and if the house was not literally a tiny house, then it needed to feel extremely claustrophobic, like it was quite impossible to get away from anyone. Ideally it was a design that would represent the domestic world of Lizzie and Abigail, the patriarchal world of Andrew, and somehow reflect Lizzie's psychological state in 1892 – admittedly this is a lot for a single set to do.

In hindsight, as is almost always the case, the set worked well, but there were problems with the design. The design worked, in part, because it was almost too big for the space, and although this was not a grand Victorian mansion, it was still a large, well-maintained, pragmatic home demonstrating Andrew's financial success. Part of the cooling system permanently attached to the far upstage wall – a unit that is usually hidden by drapery and that doesn't appear on the ground plan – meant that during construction the entire set was moved downstage six feet and the staircase, especially after that move, took up a lot of "prime acting real estate."

With audience sitting on three sides of the action there were some sight line concerns before the set moved, and during performances patrons were

often lightly brushed with the sweep of skirts as actors exited the space. In rehearsals actors often focused on moving up, down, and around the stairs, through the doors, and around furniture in patterns to deliberately avoid having to make eye contact or share physical space with other characters, which did make an already small space seem even smaller. I also worked very hard to limit the palette in the show. Dark green, burgundy, and dark brown were the colours I worked with, and the colours of the costumes echoed the colours used on the walls. I wanted this connection between domestic space and costume because it tied characters to the house in a way that suggested either, as with Andrew, that he was the house, or in the case of Lizzie and Abigail, that escape from this situation is impossible.



“Lizzie Lizzie Borden took an axe, Gave her mother forty whacks, When the job was nicely done, She gave her father forty-one!” Company members from *Blood Relations*, Set and Costume Design Wes D. Pearce, Lighting Design Kennedy Sembaliuk. Photo courtesy of Trevor Hopkins, University of Regina (2018).

Dennis Salter's valuable essay "(Im)possible Worlds: the Plays of Sharon Pollock" was the inspiration for the title of this essay. His essay was the first critical reading of Pollock's work that combined textual analysis with production analysis, and since this is essay is also the first to explore these domestic spaces, Salter's work seemed an appropriate inspirational source. As I have suggested, domestic spaces in Pollock's plays represent a wide variety of locations, functions, and meanings, and yet all these spaces are, to varying degrees, spaces of politic. This conclusion comes from Pollock's declaration that "every play has a politic, I believe that 'Three's Company' has a politic. The fact that most people don't recognize it makes it a far more dangerous politic than any politic I could put on the stage" (Wallace & Zimmerman 122). This essay expands upon my work around fragmented scenography and furthers that work by suggesting that special attention must be given to reading how and why domestic spaces in Pollock's plays are used. I have touched on the use of domestic spaces in three of Pollock's best known works, but there is no doubt that there is much to be gained from a detailed analysis of domestic spaces in her other plays, including *The Komagata Maru Incident* (1976), *Whiskey Six Cadenza* (1983), *A Death in the Family* (1993), *Fair Liberty's Call* (1993), *Saucy Jack* (1993), *End Dream* (2000), and, perhaps most importantly, *Doc* (1984). As I've argued elsewhere, *Doc* is best understood as the play that fuses the individual scenographic elements that Pollock has experimented and played with during her career into one seamless tour de force play (97-8). Further, Anne Nothof's article "Staging the Intersections of Time" suggests that *Doc* marks the beginning of a recognizable Pollock style insofar that many of her subsequent plays employ a similar structure and exploit scenographic devices in a similar manner. *Doc* realizes domestic space almost as ephemeral – gone is the naturalistic domestic world of *Generations* or the polished surfaces of the Victorian domestic world of

Blood Relations. Pollock suggests that the domestic world of *Doc* “is most effective when the set design is not a literal one, and when props and furniture are kept to a minimum.... the setting...has the potential to explode time and space” (129). That play, however, will be the subject of another conversation at another time.

The domestic spaces in Pollock’s plays, whether they are unusual, such as a small encampment in a forest in British North America which is the setting for *Fair Liberty’s Call*, or the more expected, as in *A Death in the Family*, which is set on an old rural homestead some distance from the nearest hamlet, should never be read as “just the set” or (even worse) as neutral spaces. They need to be thought through carefully. These numerous and varied domestic spaces need to be recognized as spaces that function in a very particular manner within the specific theatrical envelope of a given play, as spaces of purpose, and as spaces of complex political and social meaning. This reconsideration of Pollock’s use of domestic spaces furthers my own understanding of how Pollock uses design, but more importantly how space means within her plays.

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