

Introduction:
The Bonds of Intimacy

by Roxanne Ray

The Mae West Fest originated in Seattle as one means to combat the under-representation of women playwrights and directors in theatre. In our eighth year of production, we are proud to announce that the Mae West Fest has extended its mission further: to provide additional opportunities for bringing the work of women playwrights and directors into the spotlight through publication.

In the past eight years, the Mae West Fest has expanded from a local festival to one that includes work from women theatre artists nationwide. In this first anthology published by the Mae West Fest, we therefore sought to include both local playwrights and playwrights from around the U.S. We want to emphasize the sheer diversity of ways in which playwrights have addressed what coalesced into a coherent theme: *the bonds of intimacy*.

These eight plays tell us about women's multiple places amidst partners, mothers, daughters, and co-conspirators, and they illuminate women's concurrent existence in the past, present, and future. Through these plays, we experience the joys of chosen relationships, as well as the strictures of affiliations to which women are bound. Of the many things we learn, the inescapability of history comes to the forefront, entertaining us with the comedy of its repeated return, as well as sobering us with its incessant nature.

The characters in most of the plays included here are haunted in some way, by ghosts from the past – or even the present. Among the challenges these characters face, as Sharon Patricia Holland has found in her examination of African-American literature,¹ is foremost the work of incorporating those phantoms into their lives in a sustainable way.

In three plays, *Before the Wedding* by Louise Penberthy, *What Happened in the Back of the Boat* by Susan Riemen-Ihli, and *My Sister Underground* by Jewel Seehaus-Fisher, dead men left in the wake of a violent past arise to haunt a day that should have been a new beginning. More ominously, indeterminate revenants of the institution of marriage overshadow a batchelorette's pre-wedding ritual in Rachel Jackson's *On the Virg*. And in the present, a woman in

Lisa Voss's *Psychodrama* discovers not only that ghostly hazards multiply despite our best efforts, but also that they sometimes burrow more deeply into our lives than ever suspected.

Conversely, the specters in *The Practice Baby* by Molly Best Tinsley and *A Bushel of Crabs* by Kathleen Warnock are happily – if uneasily – incorporated into what promises to be a future full of reconciliation and new possibilities. And in Robin Rice Lichtig's *Saint Anthony and the Appendix*, we – and the characters – have the opportunity to take a warm and humorous look at a friendly ghost and a physical embodiment of history confronted.

A significant aspect of the history that must be faced in many of these plays is the pervasive occurrence of violence. From the paralyzing threat of the presence of a gun, and the disturbing and vaporous character of suspicion, to actual assault and even murder, many of these characters have experienced, witnessed, or even participated in physical and emotional damage to their own lives or the lives of others. Some are haunted by fear, and still others bear the label of “victim” assigned by people close to them. In each of these situations, the characters we meet here remind us of what feminist scholars have documented² so well over the last few decades: that women regularly encounter the immediacy of the often intimate nature of violence, and that these skirmishes impact their future ambitions as well as their existing relationships.

Yet despite the palpable damper placed by violent experience on the options women might imagine, many of these plays also evoke powerful images of prospects of freedom, joy, and renewed friendships. As new starts abound, we glimpse a prolonged pause at the horizon of the future. Before weddings can be completed, relationships revisited, or new homes inaugurated, the characters in these plays must take stock of the ways in which the appearance of the present will always be shaped by the uncanny reflections and deflections of the past. As Paul Connerton has theorized regarding social memory,³ the ethereal accusations and recollections from years before will arise and reverberate according to the needs and desires of the present.

One of these many needs and desires is often the urge to create one's own history – to understand it and *come to know it* by virtue of the very process of telling that story, shaping it, interpreting it, and communicating it. As several authors have written in regard to *testimony*,⁴ the characters in these plays only come to belatedly learn what they *have already experienced* by virtue of

passionately blending that experience into a shared testimonial narrative. While these plays do not conform to the traditional structure of a first-person testimony utilized in documentary or confessional work, what the playwrights in this volume have granted us is the opportunity to come to know more about our own manifold intimate attachments through their characters' struggles for self-knowledge.

In turn, we offer this anthology to our readers as a partial response to the need for greater inclusion of women in American theatre and the canons of dramatic literature. We also present this volume, and in particular the glance at how our own history confronts us in "The Mae West Fest: Origins and Overview" by Founder and Artistic Director Heidi Heimarck, as a testimony to the commitment and collaborative effort bestowed – and the bonds formed – by these playwrights, directors, and other artists who have made the past eight years of the Mae West Fest a success.

¹Sharon Patricia Holland; *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*; Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

²Jane Mooney; *Gender, Violence, and the Social Order*; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

³Paul Connerton; *How Societies Remember*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁴Cathy Caruth; *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub; *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*; New York: Routledge, 1992.