

Introduction:
Illuminating the Past

by Roxanne Ray

In 2004, the Mae West Fest launched our Publications department with our first anthology of fine plays from the Fest, centered on the theme “The Bonds of Intimacy.” After a hiatus in 2005, we celebrate the Mae West Fest IX in 2006 by publishing another anthology of plays by women. In this collection, we present the sheer variety of ways in which women have chosen to dramatically *illuminate the past*.

The eight plays included in this anthology show us the many eruptions, intrusions, and carryovers of past personal experience into the present, for both good and ill. Each drama – as well as our own hiatus as a festival – suggests, in styles ranging from comedy to dramatic realism to surrealism, that *time* is a crucial factor in understanding ourselves and our world.

Many of these plays highlight the intertwined nature of personal experience with larger historical events. In two plays, *The Time the Flower Withered* by Nu Quang and *What the Birds Carry* by Elizabeth Gjelten, the Vietnam War exists as a potentially life-shattering shadow over the current-day experiences of these plays’ female protagonists. Yet both plays emphasize the power of their protagonists to shape – as theorist Paul Connerton¹ says we must – their memories of the past into useful meaning in the present.

Such construction of meaning is especially crucial in the face of potentially-fatal illness: *Commit Me to Memory* by Karen Macklin shows us one woman’s need to leave behind her past relationship and occupation, in order to fully come to terms with terminal cancer. In contrast, Susan Gidding-Green’s play *I Like It When You Touch Them* suggests that the fearsome possibility of breast cancer – and its potential body-altering aftermath – can rekindle the trust and intimacy of a pre-existing relationship.

Body image also plays an important role in the surreal *Jeopardy Gaping* by Roxanne Ray. In the whirlwind of time created by this non-chronological play, hopeful prospects become missed opportunities under the almost oblivious eyes of the characters. Another whirlwind, in Nancy Jones’s ensemble piece entitled

Moliere's Women, offers a bittersweet look at the historical life of the French dramatist from the vantage point of those who remember loving, co-existing with, and leaving behind this male theatre artist who continues to loom large in our memories – and our theatre archives.

Love likewise plays an important role in both *Animal Control* by Barbara Genovese and *Warren's Warning* by Molly Best Tinsley. The struggle to leave behind the ghost of a past love summons a dreamscape to help a mourning woman in *Animal Control*, while *Warren's Warning* takes a lighter look at the admonishments provided by a former lover now absent. Each of these plays demonstrates the myriad of paths into and out of the past, all illuminated by stage lights.

As a testament to the importance of the past, this year the Mae West Fest emphasizes the important role of the *dramaturg* in the theatre. “Dramaturg” is often viewed as that mysterious title in a play’s list of credits – but we hope to illuminate the contributions of this specialist to the ongoing construction of each play’s socio-historical context and production history. Situated in time, a dramaturg may serve as research advisor, new-play-development guide, and audience outreach specialist. With a deep love of history, most dramaturgs collaborate with directors on mainstage productions, spending time in the archives and library stacks in order to provide the cast and production team with contextual and conceptual research – sometimes including “living history” through field trips!

Dramaturgs also have a firm grounding in the written word: they love plays of all kinds – especially new plays! Dramaturgs work with playwrights in new-play development, a process integral to our work at the Mae West Fest as we foster new work by both early-career and experienced playwrights. Serving as an advocate for playwrights, dramaturgs offer them assistance in meeting their own stated goals for a new work through research and play analysis.

A dramaturg’s goal in all this is to reach out to that other group so necessary to theatre: the audience. In working to bring “the page to the stage,” a dramaturg may contribute program notes and newsletter articles, host post-show talkbacks, or provide study guides – all with an aim of extending a bridge into the time and place of the play, and fostering an audience’s greater appreciation of the play. Dramaturgs help to illuminate the past for their artistic teams, just as

the plays included in this anthology bring the past to bear upon our present-day beliefs and experiences.

In that spirit, we offer this anthology as another way to strengthen the literary archive of women's theatre and performance. As this current festival becomes yet another part of the successful history of the Mae West Fest, we hope you will join us in reflecting upon and celebrating the importance of drama in the cultural life of generations past and future.

¹Paul Connerton; *How Societies Remember*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.