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Introduction: Hearing Women's Stories

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Hearing Women's Stories

KIM SOLGA

As I sit down to write this, it's been exactly one year since the *New York Times* broke the story of decades of sexual assault allegations by Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. I know, because I've been glued to the *Times* website, like many women in North America and around the world, waiting to hear if the Senate will vote to confirm Republican Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh gave an extraordinary performance of White male self-entitlement before the Senate judiciary committee convened to grill him about accusations of sexual misconduct; this came hot on the heels of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's historic own testimony, in which she detailed her painful memories of his assault on her, and patiently taught the assembled Senate panelists how human psychology works, and how trauma is retained in the brain.

If you've also followed this story (and I bet you have), then you know the take-aways already. Blasey Ford was a picture of measured calm, despite the unbelievably risky, potentially re-traumatizing thing she had volunteered to do as a concerned American citizen. She had no choice but to be: "hysterical" women make too-easy targets for the media and are never believable, their narratives drowned in ungainly girlish feeling. Kavanaugh, on the other hand, emoted to the heavens, so much so that Matt Damon's imitation in his *Saturday Night Live* cold open on 29 September barely upstaged the original.

And yet, of course; and yet. As I write this, it looks very much like Kavanaugh's narrative will prevail. (Spoiler alert: it did.)

As a woman, a feminist, and a citizen of North America I'm saddened and enraged by this apparent inevitability; as a feminist theatre researcher, however, I am not even remotely surprised. The ways in which women's stories of sexual violence and domestic abuse have for centuries been shoe-horned into patriarchal narrative structures was the subject of my PhD dissertation and my first book, *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts*. In its second chapter, I told the story of the rape script women in Shakespeare's time were expected to follow in order to have their assault first believed, and then pursued, by the respectable men of their communities. That script was detailed by the author of the 1632 treatise *The Larwes Resolutions of Womens Rights*, in an effort to help female victims of violence access some measure of social agency.

The take-away from that 400-year old text: find a way to tell your story according to the expectations men have about what it should have felt or looked like. (That is, assuming you really weren't consenting. Assuming it really was kind of a big deal.) Make yourself appear respectable and believable on their terms—because those are the only terms that count.

What does it mean to listen—really listen—to women's narratives now, in 2018? #metoo has galvanized a movement and gained incredible momentum in a very short time, and yet the recent evidence from Washington speaks volumes not only about the very real limitations still placed around women's ability to exert power and influence in the Anglo-American

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public sphere, but also about the extent to which women's stories (both lived testimony, and well researched evidence—both of which Dr. Blasey Ford brought with her to Washington) continue to be undermined, denigrated, or simply not heard. Consider Jian Ghomeshi's recent resurfacing in the *New York Review of Books*: he published a personal essay that reflects on his experience as “the guy everyone hated first” in a gesture plainly poised to capitalize on the fame of #metoo but also on its inevitable, growing backlash. Tellingly, as many female commentators have noted, the essay is not an apology; rather, it features Ghomeshi humble-bragging his way through his own side of the story and its aftermath, at great length and on a prestigious platform—even as the wrenching and horrific narratives of the women who accused him remain broadly misunderstood, their complexities having been mishandled by the prosecution in the 2016 trial that failed to bring them any sense of closure, or any justice.

And so I ask again—this time as editor of *TRIC/RTAC*—what it means, and what it might mean, to listen thoughtfully, carefully, and without prejudice to women's stories now. This issue offers, I hope, some provisional answers to this difficult but urgent question. In the following pages you will find six full-length articles by seven women researchers, telling a host of *other* women's stories—historical and contemporary, fictional and real, queer and straight, of colour and not of colour. Following that, two more women occupy the pages of this autumn's Forum, with important news for our shared discipline.

To open, Laine Zisman Newman explores what she terms the “lesbian rush” in the work of Toronto-based artist Jess Dobkin. Zisman Newman invites us to witness Dobkin's “rush” and then to question it, seeing in the rush's performative arrest the possibility of hearing, in the gaps and silences Dobkin's *The Magic Hour* makes, a narrative that can't be fully articulated on any other terms but its own. Next, Yasmine Kandil and Michelle MacArthur explore Danya Buonastella and Nina Gilmour's *Death Married My Daughter*, a feminist clown show based on the deaths of Shakespeare's Ophelia and Desdemona. Witnessing the political power of “seduction and provocation” in Buonastella and Gilmour's *bouffon* labour, Kandil and MacArthur argue that their zombie-feminist clowns have much to teach applied theatre practitioners of all backgrounds—provided we are willing to listen carefully to the female dead.

A pair of articles then take on Canadian women's histories, on the page and the stage: Cathleen McKague heads into the archive to follow the breadcrumbs left by Robertson Davies as he prepared to produce *The Taming of the Shrew* in what we might now regard as an original-practices style for the Peterborough Little Theatre, while Shelley Scott returns to the scene of Gwen Pharis Ringwood's iconic *Still Stands the House*. McKague painstakingly details what Davies' hit amateur production can tell us about Canadian practitioners negotiating “British” alongside “Canadian” techniques on the pre-Stratford stage, while Scott considers the interleaving of geography, climate, and violence in Ringwood's representation of settler-colonial gender roles and relationships.

Our final two articles, by Kimberley McLeod and Naila Keleta-Mae, each ask readers to question how the commonplace narratives we tell ourselves as researchers about the art we investigate can work insidiously to legitimize, and to recirculate, normalized perspectives about that art. McLeod looks closely at the comic Nathan Fielder and his spoof reality show *Nathan for You*; Fielder's work, she argues, places theatre-of-the-real traditions in rich and complex conversation with reality television tropes, a move that allows us to question how, and why, cultural critics have implicitly hierarchized these genres as “valuable” and

“dismissable” respectively. Closing our articles section, Keleta Mae surveys Trey Anthony’s labour as both playwright and cultural impresario; she examines how Anthony cultivates sell-out audiences of Black women precisely by sharing those women’s stories, proudly and exclusively, on her stages. Ignoring critics’ complaints about her work (often born of their own Eurocentric, White expectations about what “good” drama looks and sounds like), Anthony makes space for Black women’s bodies, conversations, and catharsis in the auditoriums the critics choose to vacate; their loss is her Black female audience’s gain.

In the Forum this issue, Jill Carter reflects on 50 years of the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto. Carter pays particular attention to how the Centre is actively working toward decolonizing its academic and artistic practices and considers the work that still remains to be done in that vein. Then, in what we hope will become a bi-annual tradition of surveying recent trends in Quebec theatre and performance scholarship, Louise Forsyth offers our first ever review essay of new work from the community’s major scholarly journals. Following Forsyth’s essay, our usual roster of book reviews rounds out the issue.

Nine women, nine narratives—exploratory, critical, unexpected, informative. All different, all presented here by *TRIC/RTAC*’s proud team of seven hard-working female editorial staff: Selena Couture (Book Review Editor), Allison Leadley (EA), Sonya Malaborza (translator), Nicole Nolette (French Language Editor), Cassandra Silver (Managing Editor), Jessica Watkin (EA), and Kim Solga (General Editor).

We hope you enjoy. But please listen carefully.