

## Playwriting and Oral History: An Interview with Playwright Lavonne Mueller

Stratos E. Constantinidis

*Stratos:* Your plays and playwriting theory have been published by such publishers as Applause Books, Baker's Plays, Doubleday, Dramatists Play Service, Meriwether, and Samuel French. Your plays have been produced at The American Place Theatre, Theatre Four, Apple Corps Theatre, Samuel Beckett Theatre, Horace Mann Theatre, the Nat Horne Theatre in New York, as well as in many educational and so-called regional theatres, including The Round House Theatre in Washington, and the Trinity Theatre in Chicago. You have received a Guggenheim Fellowship for Playwriting (1981), a Rockefeller Grant for International Study (1982), the National Organization for Women Award (1984), a Woodrow Wilson Visiting Scholar Fellowship (1985), the New York Drama League Award (1987), a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant (1987), the Columbia Theatre Players Playwriting Award (1988), and a Fulbright Fellowship (1991) to Argentina where you studied the living history of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. Since you received your M.A. degree in English and Drama from Northern Illinois University in 1977, have recognition, income, and opportunity improved for women playwrights—especially in the 1990s?

*Lavonne Mueller:* Few plays by women playwrights appeared on American stages before 1980, and fewer were recognized. Thanks to Julia Miles, who received a grant to have a professional theatre company in New York City, called The Women's Project, plays by women playwrights began to be seen in greater numbers. Most American women playwrights since 1980 have gone through this company. Recognition is still hard to earn, and income is even harder. Playwriting for the live theatre pays very little money outside Broadway. One cannot earn a living from royalties and options unless one also writes for film or television. Most of us have to teach in order to make a living. Those who do not have a job live off the salaries of either their spouse, or their friend, or their parents. Before I became a teacher, I was lucky to receive many grants. From

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Lavonne Mueller was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on August 12, 1945. Stratos E. Constantinidis is author of *Theatre Under Deconstruction?* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1993).

1980 to 1990, I lived entirely on grants and I was writing plays. Now, I am a university teacher. I do not see myself as an exception to the rule of declining economic and artistic opportunity in the live professional theatre.

*Stratos*: Feminists, such as Linda Hart, who argued in 1989 that a woman who writes plays takes a greater risk than a woman who writes poems or novels, feel that the woman playwright may have a greater potential to influence social change than the woman poet. This was perhaps possible to a limited degree in the late 1960s when the feminist theatre groups in the United States were about two hundred strong. This number steadily declined, reaching a present low of about five operating feminist theatre companies. It would seem that, while feminist discourse lost its appeal in the theatre market, it is now flourishing in the academic market. Are the American feminist playwrights and scholars in the ivory towers becoming part of a "cultural elite" who, according to some of their critics, are losing touch with the issues that concern the majority of women in society?

*Lavonne Mueller*: That depends on the particular feminist who may or may not lose touch with the professional theatre and its audiences when she works in an ivory tower. The bridge of scorn between professional theatre and academic theatre is dangerous for both. The Women's Project, for instance, was not connected with any academic theatres, and those playwrights, who wanted to be "grassroots," avoided academic theatre. This was unfortunate, because academic theatre can become the spawning ground for professional theatre. For the time being, academic theatre is more inundated by politics and bureaucracy than professional theatre, and it tries to emulate professional production rather than to lead by experiment and by example. I think the only way for an academic theatre to gain credibility and shake off its disparaging reputation today is to align itself with a professional theatre.

*Stratos*: As the newly appointed director of the Playwrights' Workshop at the University of Iowa, you have succeeded a long line of male directors that goes back to the 1960s—Howard Stein, Oscar Brownstein, David Mowat, and Robert Hedley. Will the UI Playwrights' Workshop take a new direction under your leadership in the 1990s?

*Lavonne Mueller*: I hope so. I will make this academic theatre more of a conservatory than ever before. I do not wish to turn our M.F.A. candidates into just "good" students who hand in plays to be graded like term papers. The emphasis of our programs will be in preparing students for the professional

world. As far as I know, my predecessors developed only a few connections with professional theatres, such as one-year internships. I will build on our internship connections, but I will also encourage our M.F.A. faculty and graduate students to do work with as many major professional theatres as possible, not only through internships, but also through co-productions, and mutual guest employment. You see, the ideas of a playwright may be sound, but in realizing and perfecting those ideas in academic theatre, she usually relies on amateurs. I want students to realize their ideas by working with professionals in an academic or non-academic setting. I feel that nobody learns anything in an academic production that involves only amateurs. In addition, attending the theatre has become expensive, and theatregoers, who pay high prices for mediocre amateur academic performances, hesitate to repeat their subscription. If I cannot take the plays that we write and produce in Iowa City to a professional theatre, say, in Chicago, where our M.F.A. students will have the opportunity to act, direct, and design with professionals as well as to expose their work to audiences outside the academic community, then, we will invite the directors, actors, and designers of that professional company to come and work with us in Iowa City. This year, I brought two professional directors from New York to work with our students on plays written by our students. Most academic theatres are so insulated that they do not realize that the professional artist acts as a catalyst because the students can look up to him. Some university bureaucrats prevent professional actors or directors who do not have an M.F.A. degree from teaching as guest artists in residence. Fortunately, the University of Iowa recognizes artistic awards and recognitions to be equivalent to a terminal degree.

*Stratos:* Feminist theatre historians claim that the work of women theatre artists has been "erased" by male theatre historians. Can feminist playwrights likewise claim that the work of female historical figures such as Susan B. Anthony or Joan of Arc has been erased or distorted by the political agenda of playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw and Jean Anouilh? How did you recover and rewrite the "history" of Joan of Arc in your play, *Little Victories*?

*Lavonne Mueller:* I am an army brat, and I grew up in an army post. As a kid who went to Catholic schools I always wondered who this woman general was. I would ask the nuns, but they wanted me to concentrate on Joan as a saint. All the renditions of Joan that I read had portrayed her as a saint. George Bernard Shaw saw her as a canonized saint. But I saw her as a general, leading the soldiers in battle, climbing walls with them, resting next to them, eating side by side, and so on. I felt that by showing how Joan of Arc or Susan B. Anthony

dealt with down-to-earth everyday situations that involved men, I was presenting a realistic appraisal of these women rather than a preconceived, abstract portrait.

*Stratos*: Some women playwrights, Maria Irene Fornes is an obvious case that comes to mind, have publicly proclaimed that they write plays about women, but they are not feminists. You are probably the only woman playwright who wrote two plays about men with all-male casts. I'm referring to your anti-romantic war-plays, *Warriors from a Long Childhood* and *Five in the Killing Zone*. Do you define yourself as a feminist playwright, a woman playwright or, just a playwright? What purpose would such a distinction serve?

*Lavonne Mueller*: David Mamet isn't called a "male" playwright. I want to be called a playwright. I would hope that I am a humanist more than I am a feminist. When *Five in the Killing Zone* was produced in Robert Redford's Sundance Institute, several feminists walked out of the reading of the play protesting about the derogatory way in which I had the male characters talk about women. I said that I had to be authentic in reporting the way some men talk about women even though I did not like it. These women asked me to change some harsh lines, but I refused. As a playwright, I adhere to the truth of a character before being a woman. A true playwright cannot maintain only one sex when it comes to creating characters. Gender barriers in life and in fiction are suspect. My first play, *Warriors from a Long Childhood*, was about five men in a concentration camp in Korea—a story I heard as a child from my father. These five prisoners did not wish to leave when the MPs came to free them. The MPs literally carried them home. My father thought that these five men were out of their minds and ought to have been tried for treason. As a child, I thought "No, what happened in the minds of those prisoners was not an act of treason, but an act of bonding which nourished strong familial ties among them." When the play was produced by The Women's Project at The American Place Theatre in New York City in 1979, the critic of the New York Times gave me what he thought was the greatest compliment: "If I did not know," he wrote, "I would say that this play was written by a man." All newspaper critics who reviewed *Warriors from a Long Childhood* commented on the unusual fact that it was written by a woman. However, across town, Jack Heifer's play, *Vanities*, was performed and in it women talk about their periods, and their pregnancies, and their divorces, but no critic wrote "Isn't this wonderful that a male playwright wrote a play about women!" This made me think that perhaps there are plays that the critics and the public expect a woman to write. If this is true, this attitude becomes a subtle form of censorship. I was alarmed by this thought so I searched for the great, strong portraits of male characters written by women. I came up with only two: Mary

Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mary Chase's *Harvey*. The first was a monster so probably critics thought a woman could handle it. The second was a male rabbit so I figured the Pulitzer Prize Committee thought that a woman playwright could handle "whimsy". Lillian Hellman wrote in her autobiography that she found it very difficult to write plays that had men in them, and that she preferred to concentrate on women. This attitude frightens me, especially when I look at plays which received mainstream attention, such as *'night*, *Mother*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Heidi Chronicles*. They are all plays a woman is expected to write.

*Stratos*: The image of the "woman warrior" appears in the plays of many feminist playwrights even though it is a questionable image for many feminist critics because it is associated with patriarchal violence. Your two-act play, *Little Victories*, blends fact and fiction as it deals with two female historical figures asserting themselves in a man's world: political activist Susan B. Anthony fighting for women's suffrage in the rugged nineteenth-century American frontier, and general Joan of Arc fighting the English as well as the mistrust of her countrymen in fifteenth-century France. Has the metaphor and identity of the "woman warrior" taken on a new meaning in your play?

*Lavonne Mueller*: I do not admire any warriors of any kind and that includes "women warriors." But I admire men and women who campaign for such causes as equality and human rights, preferably in non-violent ways. For instance, I have no regard for the women warriors who participated in the United Nations operation Desert Storm in Kuwait and Iraq in 1991. Those women emulated the bad traits of men by trying hard to be tough like the boys. I think Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony were lucky to be motivated at an early age by religion and education respectively. Joan was not the medieval counterpart of the Desert Storm woman warrior. Her intuition (voices) gave a humane dimension to her "warrior" identity. Susan, of course, grew up in a family of educators whose influence, along with Mrs. Stanton's, worked like a humanizing buffer during her campaign. Both Susan and Joan had a child-like faith and naivete, not really knowing what they were going up against [laughs]. Both suffered enormous hardships in a landscape of men, and died believing themselves to be failures.

*Stratos*: The political causes of Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony are separated by geographical, temporal, cultural and linguistic barriers. Nonetheless, you knit their stories together when Susan B. Anthony reaches across time to Joan for support and inspiration. Each woman operates within her own period of time in your play, but they interact in three intermediate scenes where they stake out as their final destination a territory beyond war, perhaps beyond history and

gender roles. When Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony slip out of their "feminine" skirts and squeeze into "masculine" clothes, they wish to avoid the trap of existing female roles and to conquer a social space reserved for men. By leaving behind female sexuality, they achieve some recognition through their "little" victories, but they do not secure equality with men. On the other hand, neither woman could achieve her goals in your play without the cooperation of [some] men. The need of these women for acceptance seems to be central to their military and political action. However, what they lack and have to fight for (social equality) antagonizes what they need (male recognition). Am I misinterpreting your play?

*Lavonne Mueller:* No, that's absolutely true! It's a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they will never get that acceptance. On the other hand, they can make some kind of inroads with the help of certain men. And I play with a similar idea with my play, *The Only Woman General*. Here, women can be successful, they can get rank, but they never get the power with the rank. I think it is going to be a long time before women will get the power, and I think it's because—[sighs and stops to rephrase her thought]. I blame women themselves. Look what kind of plays, for instance, most women playwrights are writing even today. *The Heidi Chronicles*, *Crimes of the Heart*, 'night, *Mother*, are all feeding into that attitude. These playwrights and their audiences are still hanging on to a certain kind of femininity. Most male playwrights can forget their masculine self when they create female characters. But we are told that a woman can never forget that she is a woman. This is only a myth.

*Stratos:* A theme in your play is that these women are both victims and heroes because they have been misrecognized by their male-centered society. Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony sacrifice themselves for their political cause because they have an urgent sense that they are "making history." In this sense, the call of ideology (women's rights) is stronger than the call of nature (women's sexuality) in *Little Victories*. But this relationship of ideology to nature is reversed in your recent play, *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*, as nature (motherhood) challenges ideology (fascism). Over 30,000 Argentinians "disappeared" (mostly killed in over 300 secret detention centers) without a trace in the 1970s. The mothers of these young people have been marching in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday at 5 p.m. since 1977, expressing their pain and their resolve to make the government answer their questions about their missing children. President Carlos Menem pardoned the military dictators on December 29, 1990, but he has not answered the questions of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. What is the answer that your play gives to your audiences?

*Lavonne Mueller:* Peaceful, timid, and kind women are capable of persistent, heroic, and violent action against themselves and others in order to protect their children. The military threatened to kill the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo if they did not quit marching. The first Mother was killed brutally, but her murder did not stop the other Mothers from marching. Because of this ferocious instinct to protect their children, the Mothers were the only ones who stood up against the military. The fathers of those children were afraid for their jobs and lives. It was the Mothers who said to the military government that they would not let anyone forget until they had some answers to their questions about their missing children. It was important to me to show that very ordinary and poorly educated women were forced to rise and take a stand against what happened to their children. The play also shows that the Mothers preferred protest over mourning. Mourning has traditionally been regarded as a passive female way of expressing deep sorrow. Well, the Mothers prefer to rise and march every Thursday rather than sit down and mourn. As we speak, one of the Mothers is on trial in Buenos Aires for publicly calling Argentinian President Carlos Menem "trash." Many Argentinians wish that the Mothers would stop airing Argentina's dirty linen in public. These Argentinians are among those who did not lose any children during the Dirty War.

*Stratos:* Your play raises masculinity into a cult in Argentina. From the "gaucho" riding the stony "mesa" to the military precision of the Tango, "machismo" becomes a popular national metaphor. General Gustavo Bonifaz tells Esme Navarro, "A country that has no history has only style. Unlike you, Senorita, I study style. And I'm sorry to say that style belongs to the male. *Machismo* is not an ugly word. Oh, they will tell you so in North American books. But my gender is Argentina's true fashion." These are condemning words. In some cultures "to forgive and to forget" the dirty civil wars of the past is considered to be a step towards "progress". You resent this attitude in your play. In fact, you transform the absence of historical evidence about the missing children into a record of pain and loss through the testimony of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. Their silent marches wearing masks and white scarfs on their heads with the names of their missing children stitched on the back become a living memorial more eloquent than the Vietnam memorial in Washington. How long do you think that this monument of oral history will be able to survive, and how will your play help echo the Mothers' questions from production to production?

*Lavonne Mueller:* I felt that most Argentinians do not wish to acknowledge history. They want to erase the past and forget everything. If one pays his bills

in Argentina, nobody cares what he did and where he came from. I heard a German in Buenos Aires say one can be more of a Nazi in Argentina than in Germany. I was shocked to see that swastika pins are openly displayed for sale in every street market. In the play, the General sees *machismo* as a shared good which constitutes the foundation of Argentinian democracy. I was being ironic, of course, but there is an eerie truth about this perception. For example, the rage among Argentinian men—including the Mayor of Buenos Aires and the President of Argentina—is to brag that they had been taken prisoner and had been tortured during the Dirty War. But their bragging turns the humiliating experience of torture into a worthwhile manhood ritual. And these tough guys have tough stomachs. I could not fail noticing that all gourmet Argentinian restaurants display the carcasses of the slaughtered animals in their windows in order to stimulate the appetite of their customers. Most Argentinians consider themselves Europeans. I felt that I was visiting one of the capitals of Europe because Buenos Aires is the most un-South-American city. It has randomly copied architectural styles from every major European town and period. In this sense, style is their history. But this style of theirs is as superficial and absurd as their graffiti. For instance, when I visited the headquarters of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo on the second floor of a two-story brick building on Hipolito Yrigoyen Street in Buenos Aires, the word *puta* (prostitute) was smeared in red paint on the entrance. Their "headquarters" are a three-room office donated by the government of Holland. One of the three rooms serves as a museum—the pictures of the missing children hang on the walls. The second room has a desk. This is where the Mothers organize their marches and send out information. I was in this room when the Mothers received a death threat, in other words, "if you don't stop marching, we are going to kill you." I asked them if they were frightened. They said no. They were very happy that I was writing the play about them. Publicity of any kind serves them in two ways: it offers them some protection and keeps their cause alive. I remember one time being in their headquarters and wanting to touch a scarf. They responded as if I had asked to touch the Eucharist. I realized that their scarfs *are* their children. I kind of felt that their missing children are very much present in the weekly marches of the Mothers. As long as the Mothers march, their children still exist. Very much like the Jews after the holocaust of the Second World War, the Mothers do not wish people to forget the Dirty War, and are a living reminder that atrocities of this kind should not be allowed to happen again. They march in protest against those in power who wish to erase the past. George Santayana says somewhere that we must remember the circumstances and mistakes of the past so that we do not repeat them. It was very urgent for me to visit the Mothers because this living memorial is aging fast. Some of the mothers are getting old and arthritic and can no longer march. I



would be surprised if any Mothers will be still around to march by the beginning of the twenty-first century. I hope that their march will continue in my play for a very long time. The mother's protest that echos in my play is quite simple: A government cannot wipe out a portion of its subjects without a public trial—even if these subjects are suspected for subversive, anti-government activities. How to protect human rights is becoming a bigger and bigger issue every year.

*Stratos:* Like a biographer who wishes to have direct contact with the person she writes about, you entered into the [hi]story of the Mothers in a very big way. As you did years earlier at Domremy, France, where you walked the hills and streets of Joan's hometown, you marched with the Mothers in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina. You interviewed the Mothers, and you recorded their "oral" histories. Why then did you choose to distance your audience from the Mothers and deprive it of a similar experience of proximity through your play?

*Lavonne Mueller:* I did not experience a great sense of proximity when I visited either Domremy or Buenos Aires. Actually, I felt that I was getting a kind of Brechtian sense of the subject without being totally immersed in it. I was not [re]living their [hi]stories. The subject of the Mothers, in particular, is so heroic and horrific that audiences may get emotionally involved and may fail to see how or why this happened to the mothers and their children. I did not want to manipulate the audience's emotions. I wanted to distance the audience so that it could see the historical frame and how to prevent this cultural and socio-political climate from occurring in the future. It was important not just to have these women on stage being mothers, but to get the audience to see the social, political, and cultural conditions in which these mothers lived. These conditions had a kind of surreal touch to them in the 1970s. For instance, Peron ordered Evita's body to be embalmed with a special kind of fluid that would make her what he called "intacta" forever. The embalmer lived with Evita's body in a room for one year perfecting it. Then, Evita's body disappeared for seventeen years.

*Stratos:* Speaking of Brecht, he claims, in his essay, "The Popular and the Realistic," that a playwright should come from the people about whom he writes. You write for a people without living among them. You have only been an American tourist in Argentina. You did not share the culture, language, and economic conditions of the Mothers. How do you justify your intervention?

*Lavonne Mueller:* I may not be an Argentinian citizen, but I am a mother. Motherhood is a very strong universal experience, and became the connecting link that helped me tunnel into the material. I told the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo

about the mothers of DeKalb, Illinois, who marched against the war in Vietnam in the early 1970s in the main street of this little town near Chicago where I live. The march in DeKalb never attracted the wide attention of the marches in the Plaza de Mayo. You see, when young American men were disappearing during the war in Vietnam, it was the students, not the mothers, who were rebelling in the United States. Mothers had always had to deal with their sons going off to war. Oliver Stone's screenplay, *Born on the 4th of July* (1991), showcased the attitude of an American mother towards her son. More recently, I was appalled by those American mothers who appeared on television and said how proud they were of their children who fought, killed, and got killed during the United Nations' Operation Desert Storm. The big question for me was Why some mothers in Argentina are different from some mothers in America. It's not simply a matter of economy, culture, or language.

*Stratos*: You wrote a lyrical poem, entitled, "An Experienced Actor" (1986) for actress Colleen Dewhurst, who played the mother of anchorwoman Murphy Brown on television, and who died recently. There are four lines in this poem whose meaning eludes me. "Everything you see has a double life. Acting is singing to yourself in captivity. Acting is dancing without a father. You have chosen a dangerous job, my friend." Most feminist playwrights have explored themes between mothers and daughters, but in your poem as well as in your plays, you have explored themes between fathers and daughters. Some daughters (Joan of Arc) flirt with the military. Other daughters (the Mothers) challenge the military. How much of your biography goes into the history of Joan of Arc, Susan B. Anthony, and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo?

*Lavonne Mueller*: My attitude is extremely anti-military. I am obsessed in that way: any chance I can to strike at them, I will use. But my attitude has nothing to do with my father. My father graduated from the Military Academy at West Point, and he served in Korea in the early 1950s. Oh, dear, another United Nations war! [laughs]. My father was not a devious person. He was honest in his own way, but he had bought into the system. He was the system. He would not question it, and he could not see the other side. To me, there is always this huge force, which is the military, and the little people, like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who fight it.

*Stratos*: Could you put in a nutshell your theory of playwriting?

*Lavonne Mueller*: My job as a playwright is to stir the conscience of my countrymen. It is my duty to sort out the massive details of world affairs, to

focus on some of the victors or victims, and to get the theatregoers to pay attention to the issues and the people involved. I focus on affairs that make me angry because they are unjust, and I focus on persons who go unrecognized by the mass media which bring half-truths into our living rooms. Playwriting, unlike any other genre, gives me the impression that I am creating a new world. I remember my response when I saw my first play performed for the first time: what I wrote on paper came alive and breathed on the stage. It is important that I entertain my audiences, but it's also important that I make a social statement. What keeps me at my desk writing every day is the urgency of my focus—whether it is an individual who has suffered, or a political system that has gone awry, or some group interests which have perpetrated horrific deeds.

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