APPENDIX
10.10.2002

From:

Mrs. Geetha Manivasagam,
Lecturer in English,
Holy Cross College (Autonomous),
Tiruchirapalli -620 002,
Tamil Nadu,
India.

Dear Madam,


I had made several attempts to get your e-mail address and your website address. But since I did not succeed, I am writing to you in person. Your answers to these queries will greatly help me in completing my work:

1. How far do you think your plays have contributed towards the creation of a National Theatre and a National Drama?
2. Can it be said that you are a forerunner of women's theatre collectives founded in the 1990s (like The Company of Sirens based in Toronto, and Sistren Theatre Collectives based in Kingston, Jamaica)?
3. Among the protagonists in the six plays I have taken for study, with whom do you sympathize the most? and why?
   i. Which character has been the toughest to create and why?
4. What are your current artistic concerns and preoccupations in drama?
5. What direction is Canadian drama taking in the 21st century?
6. What is the most recent work you have published and the one you are currently working on?
7. Is there religious alienation in any of the protagonists I have taken for study?

I shall be very grateful if you could send your valuable answers to these questions through e-mail to the following address:
e-mail address: geethamanivasag @ hot mail.com
geethamanivasag @ rediff mail.com

In case you are not able to reply through e-mail kindly reply through post. My postal address is: Mrs. Geetha Manivasagam- 64/9c/3 Nachiar Palayam, Woraiyur, Trichy-3.

Tamil Nadu, India- Pin Code: 620 003.

Thanking You in anticipation.

Geetha Manivasagam
Hello Mrs Manivasagam:

I do hope you receive this in time for your thesis. In answer to your questions:

1. Your first question (re a "National Drama" and "National Theatre" in Canada, and my contribution to it) is a most interesting one. I find it interesting because I think it debatable as to whether we have a National Theatre or a National Drama. We certainly have a canon of plays written by Canadians and a number of theatres throughout the country which produce plays, some of which are written by Canadians. And I and/or my plays have contributed to, and in, this activity. If this creation and production of plays constitute a National Drama and a National Theatre then I believe I've played a fairly important role. I was one of those playwrights who emerged after our 1967 Centennial Celebrations during which Government monies targeted various cultural activities that heralded a "Canadian identity". My work drew and draws on my experience living in a particular time and place and thus spoke to others from here and now in a way they found truthful. In the early 70's (a time when the Government feared U.S. social and political unrest would spill over into Canada) I and my work benefited from Government sponsored work and employment programs which supported theatre projects among a number of other projects of "community value". (In my opinion these programs existed for political as opposed to cultural or social reasons). Cultural agencies then took over the public funding of much of this theatre activity because it was successful and had gained an audience.

We now have a network of playwriting service and workshop organizations across the country. Produced plays are often (although not always) published and we are told something like 73% of work produced by our professional theatres is Canadian. (Again in my opinion) this is not an accurate picture of reality. Service and workshop organizations provide employment opportunities for directors, dramaturges, actors, designers, administrators, no plays are produced, and it is questionable as to whether they turn out better plays or whether plays that are more theatrical or experimental in form or content are well served by the present workshop structure. As the publication of Canadian plays is underwritten by public monies, issues of gender, geographic region, race, ethnic heritage, as well as production become factors in publication decisions. So while published plays may reflect a great diversity of playwrights, this diversity is not reflected in the plays produced across the country. For example, an Asian theatre company may produce a play which makes it eligible for publication but it may never be produced again in this country. As for the 73% figure that is quoted when theatre companies defend their programming decisions - this figure does not make a distinction between those small marginal companies producing only Canadian work, the medium companies producing mostly...
Canadian work, and the large companies who produce Canadian work in their large theatres once a season and relegate other Canadian work to much or "studios". In other words the figure of 73% is misleading as smaller and alternative companies with fewer financial and human resources produce the bulk of the work.

Our two most important and nationally known companies are dedicated to the work of foreign playwrights: The Shakespeare Festival Theatre, and The Shaw Festival. Although both are now making overtures to more production of Canadian work their mandate is still the work of William Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw whose plays they reproduce year after year.

I won't go on any longer but suffice it to say that I believe we have yet to achieve a National Theatre or Drama. I don't believe theatre companies or plays alone can legitimize either. Almost all the players in the majority of our theatre companies, actors, directors, designers, stage managers, producers, playwrights and their stories as well as audience members are white middle or upper class Canadians. They do not reflect our national multicultural and ethnic diversity. How can one honestly speak of a National Drama or Theatre when so many stories and people (either as makers of theatre or as audience members) are excluded from the majority of the activity? I believe a great deal of this problem is a result of our colonial heritage.

I won't go on any more. As you can see you have hit on a topic about which I feel strongly.

2. I greatly respect the work of those who creatively interpret my work - director, designer, actor. Their contribution to the final script as a result of the first (and sometimes the second) production has been most valuable in refining the script. But I don't think that kind of collaboration around rehearsal and production reflects the same kind of collaboration that takes place in the collective creation of a script. As well I've most often worked within traditional or established theatre companies with traditional trained actors. My attempts to change that status quo has not always been successful. It might be said that in some ways my political and social concerns re the content of my plays is a relative of the concerns that motivated Company of Sirens and Sistren Theatre Collectives. I think others who know more might be a better able to assess whether I was in any way a forerunner or not.

3i. "with whom do I sympathize the most"? That's a hard one. It's impossible to say. When I'm writing a play I feel like I understand and make no moral judgement on any character. Each one does what each thinks is the best thing they can do under the circumstances. I don't believe anyone sets out to do evil although what they do may be evil. The character's motivations may not be ones I support but when I'm writing that character I support them wholeheartedly. I make no moral judgements. That is the job of the audience. And if I'm truthful to the reality will emerge because I believe ultimately there is moral order in the universe. As the playwright I have compassion for every one of my characters. I have to sympathize with every one of them because they are making difficult decisions and making difficult decisions isn't easy. If it were easy it wouldn't be worth writing a play about.

3ii "toughest"? Once again I have to say I don't know. Perhaps in some ways it's been the female characters. Perhaps Miss Lizzie in "Blood Relations" because her feelings most closely resembled my own feelings at times in my life. I need distance from characters and at the same time I need to be them. I realize that's a contradiction but that contradiction is essential for my writing - another way of putting it might be that I need both to see into the character and to see out of the character, to be both inside and outside simultaneously. At times I wasn't far enough outside Miss Lizzie. Ev in "Tiger" was difficult because I'd done a lot of research and spent time with both prisoners and guards in our prison system and I was torn between the plight of those who were imprisoned and those who imprisoned them.

4. Some of my current concerns are probably evident in the answer to your first question. I'm concerned with the structures within which we work in this country. I don't think they serve creativity. I'm concerned by the impact of television and the resulting banality of some of the work we produce. I'm concerned by the marginalizing and ghettoizing of theatre by minority Canadians. I'm concerned with whether it is an act of self-absorption to try and make
theatre when one might be better employed serving food to the homeless or working against bullies with big sticks and depleted uranium missiles.

5 I'm deeply afraid that theatre in the 21st century in Canada will see increasing polarization of small marginalized artist subsidized companies creating perhaps important work, with larger companies becoming "entertainment centres" producing expensive irrelevant escapism with public dollars. Maybe tomorrow I'll feel differently.

6. I have three new plays, produced in each of the last three years by Theatre Junction in Calgary: "Moving Pictures" "End Dream" "Angel's Trumpet". They will be published by Playwrights Canada Press in Toronto in the spring 2003.

I'm presently researching and delving into material related to the Palestinian Occupation; I have no idea where it will lead me in terms of a play. It seems crazy but I'm also researching material on Northern Canada. Once again I have no idea how these two things might come together. I'll go where it leads me.

7. Your question re alienation spiritually or religiously. I believe part of Hopkinson's journey springs from his denial of his heritage. (Komagata Maru) The manner in which he accepts his death "I open my arms I say Now" and his recital of the Sikh verse represents his wholeness at the moment of his death, which I think of as his return to his Indian mother and religion. I believe Sitting Bull's (Walsh) spiritual instruction to his son enables him to face the challenge fate and time has presented. I'm not sure that moral questions that may underlie my plays have religious underpinnings which is not to say I don't believe they exist. I just don't know if they're there or not.

I hope this has been useful and is not too late.
Sharon Pollock