A SISTERHOOD OF WOMEN: MARSHA NORMAN'S *GETTING OUT* AND *THE LAUNDROMAT*

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Despite their dreary milieu, these are plays of healing and hope. In *Getting Out* Arlene learns to integrate the violent past she has disavowed, and in *The Laundromat* Deedee makes her first tentative steps towards emancipation. Marsha Norman is not simply anti-men; her female figures, especially the heroines' mothers, can be equally destructive. Arlene herself is both victim and victimizer, though some critics have blamed her fate solely on society. A sympathetic neighbour helps Arlene to free herself from her dependence on men and to reconcile herself to both her bleak future and her criminal past. In *The Laundromat* the betrayed wife Deedee stifles her awareness of her misery by chatting incessantly, but is finally made to acknowledge her frustrations and, in the end, welcomes the opportunity of reflecting quietly on her life. Alberta, in turn, is prevented from turning the washing of her deceased husband's clothes into a morbid ritual. Although no permanent friendship is established, both carry a sense of female sisterhood into their otherwise desolate lives.

Like many recent women writers, Marsha Norman is more concerned with the interaction between women than with the intercourse between the sexes. In several of her plays, most notably in her best known drama, *Night, Mother*, she focuses on the destructive bond between mother and daughter. In the earlier *Getting Out* and *The Laundromat,* however, she keeps the negative mother-figure in the background as a minor character, and instead foregrounds a more positive relationship, presenting what is so often proclaimed in feminist circles and so seldom shown on stage, a sisterhood of women. To be sure, the contacts established are precarious and may merely be short-lived, but in both plays women find strength and a new insight into their predicaments by confiding in another woman.

In *Getting Out* and *The Laundromat* Norman presents young women from the lowest social stratum, enmeshed in dire economic straits and appalling

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family circumstances. Arlene, just released from prison after serving eight years for manslaughter, and Deedee, who takes her washing to the laundromat at 3 o'clock in the morning because she is sick of waiting for her faithless husband to come home, find themselves without job, education or future prospects and confined to crummy apartments lacking all amenities (Deedee cannot afford a washing machine, and Arlene lacks even the bare necessities of life). The men with whom they are involved are, somewhat stereotypically, brutal and exploitative, and try to keep them dependent on and subservient to conveniently traditional roles.

Yet crushing as these living conditions may be, the outside world is not really the "permanent prison" (Fox 317). Arlene may well think it to be when she sees the bars on the windows of her new apartment (meant to keep out burglars). Rather, their true prison is of psychological origin; both women cannot come to terms with their own personalities. Arlene must accept and integrate her past before she can be truly free — even if she will henceforth have to drudge in a kitchen for a living. And Deedee, who sets up a mirror to have the company of at least one face in the empty apartment, even if it be her own, must learn to accept loneliness as part of the human condition before she can hope to emancipate herself. In these developments Arlene and Deedee are supported by a casual acquaintance who subsequently becomes a confidante.

In both *Getting Out* and *The Laundromat* the contact that will prove so felicitous is established cautiously and is originally fraught with tension, though for different reasons. Arlene, who mistrusts her very kith and kin and has learned to be wary of the price exacted for a favour rendered, at first wards off the friendly advances of her neighbour Ruby and withdraws into herself. Alberta, the retired teacher who comes to the laundromat in the dead of night to wash her deceased husband's shirts, initially feels annoyed by Deedee's intrusion and is contemptuous of her ignorance. In both plays overtures of friendship are made on a superficial, non-committal note. Ruby offers Arlene the use of her telephone, which the latter declines, and invites her up to play cards, which Arlene eventually accepts. Alberta turns down Deedee's offer of refreshment but nervously agrees to use her downy for the wash. Following this banal opening common ground is found, rather humorously, when the two women exchange similar experiences as regards the stubbornness and insensitivity of men. Arlene and her neighbour quip at the number of men "come without ears" (51) when they ought to listen to a woman's advice or opinion. Alberta and Deedee shake their heads at men's predilection for letting women watch them at work, without accepting their help or offering them a share in the task. For the characters such clichés establish a common enemy against whom the female camp can join hands. However, as far as the audience can see, these qualities are, ironically, by no means restricted to men. Both Arlene's and Deedee's mothers are no less patronizing and deaf to the needs of their children. They insist on doing the

housework on their own, relegating their daughters to the position of incompetent spectators, mistrusting their ability to cope with such mundane matters as setting the temperature of a dryer or sweeping the floor. Deedee's mindless mother does not "say two words" (76) when her daughter comes to wash her clothes and, having carped about Joe from the beginning, is "the last person" (77) the girl would tell about her marital problems. Arlene's hard-hearted mother refuses to invite her home, assuming per se that her daughter, for all her disclaimers, will go back to her pimp and whores with the prison guard who drove her home.

In view of these frustrating relationships it is all the more surprising that the three main characters all perceive children as a source of hope, indeed salvation. Deedee is bitterly disappointed that Joe intends to spend his money on racing cars rather than on a family, and elderly Alberta sighs for the children she has never had with Herb. For Arlene the hope of regaining custody of her boy is the chief motivation for her wish to rehabilitate herself.

Getting Out is a more complex psychological study. Throughout the play Arlene appears as a split personality, with one actress taking the part of the older, reformed Arlene, and another actress simultaneously representing the aggressive young Arlie. Arlene wants to leave her past behind her, but is constantly reminded of her destructive, youthful self by the scenes, objects and emotions she encounters. For Arlene, these memories are only painful. She would wish to dissociate herself completely from her former self, which she has been taught to regard as evil and harmful, and even refuses to be called by her childhood name, "Arlie." She constantly disavows her potential for violence, being at the same time disagreeably aware of the pent-up aggression with which Arlie would have responded to events.

Terry Curtis Fox has argued that this tame Arlene is not rehabilitated, but "gutted" (Fox 317). To be sure, we see how Arlie's will was broken by solitary confinement, but nobody could have wished the murderous, pathologically bellicose Arlie to continue as she was. She is emphatically not a case of a noble savage crushed by the forces of society. Marsha Norman modelled her Arlie on her personal experience of a severely disturbed girl in an institution, who was absolutely "vicious" and "terrifying" to all around her (Norman 1982: 362). Arlie is clearly both a victim (of child abuse by her father and of sexual exploitation as a prostitute) and a criminal (she is a murderer, forger and thief whose sadistic joy in infflicting pain is emphasized from the very outset), both the object of aggression and the aggressor. The treatment Arlie receives in prison may not be psychologically refined, it may even be cruel, but to regret the result, i.e. to prefer Arlie to the more mature Arlene, is perverse, as is the concept that after her attempted suicide Arlene *"dwindles* into a model prisoner and a parolee" (Weales 362, emphasis added). There is no reason in the play to doubt the value of social integration in itself, although Norman makes it clear that Arlene's economic options will be extremely restricted and her life is likely to be bleak. As

Simon stresses, Norman's characters have "intelligence, wit and pride" (Simon 317) — but not only before their imprisonment. To be sure, Arlene may momentarily be gripped by "terror" at "facing life without training, prospects, love" (Kroll 362), but she gains courage from her friendship with a girl who has gone through a similar experience. It would therefore be wrong to speak about the "predictable" "downhill structure" (Kerr 318) of the play, with one prop after the other failing Arlene. This interpretation overlooks the fact that Arlene refuses to accept defeat, rejects unwelcome male "protection", and, through the help of a female friend, faces her situation with a new determination. Norman herself says: "I always write about ... people having the nerve to go on" (1982: 361).

There can be no doubt that Arlene's decision to send her pimp packing and not to buy herself a comfortable life by shacking up with the prison guard she does not care for should be evaluated positively. Before she can do so, however, she must first come to terms with the past she so fervently rejects. In this respect the role the prison chaplain played in Arlie's reform is somewhat ambiguous. Arlene herself credits him with having changed her life for the better, but critics have seen him both as her good angel (Simon 318) and the person "responsible for the gravest brutality done to her" (Fox 317). For all we know, he must have had a positive impact on her (he was the only one the innately violent prisoner was eager to talk to); but he also confused her with his religious gibberish. She can hardly repeat his antiquated Biblical phrases, let alone understand them. Just as she interpreted the prophecy that the meek shall inherit the earth as a promise that God will provide her with a well-paid job if she "quit[s] bein' so hateful" (51), she also misunderstood his metaphor that her evil self, Arlie, was harmful to her and would be killed off by God. As a result she tried to kill herself with a fork. Arlie was certainly self-destructive long before she met the chaplain, at least subconsciously (she refused to eat, she set her blouse on fire); but the minister is surely to blame for the split in her personality that is now tearing her apart.

The point is not whether Arlie's shadow will ever "let her [Arlene] go" (Simon 318), because it would be futile and, indeed, schizophrenic even to attempt to escape from her former ego as from a private nemesis. Rather, it is necessary for her to accept this part of herself, good or bad, and to learn to come to terms with it. Indeed, while constantly asserting her rejection of Arlie, Arlene is, in fact, overwhelmed by an irremediable sense of loss at having to deny part of herself. Significantly, it is Ruby, an ex-convict herself, with a similar phase of disappointment and disorientation after her own release, who finds the words to enable Arlene to reconcile herself to her youthful daemon: "You can still ... (*Stops to think how to say it*) ... you can still love people that's gone" (54). Hence it is not the Chaplain who plays "midwife" (Simon 318) to Arlene's mature personality, but her new friend Ruby, who suggests to her a new, healing and integrating approach to the

past she has outgrown.

The courage to face and accept her youthful self also gives her the resolve necessary to organize her life, to quell false hopes and unrealistic dreams and to emancipate herself from her dependence on men. Instead, she opts for Ruby's friendship, accepting the invitation to a card game she rejected earlier and deciding to take the dishwashing job Ruby suggested to her. Having made these decisions, she can for the first time encounter the phantom Arlie with a smile. In her last speech she laughs fondly and half nostalgically both with and at Arlie. When she gains the strength to smile at her former impetuosity and vindictiveness, she also gains the strength to see the humour in her mother's dismay at her "hateful" daughter, and can thus replace her paralyzing feeling of rejection with a more mature viewpoint.

The meeting in *The Laundromat* is much more fleeting. In *Getting Out* Ruby shares with Arlene class affiliation, age, background and experience, and can therefore sympathize and offer cautious advice. The retired teacher and the low-class girl in *The Laundromat* are different in age, class and education, and upon first sight seem to have little in common. Yet this play, too, suggests a female sisterhood — no matter how short and temporary the contact — which transcends these social differences. Deedee, uneducated, poor, helplessly jealous and miserable because she has just found out that her husband is betraying her, pretending to work night shifts but in reality amusing himself with other women, comes to realize that, for all the well-to-do status and education she envies, the widowed Alberta is really no better off. The only difference is that she has learned to accept her loneliness. "We might be related" (64) the girl says naively early in the play when she learns that she and the stranger she has just met in the laundromat have the same surname. But in fact the remark does hit upon a more hidden and metaphorical truth. Through the gradations of indifference, annoyance, withdrawal, inadvertent confession, real pity and a shy, but genuine attempt to reach out to the other woman, the two protagonists experience a sense of female propinquity.

Both women have to confront a loneliness deriving from a painful sense of absence and loss. After her husband's death Alberta finds herself forlorn after years of happy marriage. On being deceived, Deedee is no less disconsolate. Although she must have suspected Joe's indifference for some time, she now has final proof of his unfaithfulness, and she attempts to stifle her awareness of her misery by talking incessantly. Throughout the play she babbles on compulsively, at first keeping up the fiction that he is working overtime, then acknowledging her fury and frustration. She finds it easier to articulate these emotions to another woman — a stranger — than to her insensitive mother, who "tried to get [her] off" (66). Joe from the outset, let alone to the man himself. She complains that she would not know what to say to Joe, when Alberta suggests that she ought to let him have a piece of her mind. She is afraid that any such confrontation might be an excuse for

him to leave her for good.

> I don't want to start it. I don't want to say I want a real job, 'cause then I'll say the reason I want a real job is I gotta have something to think about besides when are you coming home and how long is it gonna be before you don't come home at all. And he'll say what do you mean don't come home at all and I'll have to tell him I know what you're doing, I know you're lying to me and going out on me and he'll say what are you gonna do about it. You want a divorce? And I don't want him to say that.
>
> (76)

Deedee easily enough finds words to voice her feelings when talking to Alberta, perhaps because she senses that the other woman can relate to her problems despite her smug façade. Though as a rule unable to sound out emotional subtleties, she conversely, also instinctively, knows that the older woman did not want her to touch the stained shirt because it is a relic, and that Alberta's husband is, in fact, dead, not out of town.

This night both women are compelled to face the truth about their lives. As far as Deedee is concerned, the conversation with Alberta forces her to admit that she is alone with or without Joe. When the lights finally go on in her apartment, she does not rush into his arms. For once she prefers to be on her own and to think. Of course, we do not know whether she will actually heed Alberta's advice that her own face in the mirror is really better company than the man she so clings to; indeed, there is reason to doubt that she will emancipate herself so quickly. But she no longer needs to stifle her awareness by talking incessantly, and can relish the idea of "a little peace and quiet" (81), thus indicating a new willingness to reflect on her life.

Alberta, too, who was at first anxious to keep her distance from the talkative low-class girl, gains something from the brief encounter. She had gone to the laundromat late at night to be alone in the gruelling ordeal of washing her dead husband's shirts and thus closing the book of her married life. Deedee's presence has prevented her from turning the wash into a ritual and has forced her to rejoin the living. In the end she is genuinely grateful for having been denied yet another opportunity to indulge in her grief.

Admittedly, unlike in *Getting Out*, no permanent friendship is established. Alberta offers Deedee her first name and a kiss, but not her phone number. It is clear that their encounter has been merely temporary. Yet from the casual contact struck up in the female preserve of the laundromat both women carry away something of human warmth, a small satisfaction, a sense of community, into their otherwise desolate lives.

"The people I care about," Marsha Norman said in an interview (1982: 361), "are those folks you wouldn't even notice in life — two women in a laundromat late at night as you drive by, a thin woman in an ugly scarf standing over the luncheon meat at the grocery, a tiny gray lady buying a big sack of chocolate-covered raisins and a carton of Kools." The story she weaves around these unpromising characters is not one of conflict, but of

healing, one not based on confrontation, but on the fragile sense of sisterhood.

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Παρά το μελαγχολικό τους περίγυρο πρόκειται για έργα επούλωσης και ελπίδας. Η Arlene, στο *Getting Out*, μαθαίνει πώς να συμβιβάσει το βίαιο παρελθόν που έχει αποκηρύξει και η Deedee, στο *Laundromat*, κάνει τα πρώτα της δοκιμαστικά βήματα προς τη χειραφέτηση. Η Marsha Norman δε στρέφεται απλά κατά των ανδρών. Οι γυναικείες της φιγούρες, ειδικά οι μητέρες των ηρωΐδων, μπορούν να είναι ιδιαίτερα καταστροφικές. Η Arlene η ίδια είναι και θύμα και θύτης μαζί, μολονότι κάποιοι κριτικοί έχουν αποδόσει τη μοίρα της αποκλειστικά στην κοινωνία. Μια γειτόνισσα που τη συμπαθεί βοηθάει την Arlene να ελευθερώσει τον εαυτό της από την εξάρτησή της από τους άνδρες και να συμφιλιωθεί τόσο με το σκοτεινό της μέλλον όσο και με το ένοχο παρελθόν της. Στο πλυντήριο η προδομένη σύζυγος Deedee καταπνίγει την αυτογνωσία της μιζέριας της με την ακατάσχετη φλυαρία της, αλλά στο τέλος καταφέρνει να παραδεχθεί τις απογοητεύσεις της και τελικά καλωσορίζει την ευκαιρία να καθήσει να σκεφθεί ήσυχα πάνω στη ζωή της. Η Alberta με τη σειρά της δεν αφήνεται να μεταστρέψει το πλύσιμο των ρούχων του νεκρού συζύγου της σε μια νοσηρή τελετουργία. Μολονότι δε δημιουργείται καμιά μόνιμη φιλία μεταξύ των δύο γυναικών και οι δύο αποκομίζουν μια αίσθηση γυναικείας "αδελφοποίησης" μέσα στην κατά τα άλλα έρημη ζωή τους.