# SPIRALS FROM THE MATRIX:

# THE FEMINIST PLAYS OF

# MARTHA BOESING,

# AN ANALYSIS

by

Lynne Greeley

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Patti P. Gillespie
Professor Carla Peterson
Professor Roger Meersman
Professor Robert P. Kolker
Professor Evelyn T. Beck

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: Spirals from the Matrix: The Feminist Plays of Martha Boesing, An Analysis

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Martha Boesing is a feminist playwright who in association with the feminist theatre, At the Foot of the Mountain, has written and produced feminist plays since 1974. Boesing has contributed to the development of feminist dramatic theory and criticism in the United States.

In this dissertation, Boesing's twenty-two published and produced plays are analyzed. The analyses are placed in the context of the experimental theatre movement of the 1960s and the women's movement of the 1970s in the United States and in Minneapolis, where At the Foot of the Mountain is located. The scripts are analyzed for recurrent patterns in the use of the stage space, the development of the characters, the organization of the dramatic structure and form, and the manipulation of the language and music. Throughout the analyses, particular attention is given to the ways in which Boesing's feminist thinking informs her work so that feminist theatre may be

distinguished from other forms of experimental theatre. In addition to the analyses of the written texts, a video of a performance and the film of a play are analyzed. Finally, feminist dramatic theory as represented by Boesing is compared to relevant feminist theories of literature and film.

Thus, this dissertation is a case study of a radical feminist playwright in the United States, who consciously rejected the commercial theatre to work regionally, and who, in a feminist theatre, produced a significant body of work as a feminist in a feminist context. Boesing's strategies of writing can therefore be seen as representative of a successful feminist playwright.

# PREFACE

The Oxford English Dictionary defines matrix as follows:

> Matrix: in L. womb, in older Latin pregnant animal, female animal used for breeding; app. f. mater mother, by change of the ending.
> 1. The uterus or womb. Also occas. used for Ovary.
> 2. A place or medium in which something is bred, produced, or developed.
> 3. A place or point of origin or growth.

Martha Boesing, as a feminist playwright, writes from the matrix of her experience. Her published volume of works, Journey Along the Matrix, is titled to illuminate her experience as an artist and a woman. With the author's permission, the volume of plays forms the basis for the title of this dissertation.

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to
Patti P. Gillespie, Bobbi Ausubel, and Martha Boesing
who are true sisters.

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# CHAPTER I

# AN INTRODUCTION

Feminism in theatre, like feminism in society, has been controversial. There has been no universal agreement in theatre, or in society, about the meaning of the word feminist, or about how feminism relates to words like female, feminine, womanly. In theatre, as in society, different groups of self-described feminists occasionally compete--heterosexual and lesbian feminists, black and white feminists, and feminists who want to work within the system and those who want to destroy and build anew. Indeed, so problematic has the term feminist theatre become that several theatres now call themselves women's theatres instead of feminist theatres to avoid the controversy and confusion that the word feminist engenders. Thus, the process of defining feminist theatre is as difficult as defining feminist literature, for within the theatre groups, no standard definition exists.

In spite of the lack of agreement on definitions, there is one point of agreement among feminists in society and in theatre: women in contemporary culture are oppressed. Thus, women, as an oppressed group, are subject to mistreatment by other groups, by society at large, and by members of their own group based on the accumulation of misinformed attitudes and the

rigidification of those attitudes into societal institutions.

Some feminists have chosen to use theatre as a way of presenting and exploring the issues of feminism. When an organized theatre takes as a major goal such exploration, it has been called a feminist theatre, or, alternately, a women's theatre because the use of the wider classification seems less threatening to some audiences. Feminist theatres and women's theatres committed to a feminist perspective attempt to make the oppression of women visible and consequently to change misinformed attitudes and the institutions that rigify those attitudes. Because such artistic work is directly affected by the political events of the culture, a study on feminist theatre necessarily must consider the major trends of that culture.

Despite the presence of feminist theatre, feminist criticism of drama and theatre is in its infancy compared with that of film and literature. At Helen Krich Chinoy's retirement celebration at Smith College in 1986, Roberta Sklar called on all women in theatre to attend to the need for feminist criticism. Martha Boesing, present at the same celebration, agreed with Sklar, saying, "Women's theatre has perhaps reached its peak and is passing because now women are more established in theatre. However, we need our work criticized from a feminist perspective. We NEED to be

criticized. We need feminist critics." As creators of theatre, Sklar and Boesing realize that their work needs validation by critics who understand its purpose.

But feminist criticism in theatre and drama has suffered from several problems: First, because of disagreements about whose work was that of feminists in theatre as opposed to that of women in theatre, there has been no general agreement on what ought to be studied. Second, when agreements could be reached, there have often been difficulties in finding a body of materials that fit the criteria established by the agreements. Third, once a likely body of material has been identified as appropriate, acquiring it has been unusually difficult, because many feminist dramas have been collectively produced and not written down. Fourth, there have been serious problems surrounding production.

Although the first three problems are self explanatory, the fourth probably requires some clarification. Feminist plays tend to be experimental rather than traditional. They rarely derive their unity from causal plots and seldom use simple narrative to tell a story. Because the play's story is told largely through non-narrative, often non-verbal means, feminist plays, like other kinds of experimental plays, tend to depend to an uncommon degree on the production for their force and meaning. But it has been unusually

difficut to get feminist plays produced, for several reasons. First, almost all experimental theatres are non-commercial. Second, almost all politically subversive theatres are non-commercial. To these two, feminist theatre adds a third--male producers--who hold the money and the power. Now, to be sure unproduced drama is possible, but for a rhetorical theatre, no production equals death.

With such problems as feminists working in theatre have found, it is perhaps not surprising that they have sought differing solutions. Some try to accommodate in some way to the mainstream, commercial theatre. Such women have occasionally been inclined to compromise their own feminism even as they have written the works that redefine women. Others have sought support in groups outside the commercial mainstream, in separate, feminist groups. And even when these groups are not immune to the pressures of theatrical production, their attempts at collaborative or leaderless management have occasionally caused them to be victimized by a pattern that has come to be called "kill the leader." Their internalized oppressions (the unconscious acceptance of misinformed attitudes, as for example, that women cannot be leaders) have caused them to unseat leaders that through individual leadership talent have emerged. When the "leader" collapses, the group cannot sustain

the leaderless management style so that the theatre company would lose heart and fold.

I propose in this study to address these four problems in several ways. First, I will study the work of a self-proclaimed feminist playwright who has worked in a self-proclaimed feminist theatre. Questions of appropriateness and definition should therefore be minimized. Second, I shall work with a body of published and produced work that is available and that is considered by the playwright to constitute a coherent and complete body of material. Third, I will supplement my textual analysis of the written texts by examining the film of a particular play and attending live performances. Fourth, I will select a body of material that is substantial in quantity, quality, and duration.

The published and produced works of Martha Boesing meet these criteria. Boesing is a self-aware feminist, a political product of the 1960s with a strong commitment to the politics of feminism. But she is also a trained theatre person, knowledgeable about the traditions and techniques of mainstream theatre. Boesing is considered one of the major feminist playwrights in the United States; furthermore, in addition to writing plays, she has written about playwriting. Indeed, Bobbi Ausubel called her a "guru" of the feminist theatre.[1]

Boesing grew up in the 1940s, completed her education in the 1950s, experimented with ideas in the 1960s, and, in the 1970s, after deciding to reject the values and work of the commercial American theatre, she moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. She established the feminist theatre, At the Foot of the Mountain, and in collaboration with that company produced twenty-two plays, of which two exist on videotape and one on film.

Boesing was the artistic director and playwright of At the Foot of the Mountain for ten years (1974-1984). Although she resigned as the artistic director of the theatre in 1984, she continued to work with the theatre on a project-by-project basis. However, in April 1986, she announced that she was changing directions in her career to seek a wider audience, beyond the geographical area of Minneapolis, for her feminist plays. Thus, twenty-two plays, her work produced with At the Foot of the Mountain between 1974-1984, can be considered a complete and coherent body.

In studying the works of Martha Boesing then, I am undertaking, as a case study, the work of a feminist playwright in the United States who consciously rejected mainstream commercial theatre to work regionally, and who, in a feminist theatre, produced a significant body of work as a feminist in a feminist context.

Martha Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain

There has been no study of either Martha Boesing or her plays. The most relevant piece of scholarship is a dissertation by Meredith Flynn that deals with At the Foot of the Mountain and thus tangentially sketches Boesing's search for theatrical form and her experimentation with the production process.

Before undertaking the textual analysis of the plays, I will sketch the social and theatrical milieu in which Boesing wrote. Both the women's movement and the experimental theatre movement peaked at the time that Boesing began her work with At the Foot of the Mountain; I will examine the ways in which both movements informed her choices.

For this study, however, the major evidence will be the plays themselves. I have selected for study those that have been published, produced, or both. The plays to be considered, listed in chronological order by date of writing are the one-acts Pimp (1973), The Gelding (1974), Mad Emma (1976), Love Song for an Amazon (1976), Trespasso (1977), Labia Wings (1979), Song for Johanna (1981), and The Last Fire--An Illumination (1981); and the full-length plays Journey to Canaan (1974), River Journal (1975), The Moon Tree (1976), The Story of a Mother (1977), Dora Du Fran's Wild West Extravaganza or the Real Low-Down on Calamity Jane (1979), Junkie! (1981), The Web (1981), Ashes,

Ashes We All Fall Down (1982), The Mothers of Ludlow (1983), Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance (1983), and Las Gringas (1984). In addition, the film of Junkie! and the video of Ashes, Ashes We All Fall Down will be examined.

The plays can be divided into two major groups--the collaboratively created pieces and the single-authored pieces. In the collaborative works, Boesing wrote a skeleton of the piece, and then the actual dialogues and characters were created out of improvisations with the company.[2] Journey to Canaan, The Story of a Mother, Junkie!, Ashes, Ashes We All Fall Down, and Las Gringas are examples of this process. The mixed-collaborative work, The Moon Tree, was first written by Boesing and then re-written with the company. Of those plays written by Boesing, alone, there are two sub-groups: the historical collages and the original pieces. The collages were created out of material that was not original to Boesing. In an attempt to be truthful to specific historical individuals, the documented speeches of historical figures were written into the play texts. Antigone Too was written predominantly as a in collage, while Calamity Jane and The Mothers of Ludlow contain actual words of only the main characters. The plays that are originals by Boesing include all of the one-acts and

the full-length plays, as well as most of Calamity Jane and The Mothers of Ludlow.[3]

The textual analysis--the heart of this study--will seek to discover patterns in the plays according to some traditional categories of analysis (spectacle, character, form, language, and music), seeking in those categories new uses by Boesing. I will also seek qualities termed characteristic of feminist drama by previous critics: transformations, desiring subjects, multi-layered structures, cyclic organizations, telling images (blood, webs). The effort will be to analyze the data as systematically and sensitively as possible to discover how this feminist playwright has dramatized her vision. The larger goal, of course, is to discern what might be more generally true, characteristic of other feminist playwrights.

In addition to the plays themselves, Boesing's own writings and lectures on playwriting will provide a theoretical framework. Other sources will include personal interviews with Martha Boesing, Paul Boesing (her former husband), and her close associates from At the Foot of the Mountain, Phyllis Jane Rose and Jan Magrane. Also included will be interviews with Bobbi Ausubel, Boesing's close friend and professional associate, as well as my own experiences as assistant to Ausubel who directed the production of Antigone Too

at the University of Maryland in 1986. Reviews and criticisms of the plays and productions will help to provide a background to the context of the work of Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain.

Boesing's biography is important as a reflection of three decades in which, within the same person, the woman and artist were often in conflict. The emergence of the artist from the culturally defined woman was slow and painful and is not yet complete. As I attempt to generalize from Boesing's work to the larger field of feminist drama, I will try to show how the artist's personal development influenced and was informed by the political movement of which she was a part. Without the liberation movements of the sixties, perhaps Martha Boesing would never have recognized the issues around which she later built her plays.

Throughout the study, the emphasis will be on the influences that Boesing's feminist thinking brought to bear on her work. Following the analysis of the plays, I will hope to draw conclusions about the dramaturgical choices of this major playwright. The choices will be viewed in the context of selected feminist critical theories in other artistic forms, especially film and literature. Thus, the goal of this study, beyond the illumination of the dramaturgy of this significant feminist playwright, is to provide closely analyzed evidence that can contribute to feminist dramatic

criticism and the eventual development of feminist dramatic theory.

# CHAPTER ONE
# ENDNOTES

[1]Bobbi Ausubel, Interview with Lynne Greeley, March, 1986.

[2]Martha Boesing, Interview by telephone with Lynne Greeley, December, 1986.

[3]*Ibid.*

# CHAPTER II

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Theoretical Work of Analysis in Drama

For a textual analysis of Martha Boesing's plays, I will begin with Aristotle's elements of tragedy as a model for organizing the sorts of questions that I want to ask. In searching for patterns, I want to see how each of the elements are manipulated in all of the plays. Because the search is for repeating patterns across plays, a work like George Duckworth's The Nature of Roman Comedy will be a more helpful model than will H. D. F. Kitto's Greek Tragedy. I shall not feel bound by these classifications but shall use them merely as initial organizing structures for my questions.

For non-traditional theatre, traditional analysis is perhaps not sufficient; therefore, I will be informed by contributions from non-traditional theorists. The first group of theorists that seem most likely to be pertinent are those whose major interest is in provoking political change--for example, Bertolt Brecht, whose theories have influenced both Black theatre and Chicano theatre. The second group are experimentalists, whose major interest was not politics but in reshaping art itself--for example, Joe Chaikin. The third group are the feminist theatre artists, especially, Roberta Sklar and Megan Terry.

Brecht's well-known theories of epic theatre have widely influenced people whose major interest in theatre is political.[1] Most salient for the current study are particular studies of Brecht and his dealings with women. Janelle Reinelt (1986), in "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama," argued that "for feminists, Brechtian techniques offer a way to examine the material conditions of gender behavior (how they are internalized, opposed, and changed) and their interaction with other socio-political factors such as class."[2] Sue-Ellen Case examined "Brecht and Women: Homosexuality and the Mother," as an extension of the new "discourse of desire and corporeality. . . an alternative discourse [that is] either a terrorist act, or a laboratory for political experiments," a discourse that is thus fully relevant to questions concerning women.[3] Sarah Bryant-Bertail also considered "Women, Space, Ideology" in Brecht, demonstrating how the females are part of the "dynamic that makes the plays move through the time and space they set up," a space, she contended, that argues on behalf of women.[4]

Many experimentalists have also drawn on the works of Brecht but have been less guided by the political qualities of his writing than by his call to change the nature of the traditional dramatic form. Some of the experimentalists are more guided by the theories of Antonin Artaud than by those of Brecht, but what is

significant is that even without caring very much about the politics of the situation, these experimentalists wish to break down traditional forms. Since many revolutionary groups think that both content and form must be changed, these theoreticians become important as well. Among these experimentalists, probably the most important is Joe Chaikin, who "has tried to extend the boundaries of what we can communicate. . . through the development of nonliterary languages and non-narrative structures for the stage," inspiring the development of experimental workshops and ensemble creations, and nourishing "resistance to commercialism."[5] Chaikin is particularly significant for this study because Paul Boesing, Martha's former husband, was a member of the Open Theatre in its earliest days.[6] Also, two of the first feminist playwrights and directors, Roberta Sklar and Megan Terry, worked at the Open Theatre.

Roberta Sklar's work at the Open Theatre was as a writer for the collaborative pieces and as an assistant director.[7] Sklar later became interested in women's theatre and began to ask theoretical questions about women and feminists in theatre. Megan Terry, who is often cited as an early significant feminist playwright, participated in writer's workshops and readings at the Open Theatre, from which her commercially successful off-Broadway piece, _Viet Rock_,

was developed. Terry also wrote one of the first feminist plays, Calm Down, Mother. Both Sklar and Terry are relevant to this study because they early applied experimental techniques to theatre that centered on issues involving women.

## Feminist Theatre and Drama

Out of the wave of the experimental and revolutionary theatre of the sixties and as part of the women's movement of the early seventies, a literature about feminist theatre began to develop. Subsequent critical work on feminist theatre has tended to cluster around three groupings: (1) Between 1974 and 1979, scholars and critics analyzed and described both active and inactive feminist theatre groups; (2) Between 1980 and 1984, collections of biographies, plays, and criticism focused on both feminists and women in theatre; (3) Since 1985, scholars have begun to apply critical models from both literature and film to feminist productions and scripts. The literature of all three phases appears to coalesce around theories of creating, and for the third phase into theories of performing as well.

The theories of creating: The theories of creating ask questions about the process in which the script and production is made. At first, for example,

theatre was used by women for consciousness raising where their primary interest was in new forms "that have not been derived from the male-oriented and male-dominated theatre." [8] In 1978, Patti Gillespie described feminist theatre as a rhetorical phenomenon in which the willingness to be personal highlighted the groups' "vulnerable style of production"[9] with a "woman's struggle for autonomy [serving as] a play's central rhetorical motive."[10]

In the second phase, some scholars asked questions about the origins of the theatre, looking to ancient rituals in which women were the shamans and theatre was created out of their experience [11] as "a dance of life."[12] In addition, some scholars began to wrestle with questions of aesthetics and politics, specifically with the implications of the meaning of the words <u>women</u>, <u>feminine</u>, <u>feminist</u>, and <u>female</u> when applied to questions of dramatic form, play production, and performer training and to unresolved questions of dramatic theory. Throughout the literature this struggle to differentiate remained problematic because not only did scholars disagree about what to call the forms that women/feminists/females create, but also they disagreed about who is to do the calling: the playwright, or the critic, or the performers, or the audience. The result of this confusion was that a variety of questions continued to be raised. For

example, could a feminist critic call a playwright feminist because she used a particular form, or must the playwright herself be self-consciously identified? What criteria identified a play or a production as feminist? Did it matter what a play is called by the critics if the audience was politicized in its view of women?

The last phase shifted to the critics who are beginning to create critical theory using analytical tools drawn from other disciplines. Helen Keyssar identified character transformation as a strategy that distinguishes feminist drama. Her definition of feminist transformation was when the "impetus is not towards self-recognition and revelation of a 'true' self but towards recognition of others and a concomitant transformation of the self and the world."[13] She thus surveyed a selection of plays based on their use of this transforming device. Other critics have attempted to formulate theory using semiotic tools that show that feminist theatre disrupts the normal discourse of theatre by changing the functions of set, character, and proscenium.[14] Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte noted that in addition to changing the elements of theatre, feminist theatre has changed the subject of theatre since "the action of the desiring subject, the drama of the woman who desires, is in contrast to the passive role

traditionally granted woman as the object of male desire."[15]

Thus, feminist theories of creating suggest that in the first phase, feminist theatre was created out of collaborative consciousness-raising in which the slogan "the personal is political" was represented theatrically; during the second phase, women's theatre and women playwrights became self-consciously or critically identified as feminist because of their experimentation with new forms or their emphasis on women-centered content; and in the third phase, feminist critics began to create theories of theatre and drama demonstrating how women and feminists write and criticize plays from a perspective that has the potential to change the position of women in the culture.

Theories of performing. Theories of performing in feminist theatre are not so abundant as those of creating, perhaps because ephemeral performance is not so readily recorded and not so accessible as the drama. In part because of this difficulty, theories of performance have only begun to develop since 1985, so there were no theories of feminist performance in the first two phases. Roberta Sklar asked questions about sex-role assignments and their impact on acting methods in the early seventies, but scholars have only recently begun to answer the questions she raised.[16] The areas

in which feminist theories of performance have been proposed are the preparation of the woman actor, the collaboration of the performers in the theatrical performance, and the involvement of the audience.

As a result of interviews with prominent feminists in university and professional theatre, Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden-Malouf have asserted that the "female actor" prepares differently from the male actor because "feminist innovations in casting, rehearsing, actor training, dramaturgy, and writing consciously use the power of the pre-production process to subvert or change gender socialization";[17] through strategies that foster gender consciousness, feminists have introduced techniques that prevent female actors from aligning with an unhealthy gender role and thereby re-submitting to sexual oppression.

Meredith Flynn argued that the process of collaboration so fundamental to theatres throughout the ages and even more significantly to the experimental theatres of the fifties and sixties has been adapted by feminist theatres in such a way that Stanislavski's "magic if" ("it is as if"--what the actor has not experienced is treated as if it has been experienced)[18] is by-passed. Flynn demonstrated that in feminist theatre the actors present their actual responses to the issues in their performances.[19] An actor from At the Foot of the Mountain explained:

> We do not simply come in and improvise together. There's a psychic shift that happens inside everybody. Everybody totally immerses themselves in the oppressed side of the issue or issues. Once you've done that, you're collaborating. I think some struggles in the rehearsal have often been around somebody who refuses to jump in to that deep and often painful place.[20]

Patti Gillespie illustrated that audience participation in experimental theatre became a process by which the audience moved from being passive as in the fifties to being active, becoming performers in the happenings of sixties.[21] Charlotte Rea demonstrated that in the seventies women's theatre expanded the role of the audience making it central to the performances, since the productions were aimed at "a specialized audience and often [were] performed exclusively for that audience--women."[22] As inheritors of the work of both experimental theatres and the early women's theatre, feminist theatre, as described by Meredith Flynn, expanded the role of audience to include two additional elements: the development of a sense of community through the re-creation of ritual and the changing of the audience through healing. While both the concept of ritual and political empowerment are products of the political and experimental theatre of the sixties, the concept of healing the performers, the audience, and the community was introduced by Antonin Artaud, but healing as part of the collective event of theatre appears to be particular to feminist theatres.

Two such theatres are Lilith Women's Theatre of San Francisco and At the Foot of the Mountain. Flynn quoted Martha Boesing:

> Ritual drama does. . . . what the shaman has tried to do, or does in more tribal societies where the shaman as artist and as healer has to represent and conjure up all those images that are from our deep unconscious where they can be pained and troubled. By naming them and dancing them and painting them and singing them, the shaman brings them out into the arena of visual imagistic life--as we try to do in the theatre. . . . I see art as a very healing force in this sense. [We] attempt to be healers, to literally move people from pain and trouble into a wholer, saner, healthier way of living.[23]

Thus, feminist theories of performing have attempted to re-define how an actor prepares, to replace the "what if" with "this <u>is</u> how I respond" in performance,[24] and to recover a sense of community by including the audience in a theatrical ritual that emphasizes healing.

## Theories of Related Arts

Although not specifically addressed to feminist theatre, feminist theories of literature and film may be helpful to this study. In literature, most feminist critics practice two kinds of analysis: the re-reading of texts to locate female representation, and the analysis of women's writing to locate female style.

Either may be pursued through a variety of theoretical approaches like those summarized by Elaine Showalter as the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. These approaches are not inclusive in feminist critical theory, but they are four angles from which the analyses can be viewed.

Exponents of the biological offer the most "extreme statement of gender difference" in analyzing writing in which "anatomy is textuality. . . . Simply to invoke anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past. . . . Some theorists seem to have accepted the metaphorical implications of female difference in writing."[25] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,[26] Helene Cixous,[27] and Luce Irigaray[28] differently interpret the theme that the woman's body is the starting point for female self-consciousness. Irigaray writes: "Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. . . The geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined--[so that] 'She' is infinitely other in herself."[29]

Linguistic theories of difference are interested in discovering patterns of use in language that indicate a female presence in women's speech, reading strategies, and writing. In this argument, specific uses of language are generalized as examples of female

universals. Many French feminists advocate an "oral break from the dictatorship of patriarchal speech."[30] (Whittig,[31] Gauthier,[32] McConnell-Ginet[33]).

The psychoanalytic perspective, reconsiders Freud and Lacan to establish woman differently in the psychological order. Annie Pratt[34] and Barbara Rigney[35] offer alternatives to Freudian theory. Nancy Chodrow places the Oedipal stage of child development earlier than the eighteen months of the Lacanian scheme, so that the female infant sees women not as Other but as the source of both identification and nurturing.[36]

The cultural approach draws from and redefines each of the previous perspectives in an attempt to "plot the precise locus of female literary identity and to describe the forces that intersect an individual woman writer's cultural field."[37] The cultural approach is more concerned with seeking out evidence of female repression in a woman writer's "cultural field" than with looking for evidence of female essence.

The recurring debate in the literature concerns the question of female essence versus female repression. Many feminists are looking for <u>an essential</u> femaleness in writing and creating, whereas others are seeking evidence of the <u>oppression of the female</u> in the literature and the culture. Both groups, however, view

women as culturally powerless and therefore assume a political basis to their theories.

Similarly, feminist film critics are interested in re-reading the cinematic text for examples of woman's repression and in re-creating images of women on the screen. Like literary theorists, film theorists use several approaches. Among film theorists, the major division is between the Americans, who use a sociological approach, and the Europeans, who use semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches. The sociological approach portrays woman's truth on the screen "even if the form of that truth [is] similar to the dominant forms of representation under patriarchy," whereas the semiotic/ psychoanalytic approaches focus on radically new forms of representation that express women's unique "truth."[38] Also, like the literary critics, most film critics unite in viewing the oppression of women in the culture as politically based.

The theoretical models provided by literature and film may be useful for this study because they have been developed over several decades and are debated both in the United States and in Europe. Feminist critics in theatre may benefit from the thinking of the literary and film critics even while acknowledging the differences in the art forms.

# CHAPTER TWO
# ENDNOTES

[1]Brecht has influenced both political and experimental theatre throughout the world. Of significance for this study is his influence on the experimental theatres of the sixties in the United States as those theatres influenced the work of Martha Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain. Some of the experimental theatres included the Open Theatre with Joseph Chaikin, Roberta Sklar and the Living Theatre with Julian Beck and Judith Malina.

[2]Janelle Reinelt, "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama," Theatre Journal (May, 1986): 154.

[3]Sue-Ellen Case, "Brecht and Women: Homosexuality and the Mother," The Brecht Yearbook, Vol. 12, 1983, edited by John Fuegi, Gisela Bahr, & John Willett (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1985): 69.

[4]Sarah Bryant-Bertail, "Women, Space and Ideology: Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder," Ibid., p. 43.

[5]Eileen Blumenthal, Joseph Chaikin: Exploring the Boundaries of Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 1.

[6]Ibid., p. 227.

[7] Ibid., p. 112.

[8] Charlotte Rea, "Women for Women," Drama Review, 18, 4(December 1974): 77.

[9] Patti P. Gillespie, "Feminist Theatre: A Rhetorical Phenomenon," The Quarterly Journal of Speech 64(1978): 292.

[10] Janet Brown, Feminist Drama: Critical Definition and Analysis (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1979), p. 1.

[11] Chinoy, Helen Krich & Linda Walsh Jenkins, Women in American Theatre: Careers, Images, and Movements (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1981) p. 23.

[12] Karen Malpede, Women in the Theatre: Compassion and Hope (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1983) p.10.

[13] Helene Keyssar, Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1985) p. xiv.

[14]Sue-Ellen Case & Jeanie K. Forte, "From Formalism to Feminism," Theatre (Sp 1985): 64.

[15]Ibid., p. 65.

[16]Cornelia Brunner, "Roberta Sklar: Toward Creating a Woman's Theatre," The Drama Review 24(June 1980): 23.

[17]Linda Walsh Jenkins & Susan Ogden-Malouf, "The (Female) Actor Prepares," Theatre (Winter 1985): 66.

[18]Robert Lewis, Method--or Madness? (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1958), p. 32.

[19]Meredith Flynn, The Feeling Circle, Company Collaboration, and Ritual Drama: Three Conventions Developed by the Women's Theatre, At the Foot of the Mountain (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, Published on Demand, 1984), p. 137.

[20]Ibid., p. 137.

[21]Patti Gillespie, "Theatre as Communication," The Southern Speech Communication Journal 44 (Winter, 1979): p.171.

[22]Charlotte Rea, "Women for Women," Drama Review 18 (December 1974): p. 77.

[23]Flynn, p. 192.

[24]Ibid., p. 138.

[25]Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics." The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature & Theory (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 17.

[26]Sandra M. Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979).

[27]Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, vol. 1, n. 4 (1976): pp. 875-891.

[28]Luce Irigaray, an interview, "Women's Exile," Ideology and Consciousness, translated by Diana Adlam and Couze Venn, n. 1 (1977), p. 62-67.

[29]Ann Rosaline Jones, "Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of l'ecriture feminine," in Showalter, Ibid., p. 364.

[30]Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p.21.

[31]Helene Wenzel, "The Text as Body/Politics: An Appreciation of Monique Wittig's Writings in Context," Feminist Studies 7 (Summer 1981): 274-87.

[32]Xaviere Gauthier, Surrealisme et sexualite, quoted in Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," p. 21.

[33]Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Linguistics and the Feminist Challenge," in Women and Language in Literature and Society (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1980), p. 3-25.

[34]Annis Pratt, "The New Feminist Criticisms," in Beyond Intellectual Sexism: A New Woman, a New Reality, ed. Joan I. Roberts (New York: David McKay, 1976), pp. 175-195.

[35]Barbara H. Rigney, Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Sutdies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing,

and Atwood (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

[36]Nancy Chodorow, "Gender Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective," in Future of Difference, ed. by Hester Eisenstein & Alice Jardine (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), p. 11.

[37]Showalter, Ibid., p. 32.

[38]Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp & Linda Williams, "Feminist Criticism: An Introduction," Revision Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, edited by Doane et.al. (Frederick, Maryland: American Film Institute Monograph Series, 1984): 8.

# CHAPTER III

# THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

My interest here is in citing those parts of Martha Boesing's life which she and her friends believe have influenced her. Thus, this chapter is in no sense a biography, but rather the personal and social context of Boesing's writing that will assist us in understanding her plays. The limitation of this approach is that only Boesing and her friends are relevant so that the details of the biography may be inaccurate, but they are accurate to my purpose which is not to recount an accurate history of her life, but to suggest the features of her life which have been salient to her in her work.

## The Biography

The life of Martha Boesing is really a biography of her age. Between 1936, when Boesing was born, and 1974, when she established At the Foot of the Mountain, the national and international political situation was turbulent--three major wars (World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War) were meshed with protest against war, racism, and sexism. Throughout those years, Boesing has claimed that she was an "outsider," a "misfit," always on the "cutting edge"[1] of the issues--either because she was ahead of her time or

because her social situation created her alienation from the mainstream. As someone on the outside, Boesing had a perspective and an experience that both created and contributed to her work as a playwright, a director, and a critic.

Martha Boesing was born on January 24, 1936, in New Hampshire, and her childhood reflected the dark side of the American dream. Boesing's mother (born in 1895) escaped her working class Irish background by marrying her boss, infuriating both her poor Catholic family and his wealthy Protestant one. She created extreme isolation for herself; when her husband committed suicide, she was blamed for his death by his family. She married Martha's father shortly after her first husband's death, and, in Boesing's words:

> . . . it was a disastrous marriage. They agreed to have a son to save the marriage. I'm it. I came into the world as a kind of savior. I failed. My first project, and I failed. He left. And my mother became an outrageous alcoholic.[2]

In the little town in New Hampshire where they lived, Boesing was a misfit because, in the forties, "the news wasn't out that alcoholics were members of families, and I had this alcoholic mother."[3] Boesing's father compensated to her for his desertion by sending her to expensive private schools. However, his generosity did not extend to clothes, cash, and other external symbols of wealth, so that while she attended

the schools of the rich, she was visibly not one of them. Describing herself, Boesing said:

> I was really weird at the boarding school. I thought it was because I was weird. I didn't get that it was because I was poor. I was caught between classes. I had the education of an upper-middle-class white background, but my home background was working- class.[4]

She became intellectually conscious of her isolation at the Connecticut College for Women, where, while other girls were at Yale dances, she and five or six buddies would hole up in their rooms over the weekends, drinking whiskey out of medicine bottles and listening to the poetry of the disillusioned of the era. T. S. Eliot, "all that beatnik, kind of bitter, 'we are the hollow men, yeah, yeah. . .' I was a beatnik. I dressed like one."[5]

Her formal education continued through graduate school (University of Wisconsin, 1958, Master of Arts in English Literature), after which Boesing moved to New York. She taught in a girls' school on the East Side during the day, but at night, she became a full-scale beatnik.

> I'd come home, put on my black stockings, black skirt, black turtle neck, dark glasses, let my hair down straight, and I'd to down to the 'Seven Yards Coffee Shop' where all the poets gathered. . . Allen Ginsberg. . . and I would sing between sets, setting my own poetry to music. Then I would sit around and talk to them.[6]

While in this phase of her life, Boesing frequented the Living Theatre of Julian Beck and Judith Malina and so was directly in contact with one of the first seriously experimental theatres of the era:

> In some sense I was drawn to them. The only place I could find my niche was with the weirdos. The experimental edge, the fringe. I was always kind of on the edge of things. I never knew if it was <u>really</u> out of choice or because I wasn't accepted in the center.[7]

Boesing left New York and moved to different centers of socialist activity. Her reason?

> I got married. As far as my father was concerned, in spite of the fact that I married someone from a wealthy New York family, I was marrying a real weirdo. [Martin Pierce] was a pacifist and a conscientious objector."[8]

The next years were spent moving around because, at that time, it was assumed that wives went where their husbands wanted to go, so that after time in Cambridge and Cuba, they moved to Minneapolis where her husband wanted to study.

Boesing, is, herself, a legacy of the Old Left. At the University of Wisconsin, she read leftist literature and participated in radical politics. Minneapolis, at the time that Martha and Pierce moved there, contained elements of Old Left and New Left radicals. Boesing's life-style was "similar to that of the Old Left radicals, including Meridel Le Sueur"[9] so

that living in a radical community, Boesing began early in her career to participate in the debates that typify such communities. Thus, the political context of the city fostered and stimulated Boesing's personal development.

Boesing began doctoral studies, and then left the University of Minnesota to work with some people who were starting a succession of theatres:

> I worked all the time--day and night--acting, directing, everything. Then the theatre closed. . . and I began what is now an internationally known children's theatre, the Moppet Theatre. I created a little theatre called Horse Street Theatre, and a lot of artists started to gather there to do experimental work. . . We all ended up at the Firehouse, where I started working a few months after my son was born. I was there '63-'68, '69.[10]

Boesing's life up to 1970 contained an unrecognized tension between her private and public development: as a child, she was educated well, but her mother's alcoholism created social and personal isolation for Boesing; as a young adult in New York, she cut her experience as an artist short by marrying; as a wife, she adapted to whatever city or country her husband wanted to live in. When she began to work in theatre, she was also bearing and rearing children, and the theatre she started was for children. Her contact with the Firehouse Theatre grew out of those earlier successes, but even though she had been exposed to the

experimental theatres of New York, her real work in theatre began with children.

Martha's first marriage ended while she was at the Firehouse, and coincidentally, while there, she met Paul Boesing, who would be her second husband.

Paul directly influenced Martha's later professional development. He had been trained in music and drama at Indiana University, and, while playing in the army band, he traveled to Atlanta, where he studied acting. His teacher worked out of the Academy Theatre, and, as an advanced student, Paul began working there in 1955. He began his work as a professional actor immediately after finishing his university training, playing many of traditional roles while participating in the beginning of a theatre. He left in the early sixties and went to New York for a year and then returned to Atlanta to continue working at the Academy Theatre in the Shakespeare Festival when he met Sid Walker, a director, who was also at the Academy Theatre.

Paul and Sid Walker established a relationship which they continued in New York. Walker started doing workshops with Joe Chaikin, and, after some persuasion, convinced Paul to attend.

Initially, Paul's contact with Chaikin was not positive; Chaikin's workshops were very much like Second City's comic improvisations, and, as a

classically trained actor, Paul did not fit in. Chaikin kept working with Paul only because Walker insisted. It wasn't until the group began to work with dancers that Paul could "flow with the energy that Joe really liked." Paul then began working with the Open Theatre. He adopted experimental acting techniques so that his life as an actor was changed by his contact with Joe Chaikin.[11]

During this time in New York, Paul worked in theatres like the Caffe Cino and Cafe La Mama, and with playwrights like Sam Shepherd, Megan Terry, Maria Irene Fornes, and Jean-Claude Van Italie. He explained:

> We were discovering new forms, new ways. Sid and I did some work with the Open Theatre . . . . I did a play by Arthur Sainer, but none of this work was for pay. I was working at the YWCA at night and then one night, I was taking off my makeup, and I discovered these big welts on my face. That was my introduction to hives. Jean-Claude invited me to his summer house in Massachusetts, so I recovered there over the summer and decided I couldn't return to the city.[12]

Meanwhile, Walker and Chaikin had gone to Minneapolis to do some work with the Guthrie Theatre. Perhaps because of the Guthrie, Minneapolis in the early sixties was a center of theatrical activity. One of these theatres was the Firehouse where Joe was asked to direct. "He said no, but he referred Sid . . . and Sid said he would take the job only if he could work

with his favorite actor from New York. . . So I came."[13]

Paul came out from New York with the status accorded "the New York actor." He performed lead roles. Martha, on the other hand, had long been involved as one of a core group of actors hired to do jobs around the theatre. Martha and Paul became friends, then fell in love and married after about a year.

Paul's and Martha's relationship was as professional as it was personal, and, for this reason, Paul's training and experience deeply affected Martha's professional development. Professionally, Paul was involved in performing in experimental theatres in New York. In addition, as a result of his experimental work, he was a witness to significant revolutionary political activity.

One of Paul's pivotal experiences occurred in France in May of 1968. The Firehouse made a tour of Europe in the spring, and, when the tour finished, Paul was asked by Chaikin to remain in Paris to participate in an international workshop directed by Peter Brook. The workshop was interrupted, however, when the strikes and demonstrations broke out in the capital. French actors from the National Theatre took over the Odeon-Theatre de France where Brook was housed; the actors were more interested in running food to the

students who were staging the strikes and in discussing the activities than in doing experimental theatre. Instead of working, Paul found himself sitting in cafes watching the tear-gassing, waiting until the riots had ended. Because Brook's project was underwritten by the French government, the money was gone when the demonstrations finally quieted. The workshop then moved to England, where Brook tried to continue with actors from different countries for experiments with The Tempest. In the end, Ariel was played by a Japanese using Kabuki movments, and Ronnie Gilbert of the Weavers played Caliban.

The importance of Paul's involvment with Chaikin, Brook, and Walker was that, through Paul, Martha was exposed to the avant garde work of experimental theatre. Although she was not present in Paris (Martha was not invited to participate in Brook's workshop), and although she did not work as closely as Paul did with Joe Chaikin, Martha learned, indirectly, about theatre, politics, and the relationship between politics and art. Directly and personally, on the other hand, she was involved in child-rearing, for Jennifer (Martha's and Paul's daughter) was born in 1968, so literally, Martha was birthing babies while Paul was watching rioters. Perhaps, Martha did not know that she had any other choices, and perhaps at that time she did not have any other choices. While

Paul was at the forefront, Martha, with her children, was on the periphery of what turned into a milestone in revolutionary politics.

Martha's slow awareness of women's issues really began at the Firehouse Theatre, which was, she explained:

> . . .the artistic centerpiece of the Upper Midwest's student protest and antiwar movement. . . . [the theatre] forced the audience to confront the issues of the day: the VietNam War, materialism, self-centeredness. The theatre offered a vision of international solidarity, anti-materialism, and connectedness.[14]

Artistically, Boesing believed the Firehouse was "the most extreme of all the groups creating experimental theatre in the sixties, the closest to Artaud's vision than any."[15] Artaud sought communication that went beyond the written word so that the audience experienced "the 'divine terror' of the theatre. . . in performances as incapable of repetition as any other important human action . . . to implicate the mind, the senses, the flesh, even the destiny of the audience."[16]

The Firehouse Theatre took this vision to a dangerous extreme into "more convoluted, darker areas of expression."[17] Paul described performances in which a eight-month pregnant woman was pushed unexpectedly from a scaffold, dropping to the stage twenty feet

below. One time an actor chased another while slapping a burning rope against the floor, and another actor grabbed someone's purse, found mace in it and started spraying around the audience.[18] Behavior that was violent rather than expressive caused Paul and Martha to leave the Firehouse altogether.

The Firehouse was exceedingly radical, even revolutionary, but sexism dominated in it; however, the theatre did not see its own sexism. Boesing observed that "the women were not so present in the Firehouse. It was an extremely male dominated theatre. The women did not begin to emerge in the theatre until the early seventies when [the theatre] moved to San Francisco."[19] While Martha and Paul were at the Firehouse, however, "women ran the theater, the books, the public relations, the box office, the sets and the rehearsal schedule, while the men were choosing the plays, the directors, the schedule and who got to talk to Joe Chaikin and Peter Brook in New York."[20]

Boesing's awareness of sexism in the Firehouse Theater was expressed theatrically in her recent play, Free Reign (1986), which goes back to reconsider that whole experience in an attempt to understand how such a radical theatre could have become trapped in traditional sexism. She has documented the history of the Firehouse through extensive interviews with the major women who worked there during the sixties. The

personal histories provide evidence of women succeeding professionally only as they seduced, were seduced by, lived with, or married the men who held the power in the theatre. Because the Firehouse company worked and lived together, the relationships became almost incestuous. At the same time, the group was connected by a live wire to the political events as they occurred because "the world was sick. Moral choices had to be made,"[21] but even though the company was radical, liberal, fighters against oppression, the energy with which they fought outside of the company short circuited inside. Power relations in the theatre were divided along lines of gender.

Free Reign "is culled, refined, and shaped from interviews of the woman. . . called Sylvie, a meeting of women who lived and worked with her during the Sixties, and interviews of several other men and women who knew her."[22] In the play, the Man documents the social and historical trends while the women document the relationships. The Man says:

> THE MAN: We believed there was going to be a revolution and we'd all wake up one morning and everything would be changed. I mean the Vietnamese people were overthrowing the strongest military power in the world--it made you feel like anything was possible. Hell! Maybe tomorrow morning! Don't sleep too late--I mean, you might miss it![23]

Other characters comment on the age:

IRENE: No praise, no blame.
THE MAN: At the end, it was like Atlantis had fallen into the ocean.
CORA: We knew we were different. . . and that our differences would eventually be absorbed
THE MAN: But she [Sylvie] just jumped into the center of it. And when she got all she could out of one thing, she went on to something else. . . like she was consuming life.
MADGE: Christ--everyone was wired! [24]

The issues that later consumed the women's movement filtered through the comments about the daily routines of the women in this theatre: Who cooks? Who washes the dishes? When do the men share in the housework? Who is responsible when the children are in need? "When you're young. . . it comes as a rude awakening to know what it really means to have children and bring them up."[25] The questions of "being good" and "being open," of trying drugs and dealing with anger, of "being out there on the edge," dominated the monologues; in the end, was it all just an enormous ego trip?[26]

The women who were interviewed for the material in the play did not note the contradiction between their traditional roles and their experimentation. Like Martha, they did not appear to know at the time they were involved in the theatre that there were other choices for them in their relationships to the men, and, in 1986, as they reflected on the 1960s, they were surprised at their own behavior.

After Martha and Paul Boesing left the Firehouse, they became involved in writing music and in working actively for peace. Paul said, "We lived off of our folk singing. Soft, sweet, lyrical songs. Even if they were angry, they were lyrical."[27] At a coffee house for folk music, the Boesings were heard by the director of a Minneapolis opera company who was interested in producing new operas. He asked them if they wanted to write an opera. Before making a decision that would keep them in Minneapolis, they travelled to the west coast, a journey by van from Vancouver to San Francisco with their three children (in addition to their child, Jennifer, they had Martha's son, Curtis, and their adopted child of color, Rachel). Paul, meanwhile, was accepted as an actor at Stratford in Canada, but, because Martha would have been idle, he declined the opportunity. The Boesings decided to go back to Minneapolis and write opera.

Ten years earlier in the early sixties, Martha had come with her first husband to Minneapolis, no questions asked. When she returned to Minneapolis with Paul, it was a mutual decision. Two things may have been at work: first, they both may have been influenced by the women's movement, and, second, Martha and Paul both felt Martha's career was as important as his. The change certainly reflected Martha's growing awareness of the way in which her life was dictated by

her role as a women. Describing those experiences, she said:

> Looking at my marriages. I had given away all my power to the men. There was never a question of whether we wanted to move to Minneapolis. It just wasn't a question. You go where your husband goes. I don't think he even said, "Do you want to move to Minneapolis?" I think he said, "We're moving to Minneapolis." I said, "Oh. O.K." It wasn't something you asked questions about. Prior to that time, I was one of the women who would always hang out with the men at parties. I found women boring. They'd sit in the kitchen and talk about their babies, and I'd walk into the living room and talk about politics. So, I was one of the guys. It was the only way I could get any stimulation. I was a product of that mentality. . . . So, as I began to put this together, as I began asking questions I hadn't asked before, "How come I never had a say at the Firehouse Theatre?" I began to see this revolution was about <u>me</u> which is why it was the least popular revolution in the country. There were people who pretended and still pretend it didn't happen.[28]

The Boesings wrote an opera that was "quite unusual and enormously popular"[29] in which they combined songs from the sixties with the spiritual searching that Martha still uses in her work. They toured with the opera and then went to Mexico for vacation. Martha had become increasingly political so that opera, which does not easily accommodate political activism, was not satisfying to her. They made the decision to follow the example set by Bobbi and Stan Ausubel, who had founded the Caravan Theatre in Boston, and establish their own theatre. While in Mexico, the Boesings heard

about the Kent State shootings, so they returned to participate in what they believed was the beginning of the real revolution.

They left Minneapolis for Boston, sought and received funding from the Friend's Committee, and, with their new piece, Earthsong, began their communal life with their Earth Family in a rented house on the Cape. They toured around the New England area, and as a group, began primal therapy.

Paul and Martha's professional lives had been separate, then together, and, after 1970, were about to be separate again as Martha's awareness of herself as a woman grew. She experienced a pivotal professional revelation in 1970 in Boston when she was exposed for the first time to feminist theatre and to the feminist thinking of the director and playwright of the Caravan Theatre, Bobbi Ausubel.

The event was the viewing of How to Make a Woman by Ausubel. Boesing calls the play "the first American feminist play" because the theme centered on the process of a woman's self-discovery. She commented in 1986:

> I was blown apart by the play because it was so boldly feminist. I had been looking at this, but I was married and felt the way for me was not the separatist route. The ideas were very bold and I was excited. Afterwards, Bobbi and Stan asked the men and women to go to separate discussions. This experience was key in my development as a

> feminist. Bobbi kept pressing the idea that all of us were enslaved by oppression. I responded, "Not me." I kept putting myself forward as the exception. I refused to see that marriage was an institution that oppressed women and there were no exceptions. Bobbi and I were momentarily in real conflict. Afterwards our company began to have separate meetings for men and women. We began to really work on these issues. We got into profoundly deep psychological and personal experiences, and began to look at the problems we had been in denial about.[30]

The confrontation between the women was the breakthrough for Martha into conscious feminist thinking. Ausubel, as a true equal personally and professionally, was able to impress Martha with the truth of basic feminist assumptions. The impressiveness of Ausuhel's play, and the aggressiveness of her stance on feminism forced Martha to move swiftly from her slow awakening to an alert awareness of the issues of power that underlie the issues of equality between men and women. Beginning in 1970, Martha became committed to her own growth as a theatre professional and as a woman.

In 1971, while living with the Earth Family, Paul and Martha wrote a piece, Chameleon, about their marriage and their struggles. Shortly thereafter, the Earth Family began to disintegrate, and the Boesings decided to move elsewhere to establish their own theatre. After discussion, they decided to go to Atlanta, to the Academy Theatre where Paul had worked more than ten years earlier. Although the theatre was

not their own, the company was, and in the two years in Atlanta, they produced an original opera, Shadows: A Dream Opera, based on the dreams of members of the company, and Journey to Canaan, a musical drama by Martha about "our pilgrimage though the wilderness of our hearts and minds in search of serenity."[31]

The experience in Atlanta was important for Martha. She produced her own work, she worked in a company in which the power was distributed more equally between the men and the women, and she met Jan Magrane. Hired by the Boesings as an actor, Magrane was to become an important influence over Martha in the years to follow. Magrane described her early years with Martha as exciting. She explained, "At the end of the production of Journey to Canaan, a group of us with similar ideas had coalesced. I was very excited by Martha's work and she by mine. She was the first person I'd ever worked with who demanded honesty."[32]

The group, the Boesings, Jan Magrane, and Jeff Woodward (who years later was to become Magrane's husband), formed a real company. They discovered that they needed a city to start their own theatre in because "the real vibrant soul of Atlanta is black, and they weren't really interested in what we were doing."[33] In 1974, they packed the "kids into a truck and put all the plants into one van" and moved to Minneapolis. "We were dirt poor. . . the plants lived

in that van on the street for the entire summer."[34] The company worked out of church basements, producing Martha's work almost exclusively, and in that summer, they opened the theatre that was to become the longest living women's theatre in the United States, At the Foot of the Mountain.

The development of At the Foot of the Mountain into a woman's theatre that fostered the feminist views of its founder, director, and playwright, Martha Boesing, is the concern of Chapter IV.

## The Influences

Martha Boesing's life embodied a major slogan of the women's movement, "the personal is political," for Boesing's personal development and her professional development were inextricably linked. From 1954, when she began spending her weekends in the dorm at the Connecticut College for Women, listening to poets and drinking whiskey, to 1974, when the production of Pimp opened in Minneapolis, Martha's personal growth was directly connected to her increasing awareness her own political and professional power. She lived the slogan: her personal discoveries were political, and her political beliefs formed the core of her personal artistic expression.

Martha was politicized through the "great books. Stendhal. Tolstoy." She described her early intellectual awakening as one product of her travel abroad:

> I spent my junior year in college abroad, and I spent a lot of time reading. When I was in Paris, I lived alone in a hotel full of Moroccan students on the left bank of the Seine. I just read, read, read, and went to the Louvre. Then I went to Edinburgh for a year. It was kind of an awakening. The world was very different and large. And it was just beginning to become clear to me that my life was not the whole.
>
> Then I went to the University of Wisconsin. It was the hotbed of radicals in the country in the late fifties. I got very involved. I was educated in Marx.. I've been a socialist and a pacifist ever since, mostly involved with peace. . . I think Marx's analysis of capitalism is exactly right. That the proceeds should go back to the workers. That the division between the workers and the owners removes the power.[35]

The Marxist influence penetrates Boesing's works. Boesing is not dogmatically Marxist. Rather, she has internalized the belief that the distribution of power in a society must be equal. Thus, all groups restrained from participation in that distribution are those whose interests she represents in her plays. She consistently emphasizes the superiority of collective productivity in creating theatrical pieces. Her approach to the organization and the development of her theatre was collective.

Although she is not dogmatically Marxist, she is dogmatically pacifist. For Boesing, peace is survival, and she has affirmed, repeatedly, that the safety of the planet depends on achieving peaceful solutions to all conflicts.[36]

In addition, she is dogmatically committed to human rights. As part of her experimentation in the revolutionary 1960s, she and those in the Firehouse:

> . . .took a lot of drugs. There is no question that LSD changed my life. It opened up for me the possibility that my view of who I was was false. There simply was another way of looking at life, so that what we see as rational and sane is irrational and insane, and what we see as crazy is the only way to sanity.[37]

And finally, Boesing was influenced by the women's movement. She recently asked:

> How come I didn't want to be a leader? I think it was because I was a woman. I was terrified of it. I didn't know how to cope with that in myself. I was scared of my own power. . . I came from a neurotic, abusive childhood. . . I spent years in therapy trying to work that through, and then I was hidden behind a personal relationship. Paul. Phyllis. I even said that Phyllis was directing a show when it wasn't true. I was the classic woman. I couldn't take power. I was never a leader in the powerful sense. I was very shakey and fucked up and didn't know what I was doing. AND a theatre was built, AND a lot of excellent work came out, AND at the age of 51, I am a pretty whole, healed human being. And to idealize and romanticize that I was other along the way is just not true. I did it through grit, fear of the alternative (giving up, being a drunk like my

> mother), and real support along the way. . . I sometimes didn't get the support I needed. I needed support. I think all women do.[38]

Because it took almost twenty years for Boesing to realize the extent to which her position as a woman affected her productivity as a artist, the importance of changing the position of women in the culture has dominated her thinking. She believes that the fights for human rights have not yet eliminated sexism,[39] and thus, defending the right of women to full participation in their power is the most important of the political challenges Boesing has undertaken.

From the Becks (Julian and Judith were married), whose theatre Boesing frequented in the late fifties, she learned how to represent--theatrically--political commitment. Their theatre, The Living Theatre, since 1959, produced many new plays and was actively committed to peace. They developed techniques of interacting with the audience, forging "a communal bond among actors and audience and gave the audience an idealistic vision" that was perfectly "in tune with the decade of protest, of communes, of 'flower children,' of youth. Except for Beck and Malina, its actors were untrained amateurs, and their very lack of skill was in tune with the time's rejection of elevated ideas of art and artist, of skill, elitist talent, and nonspontaneity."[40] The Living Theatre gave Martha a view of experimentalism in its earliest form.

Joe Chaikin was a direct influence over the Boesing's because of Paul's close work with Chaikin in his workshops. Chaikin was interested in expanding the ideas about art, artistry, theatre, and theatre art, and he intended that his theatre, The Open Theatre, be dedicated to expanding the art form rather than changing the world. Karen Malpede most succinctly explained how Chaikin differed in his approach to theatre from traditional theatres and from other experimental theatres:

> Conflict is called the essence of theater when theater pretends to be realistic. The conflict is between what the characters desire and what they are able to achieve once psychological . . . limitations are considered. . . The human condition is easily defined: people are naturally aggressive and want what they cannot have. . . But there is another vision. In the Open Theatre. . . conflicts. . . have been replaced by contrast. Conflict generates conflict, while contrast established the possibility of choice. Joe directs with a crucial question: "And now what's happening?" "And now what's happening?" He stops the actors every moment a new choice is possible. And the Open Theater actors, led from the trap of causality, find other ways of being in this world. . . An artist is a person who has recognized each separate moment of choice. . . Community is the work of a group of people who become artists as they create the choices in their own lives. . . . Out of the chaos of this existence the Open Theater arrived at a fragile freedom based on the proof that there are always two ways of being--the one we have been taught and the one we are learning.[41]

Chaikin's ideas on art and theatre became part of the fabric of Boesing's playwriting. Her belief in the possibility of choice in a reality which is in flux rather than static underlies her unchanging belief in the possibility of transformation.[42] In addition, the practical aspects of theatre training and performance as developed by Chaikin have influenced Boesing in her work with her actors: improvisation based on choices coming from the performers, group contribution to script creation, and focus on the actor rather than the script are elements in Martha Boesing's work that reflect techniques developed by Chaikin in the Open Theatre.

The influences from Artaud and Brecht are perhaps less direct but still salient. The Firehouse Theatre, as Boesing asserted, was a living expression of Artaud's theories of theatre performance, and while the Boesings did not go as far in that direction as the rest of the company did, there are remnants of Artaud in Boesing's writings.

Artaud was stricken with meningitis at the age of five, and thereafter, bore after-effects of the disease in the form of mental illness.[43] He looked at the theatre as a curative agent, "a means whereby the individual could come. . . to be dissected, split and cut open first, and then healed."[44] The healing, however, would be based on the following process:

> . . . the stage happenings would elicit psychological projections from the spectator. As tension was developed on stage, as events moved toward a climax, there would ensue a corresponding tension in the audience that would eventually become so great as to force the spectator to recognize the nature of his projections and anxieties. Once having permitted his anxieties to come to the light of consciousness, the spectator would now see his various problems from a different point of view and would gain, thereby, greater perception and self-understanding. This new vision would allow the fragments of the spectator's personality, which had been projected onto the stage, to return to their source, the spectator's being--nourished and renewed by the added understanding.[45]

Boesing does not wish to splinter the personalities of her spectators in order that they be healed of their anxieties. However, she does wish to wrench, to tear, to rip viewers away from complacency. As we will discover, she does work to involve the audience, emotionally, in the issue, and she is confrontational in her approach. While not wanting to provoke the "visceral reaction"[46] sought by Artaud that might cause a viewer to vomit, Boesing is blunt in her images, and forthright in her facts so that, for example, a woman's monthly experience with blood and the planet's threat of nuclear horror are not described delicately.

Boesing views theatre as curative, and she is willing to open the wound before applying the salve. Perhaps from Artaud, Boesing learned how to dissect.

From Brecht, the influences on Boesing are perhaps more subtle. Chaikin summarized one of Brecht's stances on theatre as follows:

> Brecht wanted to show that we live either by values which we choose deliberately or. . . by those which we simply accept. His themes are of man involved with society; man suffering from a choice he may not himself have made; man imprisoned in situations constructed by a system he doesn't understand; man craving, choosing, pursuing, according to values set up by other men, dictated by ruthless economic and political forces which bear the guise of simple expediency.[47]

Boesing's focus on the audience as a changeable social group is conceptually related to Brecht's view. Her commitment to teaching while entertaining, to making ideas central to her plays, and to interrogating social roles can be attributed to influences from Brecht.

To trace all of the influences on Martha Boesing as she lived through the fifties, sixties, and seventies would require examining most of the intellectual trends that developed during those decades. Boesing's intellect is an open one that searches constantly for another answer, and as soon as it is found, asks another question. She never rests in her quest, and although her questions are often reworded versions of earlier ones, her new answers may have assimilated the newer thinking.

Conclusion

Martha Boesing grew up in the forties and fifties in a traditional working class home where as the child of a childlike mother, she learned a double message: the care-taker (which is what she became) could not follow then role model of the helpless woman she was taking care of, and yet, there were no other models. Her father was absent. Through him, she was educated at the best schools, and she launched herself on her theatrical career by living in New York in contact with the great experimentalists of the sixties (Beck, Malina, and Chaikin). She married, first a socialist and then an actor, from whom she gained exposure to ideas that later became fundamental to her thinking. Her relationships to her husbands and children were "experimentally traditional" as she lived according to socialist or leftist ideals while preparing the meals and washing the diapers.

The influence that significantly changed Boesing came indirectly from Chaikin and from the times--she gradually became aware that, for all circumstances, the possibility of choice exists. She had not known through her younger years that choice for her, as a woman, existed. She had not known that the social roles into which she was cast existed only if she chose them. She did not dare to change because she had not known it was possible.

The significant change for Boesing began when she was directly influenced by the women's movement through the person of Bobbi Ausubel. From that moment on, Boesing became visibly conscious of herself as a woman and an artist.

Her choice to return with Paul to Minneapolis after leaving Atlanta was significant for her career. Thereafter, her own theatre, At the Foot of the Mountain, became central to her work and to her life. Because she wrote the plays that the theatre produced, the issues that concerned Boesing became the issues that propelled the work of the theatre. What she chose after 1974 was to work with predominantly female artists in a theatre in which the choices of individuals contributed to the collective choice of the group. Her work with At the Foot of the Mountain, 1974-1984, was the next piece of her life in which "the personal is political" was made visible through her repertoire of produced plays.

ENDNOTES
CHAPTER III

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Mary C. Pruitt, "In the Wind of the Struggle," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 131.

[10]Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[11]Paul Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 18, 1987.

[12]Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Pruitt, p. 134.

[15] Martha and Paul Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 18, 1987.

[16] Julia Costich, Antonin Artaud (Boston: Twayne Publishers, A Division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1978), p. 39.

[17] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[18] Paul Boesing, Interview, 1987.

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[21] Martha Boesing, Free Reign (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1986), p. 2.

[22] Ibid., preface.

[23] Ibid., p. 2.

[24] Ibid., p. 2.

[25] Ibid., p. 18.

[26] Ibid., p. 49.

[27] Paul Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[28] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[29] Paul Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[30] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[31] Martha Boesing, Plays by Martha Boesing, Pamphlet available from At the Foot of the Mountain, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

[32] Jan Magrane, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 20, 1987.

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[42] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[43] Bettina L. Knapp, Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision (New York: David Lewis, Inc., 1969), p. 3.

[44] Ibid., p. 46.

[45] Ibid., p. 46.

[46] Ibid., p. 47.

[47] Joe Chaikin, The Presence of the Actor (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 39.

# CHAPTER IV

# MARTHA BOESING: DIRECTOR, PLAYWRIGHT, AND THEORIST

## Martha Boesing and Her Theatre

The immediate context for Martha Boesing's beginnings with her theatre, At the Foot of the Mountain, was Minneapolis, a city in which feminist theatrical activity was varied and intense. In November of 1975, Linda Picone of the Minneapolis Tribune described the events occurring in the area, demonstrating that "the kinds of things that take the title 'feminist theatre' vary as widely as do the definitions of feminist."[1] Picone reviewed several feminist productions: Martha Boesing's, River Journal, produced by At the Foot of the Mountain; Lady in a Cage, written collectively by the feminist theatre, Circle of the Witch; Pat Sun Circle's Cory, produced by Lavender Cellar Theatre; and The Women's Patrol, the guerilla theatre whose main effort was to "pass out roses and smiles, plant flowers in unexpected places and perform a periodic show of song, dance and comedy."[2] In addition, Picone mentioned two other groups who "dabbled in feminist theatre," Alive and Trucking Theater and the Powderhorn Puppet Theatre. The summary of theatres concluded with Picone's observation that "The idea of feminist theatre is to present a feminist message in a dramatic form. . .

[while serving as] an encounter-therapy group for those involved in it."[3]

As the newest theatre at the time of Picone's writing, At the Foot of the Mountain was just beginning. By 1980, while the Alive and Trucking Theatre Company and the Lavender Cellar Company had stopped producing, At the Foot of the Mountain was prospering.

At the Foot of the Mountain really began in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1970, when Martha and Paul Boesing became interested in establishing a theatre. Moving first to Atlanta, the Boesings finally established their theatre in Minneapolis in 1974. The process of naming their new theatre reflected their search for both personal and theatrical roots:

> After much discussion, the group decided to name the theatre by casting lots with the I Ching. The first hexagram produced was called "The Spring at the Foot of the Mountain." Not being able to decipher a name out of that, they cast lots again. This time the hexagram instructed them to "go back." When they cast lots for the third time, they again received the hexagram "The Spring at the Foot of the Mountain." Interpreting this in light of their attempt to rediscover roots, both in their lives as well as in theatre, they named the theatre At the Foot of the Mountain.[5]

Thus, At the Foot of the Mountain was founded and named. In its orginal form, it was an experimental theatre. In the summer of 1974, two original one-act plays by Martha were produced: Pimp, in which women

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sell out each other and themselves for men, and Gelding, in which men struggle to make contact with each other "through the barriers of convention and frozen emotion."[6] Both plays were inspired by newspaper articles dealing with parent-child relationships, the first about a woman indicted "for selling her daughter for $40,000.00, the second about a father accused of castrating his son."[7] The two plays exemplified the daring with which Boesing presented her ideas before she declared herself and her company feminist.

During the six months that followed, the company went through changes, partially because of individual work on primal therapy, partially because the Boesings were experiencing marital difficulties, and partially because Phyllis Jane Rose, who had joined the group, became Martha's closest connection, both professionally and personally. Jan Magrane, an actor who had come with the Boesings from Atlanta, described those early years:

> We were so ambitious. We just decided on a season of plays that we were going to do. . .We were doing all the beginning things of an institution. We were getting non-profit status. We were writing grants. I built sets in my basement. I did the costumes. After that season, we toured in Phyllis' van. We worked really hard, and I look back on that as one of the richest and most exciting times of my life.[8]

While the company was developing, Martha continued to write, and, together, they produced River Journal, which she dubbed a "feminist morality play." Thus, with River Journal, Boesing, for the first time, identified her work as feminist.[9] One reviewer called it the story of everywoman:

> Martha Boesing's self-described feminist morality play. . . takes a cruise down the conscious and subconscious of all the day-by-day ways women and men play out their assigned roles--or break the journey with the shock of revelation.[10]

River Journal was significant for At the Foot of the Mountain for two reasons: first, the play provoked controversy in the press because it effectively aroused the audience, both positively and negatively, as Boesing had hoped it would; and, second, around the time the play opened, "the men, through lack of interest and energy merely dropped out of the company,"[11] so that the opening of Boesing's "feminist morality play" marked At the Foot of the Mountain's beginnings as a feminist/woman's theatre.

With the decision that At the Foot of the Mountain was to be feminist, Boesing needed to define feminist theatre. She stated, "[feminist theatre is]. . . not just a theatre for women, but where the whole flow of the thing has to do with what had traditionally been given over to women. Subjective things, not

objective."[12] She identified herself as a "facilitator rather than director" who helped to create a play through the awareness of the "emotions of each moment" of each member of the cast.[13]

Therefore, her commitment to feminism caused Boesing to be committed to theatrical techniques that were products of her feminist thinking. Thus, her personal growth as an artist was rooted in an enormous political commitment, which she expressed through the commitments of the theatre. She articulated that commitment when asked to explain the purpose of At the Foot of the Mountain:

> To change the world. To stop oppression of all kinds. To illuminate oppression enough so people look at it in their own lives--personal oppression, racial oppression, sexual oppression, financial oppression, spiritual oppression. . . We feel committed to celebrating, rejoicing in the power of all of us to survive, to grow, to change, to revalue, to turn things around and make life more creative and healthier for all the planet. And I know that's grandiose, but over the years we've gotten use to our grandiosity. We say to hell with it, that is what we are trying to do. We don't have modest goals. . . We are such a source of energy and life for people because they see this audacious, outrageous, small group of women out there saying we're going to do this. . . The reason why people are so inspired by us is that somehow we fill that dream that it's okay to dream a vision where the world is sane and everybody is happy. It's okay to keep fighting for that and keep on dreaming it and in our naive childish way, we never grow out of that.[14]

Perhaps because Boesing had been a political activist and a theatre artist, she saw political and artistic goals for At the Foot of the Mountain: she was unwilling to separate them or to make one more important than the other. This dual commitment showed clearly in the political and artistic statements developed by the members of the company.

At the Foot of the Mountain's Political Statement

RADICAL--from the Latin word 'radix,' meaning 'root.

POLITICAL--from the Greek work 'polis,' meaning 'city.' Anything that effects the relationships and quality of life among people in a community is 'political.' Art can reinforce the values in a community or it can challenge them; in either case, ALL ART IS POLITICAL.

AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN charges all participants in the theater's activities:

to see, with radical vision, the roots of all issues;

to create, from those roots, alternative analyses, solutions, visions;

to honor the artist's political responsiblity to be of service;

to revolt against misogyny and all related violations of the human spirit whereby one person (or groups of persons) has power over another;

to renew hope and celebrate the healing power of women;

to remember that the ends never justify the means, for the means always determine the ends;

to maintain personal, political, artistic, and financial integrity;

to allow these political values to inform all artistic, educational, and management activities.[15]

Equally important was At the Foot of the Mountain's Artistic Statement.

At the Foot of the Mountain's Artistic Statement

PROFESSIONAL--from the Latin word 'profateri,' meaning 'to declare publicly.' In its radical sense, a 'professional' is one who speaks out and assumes full consequences of one's words and actions.

THEATER--from the Greek word 'theatron,' meaning 'viewing place,' akin to the Greek word 'thauma,' meaning 'miracles.' The theater is a place to create and witness miracles.

AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN charges all participants in the theater's activities:

to illuminate, share, and teach the political values At the Foot of the Mountain in all artistic endeavors;

to create theater directly out of the lives, values, and visions of women;

to honor the healing and transformative powers of art;

to respect the artistic discipline necessary to create the magic that makes the theater an awesome catalyst for social change;

to recognize that, as a performance tool and resource, training and discipline for the emotions is as essential as training and discipline for the voice and body;

to evolve new forms of theater, exploring the relationship of form and content, understanding that new content cannot be expressed in old forms;

> to discover and illuminate the theater which has been handed down to use from our mothers and grandmothers, from generation to generation.[16]

During Boesing's years with the theatre, the company struggled to be loyal to its commitments, balancing artistic excellence with experimentation in both management and production. As a fully experimental and a fully feminist theatrical organization, At the Foot of the Mountain was unique in the United States for its consistent productivity and its longevity. "The company has grown from four full-time and five part-time members to fifteen full-time members. [Between 1980 and 1982] yearly income . . . more than doubled."[17]

Boesing left At the Foot of the Mountain partially because of the personal break-up between Phyllis Jane Rose and herself. Rose, who has remained as the producing director of At the Foot of the Mountain, asserted that:

> . . . our mission is to inspire our audiences to generate a just and joyous world. . . [with] an ensemble of women because that creates a vulnerability that happens when women are alone together. It's really important to create a safe space for women.[18]

At the Foot of the Mountain provided the safe forum for Martha Boesing's artistic directing and writing. From 1974-1984 the work of the playwright and

the theatre was linked, and during that time, Boesing developed extensively as a playwright and a theorist.

## Martha Boesing and Her Theory

The close connection between Boesing and her theatre encouraged her self-conscious consideration of her theatrical choices and, in fact, allowed her to develop feminist theories and test them constantly against the work that was in progress. Consequently, Boesing has written and practiced original feminist dramatic theory. Most feminist playwrights do not have a forum available for the practice of their ideas. Some ideas that have been attributed to Boesing, however, were expressed through the character Abigail in The Web, and thus represented the ideas of the character--not necessarily Boesing. Nevertheless, the issues Boesing raised in the play were debated heatedly at the American Theatre Association's Women's Conference in San Francisco in 1984. In the keynote address, Joan Holden attacked Boesing's "orgasmic theory" of feminist aesthetics. Holden took the theory from a speech by Abigail:

> The interesting thing about Aristotle's theory of tragedy is its kinship to the male orgasm. . . Consider the standard that the first four acts of a good play be built to a slow crescendo, rising up and up, at an ever-increasing intensity of emotion, until finally the climax is reached and there is a

> tremendous outburst of passion, a catharsis, if you will, after which, in the fifth act, a speedy decrescendo immersing the hero in an overwhelming sense of exhaustion, expenditure, and loss, until he comes to his final resting place, usually in death. Given this classical format of biological determinism, it follows that women's plays could or should be multiorgasmic in form, small mini-scenes perhaps, coming in waves of emotions, crests and valleys, like the ebb and flow of changing tides, and finally consummating in a sense of nourishment and plenitude, the creating of new life, birth.[19]

Holden objected to a "mini-scenes" concept of feminist writing because as a woman and a feminist writer herself, she does not write in the structure described by Boesing. Therefore, Holden asked, how could this particular structure be used as a defining aesthetic for feminist playwriting? Boesing answered by reasserting that this particular description was part of a characterization, and, while multi-orgasmic writing is interesting conceptually, she, Boesing, does not consider it fundamental to a feminist aesthetic, a position she reiterated at the University of Maryland in 1986.

Boesing, however, has asked questions about female art: "What is a woman's space? How does such space differ from a theatre of patriarchy?" She has argued that women should struggle to "relinguish traditions such as linear plays, proscenium theatre, non-participatory ritual for theatre that is circular,

intuitive, personal. . ." emerging into a rebirth of woman's consciousness.[20]

Boesing has also presented masculine and feminine polarities in art as an extension of the orgasmic concept to emphasize qualities which have been denigrated throughout history. "'Female' qualities [such] as intuition, emotion, nurturing, healing and supporting must be owned and developed by women, not repressed and substituted for by 'male' qualities of powerfulness, analysis, aggression, and competition."[21] Boesing, during her frequent lectures to colleges and universities around the country, reproduced for her workshops variations of the following chart demonstrating the differences between the theatre of the patriarch and that of the matriarch. The following chart was presented at the Unversity of Maryland in 1984.

| | MASCULINIST | FEMINIST |
|---|---|---|
| ISSUE | Power:<br>Control<br>Conquering | Relationship:<br>Release<br>Connecting |
| ORGANIZATION | Hierarchal<br>Individualistic<br>Competitive | Mutual<br>Collective<br>Supportive |
| APPROACH | Abstract (Ideas)<br>Analytical<br>Logical | Concrete (Detail)<br>Emotional<br>Intuitive |
| FORM | Linear<br>Codified<br>Rigid | Cyclical<br>Changing<br>Fluid |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| CONTENT | Objective<br>Reactionary | Subjective<br>Revolutionary |
| EMPHASIS | Product | Process |
| OVERVIEW | Penis-Centered<br>Single Minded<br>Ejaculatory | Womb-centered<br>Suffused<br>Multi-orgasmic[22] |

The chart is intentionally separatist because the male traits are those respected by the culture in the sense that with the masculinist characteristics, an individual may attain political power. Applying the feminist concepts to theories of theatre management and production has been one of the challenges facing Boesing in her work with At the Foot of the Mountain.

Some of the methods Boesing and the company developed for their work stemmed from their understanding of the differences between masculinist and feminist thinking. The company originated some processes and expanded on others derived from experimental theatres: the feeling circle (based on the issues of organization and approach), company collaboration (based on the issues of relationships and organization), and ritual drama (based on the issues of form, content, and overview).

## The Feeling Circle

The feeling circle was always a part of the rehearsal process of At the Foot of the Mountain. One way in which the circle could begin was when the

director, Boesing, would ask an actor, "What's going on with you?", and the rehearsal would be stopped to consider the feelings of one or more of the actors.[23] The intention was to use the feelings of the moment as part of the acting technique. More importantly, Boesing thinks that reclaiming feelings as a political statement contradicts two assumptions of the culture: first, subjective feelings are seen as less important than objective evidence, and therefore, should be denied or repressed--so Boesing's acting techniques give feelings primary importance; second, women are described as emotional and the culture simultaneously denigrates emotions; conversely, Boesing's theatre recognizes that women (and men) are emotional and gives those emotions centrality.

The process by which the company of At the Foot of the Mountain developed the two contradictions to the culture was "the feeling circle." Boesing explained the feeling circle as follows:

> We come to the rehearsal time from a woman's space, springing out of those parts of ourselves which have traditionally belonged to women: our feelings, our intuition, our hysteria. . . We have always been told to leave our feelings at the door, mask the sorrow, anxiety, even the joy, approach our work with objectivity and clarity.
>
> We start with awareness. . . As we go through the script, we try to keep in contact with our own internal processes and let them be our guide, let them direct the moment. We avoid analyzing the feelings of the character

> [Stanislavski], avoid objective delineation of personality, avoid setting the moment.
>
> We are heading towards an improvisational theatre event. There is the script, there are the same people, with the same names and the same actions each night, but the emotional life changes from moment to moment, performance to performance, and the texture of the play, the subtext, is totally new each time the performers come to it. . . We have just begun to scratch the surface of what it means to relinguish our minds, our knowledge, our objective control of the environment to our feelings, our intuitions.[24]

As the company worked with the feeling circle, they recognized six basic emotions: happy, sad, loving, angry, fearful, and shameful. Penetrating present emotions to reach one of the six basic emotions was what the feeling circle set out to accomplish. Boesing commented in April 1986 that she really believed there are only two basic emotions, fear and love, but whether six or two emotions are reached, the purpose is to make each woman more accessible to herself and thereby to others so that hidden or unrecognized feelings do not surface in destructive ways. An example provided by Flynn of the Feeling Circle of At the Foot of the Mountain demonstrated the process by which "guarded" was reduced to "fear."

> Woman 1: I'm mainly happy. Somewhat guarded.
>
> Woman 2: How do you feel when you're guarded? Guarded isn't a feeling.
>
> Woman 1: Okay, I'll leave that out. I feel happy.

> Woman 2: But when I feel guarded, I feel scared and angry, that's why I wanted to check that out. . . Are you scared?
>
> Woman 1: No, I'm not scared. I see guarded as a legitimate feeling.
>
> Woman 2: . . . guarded isn't a feeling. It's a reaction. It's true. It's a reaction to a feeling. It's not a feeling.
>
> Woman 3: It is true. Guarded is not a feeling. It's like saying I feel happy and blue-eyed.[25]

The circle continued until the women reached an agreement on the basic emotion felt by the "guarded" member. Because the issue concerned tension between heterosexual and lesbian members of the company, according to Flynn, the woman who felt guarded was fearing attack for her lesbian lifestyle. The feeling circle helped her to recognize her fear so that she could, perhaps, no longer feel guarded while working with the other actors.

The feeling circle served both personal and professional uses for the actors. The personal use was closely associated with the work developed by consciousness-raising groups, and thus assisted the actors to understand their own feelings. The effects of the personal use showed immediately as tensions between actors dissolved into laughing and hugging by the end of the rehearsal. By contrast, the professional use was specifically as an acting tool in character development, and its effects were more

difficult to identify, frequently occurring over a period of time and translating on the subconscious level into character work.[26]

Boesing's ideal of how the feeling circle could ultimately affect the actor's performance is explained in her interpretation of Brecht's Alienation Technique:

> I often talk about 'wearing the mask' which is a Brechtian concept. The actor holds up a mask and in effect says, 'This is a character' so you always see the actor. You hold the mask two or three feet away from you and say, 'Here is the character and I am the actor presenting this character.' You're always aware of the actor. I differ from Brecht with this actor over here. What I described sounds like the alienation technique; presenting the character so you always have an intellectual difference. Brecht's thing was to remain free to judge this character and not get emotionally involved. I try to use that same technique of presenting the character over here, but talk about being aware of what the actor is feeling and going through so that the actor is a person who is being made vulnerable and open at this moment in time in front of the audience. . . this allows me at that moment to do the exact opposite of what Brecht was after, which is to connect emotionally and therefore really feel like I'm in the presence of someone telling me a true painful, beautiful, awful, terrifying experience of their own lives which will maybe touch me, get me to notice that about my own life and move me literally from one place to another. It's like using the alienation technique to get the exact opposite effect. Literally pull people to a real emotional moment that is happening right now with that person.[27]

Thus, using processes that grew out of the consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement in

combination with theories developed by Boesing, At the Foot of the Mountain attempted to involve the audience emotionally through the actual engagement of the actor in the emotions of the character. The feeling circle provided the access to the emotions which ultimately were shared by actor, character, and audience.

## Company Collaboration

Company collaboration, the second major convention used by Boesing and by At the Foot of the Mountain, was a careful balance of artistic expression between Boesing and the company. As artistic director, Boesing directed all production matters, and she took full responsibility for scripting the collaboratively created dramas. Boesing desribed the process as a rather painful one:

> . . . we have evolved a style where there is definitely a director and definitely a writer--a main person at the helm. But you work constantly with each other collaboratively. Anybody can have input. People can put in as much as they can or will put in. And the director's task is really to facilitate that. There is a very interesting line between a rather strong authoritarian kind of leadership on the one hand and this constant acceptance of feedback and corroboration from those who want to give it on the other. What you're trying to do is use all the resources available.[28]

While the collaborative process has been practiced in most feminist theatres, its unusual success in At

the Foot of the Mountain can perhaps be attributed to the ways with which Boesing influenced the theatre practices. As the director, she provided the theoretical framework for the productions as she facilitated the development of each actor individually and the ensemble as a whole. One of the actors, Chris Cinque, described Martha's technique:

> I think Martha is just brilliant at being able to . . . put aside her own wishes, [and] really listen. . . to people and not be . . . threatened by that. . . I think she puts aside her own opinion because she wants to say what is true.[29]

Thus, At the Foot of the Mountain developed the experimental technique of company collaboration by applying their theories of feminist thinking by working with consideration for the feelings of all members. They thereby practiced the connective form of power relations.

## Ritual Drama

Boesing described the kind of theatre At the Foot of the Mountain created as ritual drama. The purpose of the ritual was to change the emotions of the members of the audience as they participated in the emotional experiences of the actors. Boesing described the event:

> To take the play and hopefully move people and touch them and their lives in a

> personal way--which of course the feeling circle leads us into--that whole experience makes our plays very emotionally and thought provokingly immediate. To be able to have that experience and then in a literal way to experience it and express it right there in the moment by involving them in some kind of activity--lighting candles or naming names or speaking their thoughts outloud, sharing something with a neighbor. This is, I think, a wonderfully rejuventating experience for [the audience] to have in the theater.[30]

Perhaps the ritual drama was the means by which Boesing conceptualized the blend of the political and artistic goals of the theatre. The performances made ceremonies out of the common events of every day life, such as a mother's brushing her daughter's hair before school. "If you lift that up and somehow through repetitive motions or through a litany attached to it, or music, or by changing the vocal quality to it, or finding the emotional presence that is so profound under that--the love expressed, or the hate expressed, or whatever is expressed--embellishing it by taking the gesture and the feeling, crystallizing the ceremony of that--then you have lifted it into something. . . call[ed] ritual."[31]

Thus, in Boesing's theatre, the performers and the audience share a theatrical event that expresses--through ritual--their personal experience and their emotional lives. Daily events are expressed artistically and thereby are made political. The <u>personal and the artistic are made political as they</u>

are made public. The individual and the community may be changed and healed as the "affections and spirits and feelings of the audience literally become a part of [the] play."[32]

## Conclusion

Healing seems to be an important element in feminist theatre. Boesing sees art "as a very healing force" and theatre as a place "where it is safe to experience the transformation right while it's happening."[33] Thus, in the theatrical event, Boesing hopes that both performers and audience members will experience a personal transformation, and that they carry that transformation inot the culture to work to eliminate oppression in all forms. She commented, "I am finally convinced that what we are dealing with culturally is the question, 'What are we?', and we are looking for more, and MORE is not flesh and bones. We need to look into the center. We need to all meet somewhere in a real way to heal."[34]

The feeling circle, the work of the company together, and the development of ritual drama are part of her emphasis on an experience which heals and transforms. For Boesing, the theatre is not a place to experience momentary pleasure or pain; the theatre is the beginning of a new end cause--"to change the world."[35]

# CHAPTER IV
# ENDNOTES

[1]Linda Picone, "Feminist Theatre Covers Wide Range in Twin Cities," Minneapolis Tribune, November 16, 1975, p. 8D.

[2]Ibid., p. 8D.

[3]Ibid., p. 8D.

[4]Martha Boesing, Plays by Martha Boesing, pamphlet available from At The Foot of the Mountain, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

[5]Meredith Flynn, The Feeling Circle, Company Collaboration, and Ritual Drama: Three Conventions Developed by the Women's Theatre, At the Foot of the Mountain (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, Published on Demand, 1984), p. 24.

[6]Boesing, Plays by Martha Boesing.

[7]Pat Monaghan, "Reports at Random: Foot of the Mountain: A New Theater Names Itself," Preview Magazine, December, 1974.

[8]Jan Magrane Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1987.

[9]Flynn, p. 24.

[10]Ibid. p. 25.

[11] Ibid., p. 24.

[12] Ibid., p. 24.

[13] Ibid., p. 24.

[14] Ibid., p. 59.

[15] "Mission Statement," At the Foot of the Mountain Newsletter, Fall, 1982, p. 8.

[16] Ibid., p. 8.

[17] Flynn, p. 79.

[18] Phyllis Jane Rose, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1987.

[19] Martha Boesing, The Web in Plays in Progress, vol. 4, no. 1 (N. Y.: Theatre Communication Group, 1981), p. 1-6.

[20] Dinah Leavitt, Feminist Theatre Groups (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1980), p. 56.

[21] Ibid., p. 67.

[22] Martha Boesing, Chart of Polarities, presented by Patti Gillespie in THET 495, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, Spring, 1984.

[23]Flynn, p. 84.

[24]Leavitt, p. 71.

[25]Flynn, p. 89-90.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 122.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 98.

[28]*Ibid.*, p. 35.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 169.

[30]*Ibid.*, p. 187.

[31]Statement made by Martha Boesing from her personal notes.

[32]Statement made by Martha Boesing from her personal notes.

[33]Flynn, p. 192.

[34]Martha Boesing, Interview, December, 1986.

[35]Flynn, p. 59.

# CHAPTER V
# THE WORLD OF THE PLAYS: MARTHA BOESING'S USE OF THE STAGE SPACE

The preceding chapters have presented the context in which Martha Boesing founded At the Foot of the Mountain and subsequently began to develop specific theatrical processes that were distinctive both to her and to feminist theatre. The processes (the feeling circle, collaborative production, and ritual drama) contributed to the creation of Boesing's larger work, her produced and published plays.

The analysis of the plays can begin with an immediately tangible question: How does Boesing use the stage space? In experimental theatre, this question is particularly relevant because the rearrangement of the stage space has been one means by which directors and playwrights have redefined the conventions of theatre, something contemporary critics are likely to call deconstructing the code of traditional theatre. Breaking away from the style of realism, experimentalists--particularly feminists--have continuously changed the environment of the stage so that the theatre is the physical manifestation of <u>ideas</u> rather than of the objective reality that exists outside of the theatre building. In realism, the living room on the stage might be the same as that in the average home; in non-realism, or even what could be

termed anti-realism, the stage picture expresses the director's ideas, and when the director is also the playwright (as in Martha Boesing's case), the stage picture also represents the playwright's ideas.

In the texts of Martha Boesing plays, the prefaces, which are often lengthy, the stage directions, and the dialogues indicate a use of stage space that is experimental. Within the larger division of the single-authored plays (one-act, full-length, and historic collage) and the collaborative works, an additional three groupings occur: First, most of the one acts have no sets, no large set pieces, varied small set pieces and props, and occasional large costume pieces that include masks. Second, most of the collaborative and collage pieces are placed in an environmental set that is a general location that may surround the audience as well as the stage; for example, Antigone Too takes place in "the holding cell of a prison," and the audience may enter through barred gates. These plays contain large, moveable set pieces that may transform from one object to another, and a larger number of detailed props and costumes than the first grouping. Third, the full-length plays written by Boesing, individually, as well as one mixed-collaborative play, The Moon Tree, are placed in carefully described sets that are multi-leveled and multi-roomed. In two cases, the sets contain a smaller

stage for a play within the play. In this last group, both large and small set pieces are used, and the props tend to be realistic in style.

Thus, Boesing's use of the stage space ranges from an empty stage to complex stage designs involving multiple scenes taking place simultaneously on multiple levels. Her stage picture begins with the close, womb-like image of the one acts, in which stark lights focus on two or three actors, widening to the picture of the longer plays in which a central point is surrounded by higher and wider levels of action taking place in expanded sets. The stage space seems to continually expand outward as the plays, themselves, become more complex.

## The Empty Space

The largest group of plays by Boesing call for no sets. Of the eighteen plays studied, eight are in this category (five one-acts and three full-length collaborative pieces). For several of the one-acts, the stage directions clearly indicate that the space should be open and empty. For example, "Journey to Canaan takes place in a large empty space."[2] In the preface of Love Song to an Amazon, Boesing writes, "This is a play for two women. It is a celebration and ritual enactment of their friendship--the multiple masks and the deep bonding. It is for you to provide the

setting."[3] Trespasso takes place "in any open space."[4] Pimp, Story of a Mother, and Las Gringas have no stage directions indicating set. Labia Wings is the one exception because the action takes place before a backdrop of a "huge, single flower, a lily, perhaps, or an iris. It is facing front so that it looks like one could enter it, as if entering a womb."[5]

The use of open, empty spaces in each of these plays seems to emphasize the intensity of the interaction occurring between the characters because the lights focus on two or three actors moving against darkness. In addition, the limited props or costume pieces function, for the most part, allegorically. Pimp, for example, is the story of three women "selling out each other and themselves for men. . . an imagistic excursion into the minds and feelings of . . . a mother (Jo), her daughter (Adrian), whom Jo sells in order to secure the attention of her lover, and the wife of the buyer (Ruth). A montage of scenes reveal each woman's fears, fantasies, and needs."[6] The stage space contains stools, and the following props: a doll, a pipe, a brush, and a wedding ring. The stools are arranged in various configurations which appear to emphasize the threesome, a triangle, perhaps even a trinity as each woman seems to be at odds with and yet a part of each of the others. The props are literal symbols: the doll symbolizes the daughter, the pipe

represents the absent male, the wedding ring stands for broken promises, and the brush is used as a connection between the mother and daughter.

Journey to Canaan is a "modern-day telling of the Israelistes' forty year trek through the desert from Egypt to Canaan. . . an allegory for the spiritual bankruptcy, psychic detachment, and isolation many of us feel living in today's world. It is also about our pilgrimage through the wilderness of our hearts and minds in search of serenity."[7] The play takes place in a large empty space with "the movement . . . choreographed so that the whole event is a dance as well as a play, a visual image which meets, counters, and illuminates the words."[8] There are no scenes in the play, and the movement builds until the last chant when Joshua incants the battle of Jerricho [sic]:

> seven times we will circle this city
> seven times round
> seven times round
> we will circle
> we will circle the walls of the city
> at the dawning of light
> seven times round
> at the dawning of light
> I will bid you to shout
> I will bid you to scream
> seven times round
> I will bid you to scream
> I will bid you to scream
> seven times round
> I will bid you to scream
> till the walls of the city
> I will bid you to shout
> till the walls of the city
> fall down
> we will scream
> (SINGS)

lest we be found not foolish enough
we will scream
lest we be found not zealous enough
we will scream
lest we be found not crazy enough
seven times round
we will circle this city
seven times round
we will scream
we will scream
till the walls
of your city
till the walls of all cities
fall down![9]

At the conclusion of the chant, which is accompanied by rapidly increasing drum beats, the actors charge toward the audience, suddenly stopping, their hands before their faces, "creating a wall. Slowly they each lower their hands. They look at the person in front of them. Perhaps they see each other."[10]

The use of an empty space for the performance of Journey to Canaan allows the performers to create the image of the wall as well as the "falling down" of that wall. Also, the play moves continually outward, on the horizontal plane, until the actors and the audience are literally in the same circle.

Love Song for an Amazon and Trespasso, both one acts, are similar in that they are for two women, who, through a series of experiences together, discover the value of their friendship. The plays are different in that in Love Song the friendship is revealed through a "prismlike series of images created through sudden and

frequent transformations [in which] they are seen as school chums, career women, mothers, daughters, teachers, students, lovers, Amazon warriors, visionaries,"[11] whereas in Trespasso the friendship is discovered after the two (Agatha and Mick) have struggled for control over each other, as Mick struggles with her need to constantly be tested while Agatha believes that "everyone is a hallucination."[12]

The use of the stage space reflects the differences in the two plays. Love Song contains no props except for two piles of rocks, which the performers roll to each other at varying speeds and in varying numbers to provide rhythm to the images created in the transformations. Trespasso, contains a few realistic props (a table, a tea set, half-eaten biscuits), which are used to illustrate the conflict occurring between the characters as Agatha claims Mick and all the props are her own hallucinations, while Mick attempts to prove that they are not. The props in Love Song mark the beats in the changes of character, while the props in Trespasso become tangible evidence of the personal interaction occurring between the characters.

Like Pimp and Love Song to an Amazon, the full-length play The Story of a Mother deals with the relationship between women in "kaleidoscopic images [that show] the myths, the key memories, the repressed feelings, and finally, the bonding of mothers and

daughters . . . interspersed with structured audience participation. . . all present are invited to see the world as their mothers did, and to speak both the spoken and unspoken words that hang in the air between all daughters and their mothers."[13] Containing thirty-nine scenes and four rituals, The Story of a Mother is a complex play in which the actors transform many times in an open, empty space. Big Mother, an oversized character created by one actor standing on another's shoulders while wearing a costume piece, opens the play and appears just before the final ritual.

A similar kind of oversized costume piece appears in Labia Wings--"a mad, surrealistic romp into a world in which three old crones predict the end of an era . . . the world's change-over into a matriarchy, and. . . the Three-Headed Goddess comes for a visit and puts some old myths to rest and bursts others."[14] The three-headed goddess that ushers in the new age (from the audience) is costumed as three characters: a bird with a woman's head, a fat whore on stilts, and a woman with four arms and huge feet. Appearing before the huge lily already described as the backdrop for Labia Wings, the Goddess enacts the birth of a new age in which a burst balloon represents the death of the age of the patriarch. Boesing has admitted that Labia Wings is one of her favorite plays, and, of the group

of one-acts, it contains the clearest feminist message in the re-telling of a woman's mythology.

The Last Fire: An Illumination is a one-act that predicts the future in the surrealistic style of Labia Wings. However, instead of ushering in a new age, the world after a nuclear holocaust is portrayed as "the frightened opportunist, Babaganoose, seeks redemption by burning a witch and a faggot; and Karushka, the old hag, cries out for repentance from all."[15] Karushka is situated on a raised platform, the only set piece on the stage, and the props (an apple, stakes, coins, Bibles) symbolize some aspect of the mythology of the dying planet.

Las Gringas written in 1984, represents a summary of techniques visible in earlier plays. The play is placed in this grouping only because there is no set indicated. In all other respects, it differs: it is collaboratively written on a particular political issue; the cast is large; and the style appears multi-visioned as do the other collaboratively written plays. Like The Last Fire, there is a central political issue--war. Unlike The Last Fire, however, Las Gringas contains overlapping narratives as the struggles of Nicaraguan women are splashed through simultaneous stories of middle and working-class American women. The content of the narratives is factual and personal, without the surrealistic tone of

The Last Fire, so that even though the theme is the same, its treatment is radically different. The set of Las Gringas is created entirely by the performers, who, through the transformations and pantomimes, use many props and their bodies to create the images.

Thus, in this first grouping of Boesing's plays, an empty, open space allows for infinite flexibility in stage use with the result that the interactions occurring between the characters are highlighted. The use of both symbolic and literal props as well as oversized, puppet-like costume pieces provides contrast to the empty stage, dramatizing the interaction even more intensively. The movement of the interaction matches the movement of the actors in the stage space, both literally and figuratively, at first close, and then wider as they move outwardly in gradually expanding orbits from isolated characters to characters connected to one another, and finally, to characters connected to individuals in the audience. As the use of the stage space moves outward physically so does the meaning of the play move outward to encompass women throughout the world.

## The Defined Space

The plays in the second grouping are placed in an environmental set and contain large, moveable, and

often transforming set pieces--that is to say, set pieces that initially function, for example, as towers, and then later change into tanks (in Ashes, Ashes We all Fall Down). The plays in the second grouping, all full-length, are either historic collage pieces or collaboratively created pieces. They are Mad Emma; Calamity Jane; Junkie!; Ashes, Ashes We all Fall Down; and Antigone Too.

Mad Emma, a single authored play, is a portrait of Emma Goldman and "a tribute to her vision and her survival in the face of the world's view of her as a witch. . . .Based on Emma's life and writings, [the play] is a montage of episodes and songs conceived to be performed in front of slides or a film of the times she lived in--a documentary backdrop to her passion."[16] The stage is bare when the play opens, except for a ladder with either a shelf or a small table beside it, on which there are a crockery pitcher and a cheap glass with water in them. The characters are Emma, the adult; Emma, the Child, symbolic of her vision; and the Man who represents her friends, her foes, her teachers, her lovers, and her imprisoners.

In the first scene, Emma drags a three-sided cart on the stage, into which the Man throws the Child after her first arrest, so that the cart thereafter is the set piece around which the action occurs. The cart serves as a wall, a soap-box, a stage, a wagon, a

railway car, a prison, and a ship. The removable boards are used to transform the piece into its variations, and also as weapons to threaten various characters in the play.

As a counterpoint to the movable cart, the ladder remains in the same position and is used for escapes and as a perch for the more powerful of two characters in conflict. The Man ascends and descends the ladder many times throughout the play, frequently changing masks and characters in the process. The props are few, but they are used precisely--for example, the glass of water, which is often thrown in the face of the enemy and is also used to teach the Child to walk without spilling a drop (external discipline). The whip and the flag are used as symbols of submission and conquest, and the masks allow for rapid transformations, that is, as one actor plays many characters, the changing of the masks indicates the accompanying changes in character.

Mad Emma, written in 1976, introduced set pieces that re-appeared in Dora Du Fran's Wild West Extravaganza or The Real Lowdown on Calamity Jane!, a full length, historic collage piece in which a wagon and platforms make up the set. The environment is a large arena "like the old wild west shows. The wagon, which is the central image, [is] moved from scene to scene to give a sense of journeying."[17] The play, a

musical, is a re-telling of the story of "this wild and contradictory frontier woman who defied definition and embraced the extremes of all myths told about women. Seen as both a whore and a dyke, a saint and a sinner, she was needed to be and as such is a spokesperson for all women." As a musical, the play "is a funny, passionate and rebellious portrait of Calamity Jane complete with hobby horses, Indians, bull whips, shoot outs, a new look at one of this nation's famous love stories in the Ballad of Wild Bill Hickok, and Calamity's famous buffalo ride through the streets of Deadwood as 'Lady Godiva.' It is a celebration of women's will to survive."[18]

As in Mad Emma, the wagon is used to show changes of place. Her horse is a hobby horse, and, as Jane rides, she reads words written by Jane, herself, describing her early experience at riding the "most vicious and stubborn horses."[19] The prop thus humorously contradicts the words. During her ride, "as Calamity resumes her reading, the others put the platforms together, and set out the props, masks, and costumes, forming the set for the rest of the play."[20] None of the stage directions indicate which kinds of props are used, but throughout the play, ropes, whips, bandanas, bandages, half-masks with bonnets attached, and full masks are used. These props are mostly used literally (a cup is used to drink from, for example), a

fact that differentiates this play from those discussed previously.

Calamity Jane is the first of Boesing's longer collage pieces. The use of the stage as an open arena in which the set piece is moved around is also a first that accomplishes on a larger scale what she began in Mad Emma. Calamity Jane is billed as a musical, with elements of Jane's tragic life presented in a tragi-comic style.

Junkie! is a full-length collaborative piece created by Boesing with the company At the Foot of the Mountain out of the "testimonies of addicts from both within and outside the company." As a participatory event, the play explores addictions "to chemicals, food, sex, love, money, work, fame, and other fixes. Following the progression of this disease into the pain of denial and shame, the play finally opens itself to the sharing of recovery stories by actors and audience in an attempt to create a spontaneous and immediate communal renewal, as the first step to spiritual surrender and recovery."[21]

The set consists of two five-foot ladders with a ten-foot beam stretched between them, and three stools. All are bound with strips of black and white cloth, tied in knots resembling bandages. On the stage-right ladder are three hooks, a whisk broom, a black dust pan, and Esther's bag. "All of the actors are dressed

completely in black, white and grey--colorless. They each carry a bag (also made of black, white, and grey) containing whatever props they have to use throughout the play. Esther wears a hat and a multicolored jacket or vest over her black and white costume."[22]

As in most of the collaborative pieces, the stage space creates a kaleidoscopic image that starts with the addicts grouped together at a party in which each addiction is visible. The design then breaks apart as pairs, trios, and quartets of performers show the differences in their addictions while making it obvious that all addictions are really the same. The ladders are used for single and antiphonal speeches, and the stools are arranged in changed shapes or distances depending on the interaction taking place between the characters. As one or several of the addicts share their stories, a tableau of the narrative may be formed behind them by the other actors. Thus, the play moves like a kaleidoscope throughout, building designs within designs, finally opening out to include the audience within the larger design.

In the closing ritual, all of the addicts place their bags symbolizing their addictions in the center of the stage and ask audience members to join them. The actors then come down to the audience offering gifts representing their both their addictions and the healing of those addictions through the elements of

air, water, earth and fire, and with each gift they say a blessing, such as, "I give you the sweet air, source of my wounds, source of my power"[23]. The gifts are incense, water, grain, a poem, a candle, dabs of red and white paint. The actors finally introduce themselves by name as recovering addicts--"I am Anne, recovering alcoholic."[24]

The use of the set pieces and the stage space in Junkie! is symbolic and pictorial. The ladders and stools are arranged to define the highs and lows in the characters and their relationships, both to each other and to their addictions. Each scene creates a picture as the actors are arranged on the stage so that the space is used meaningfully at all times.

Like Junkie!, Ashes, Ashes We all Fall Down is a collaboratively created ritual drama, which does not have a environmental set but which does employ platforms, stools, chairs, many props, and large, moveable set pieces that transform from one object to another. The drama is about nuclear madness and the denial of death, set "in the household of a normal 'nuclear' family; the mother is dying. While she and her family try to come to terms with her individual death, the mother hallucinates scenes of contemporary and historical mass deaths. Taking this personal death as a metaphor for the highly plausible mortality the earth faces from imminent nuclear holocaust, Ashes

exposes the madness of nuclear armaments and the irresponsibility of our escape from the lessons of history."[25]

Ashes is in two acts, with nineteen scenes and seventeen "hallucinations." Each scene is followed by a hallucination, indicated by the moving of a set piece. Miriam's house is represented by a chair and a lamp, and the grander global background is symbolized by literal two towers that eventually represent tanks, with various platforms arranged around the towers on the stage space. The platforms are sometimes whirled around as the scene changes, to represent movement not only between the public and private domain, but also between the hallucinatory and the real. In addition to multiple uses of the stage space, the speeches retell past events (the Black Death, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Dachau), some of which are enacted, so that Ashes is an almost dizzying review of history that also illustrates the present and predicts the future. The spatial pivot is Miriam's family, but the play clearly expands to the ever-widening circles that the use of space makes concrete. One of the characters, Doc, even states, "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle to embrace all living creatures."[26]

In the concluding ritual, the actors ask audience members to light a candle for someone or something. At several performances this ritual was preceded by the

request that each audience member think of one person who might be killed in an atomic blast. They were then asked to light a candle for that individual.[27]

Ashes, Ashes We all Fall Down is a bombardment of dramatizations containing chilling facts about nuclear war. The use of the stage space, the set pieces, and the props all contribute to the final ritual which, again, expands to the audience in a circle that is intended to celebrate life after a grueling look at death.

The last of the plays in the second group, Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance, takes place in an environmental setting (a set that surrounds the audience as well as the actors), the holding cell of a prison. Several long benches line the walls, and above the cell is a platform for Creon. The play, loosely based on an adaptation of Sophocles' play, "interweaves the words of the Greek play with the words of many North American women who have, like Antigone, committed civil disobedience. These women (Mother Jones, Mary Dyer, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hammer, Alice Paul, to name a few) form the chorus, who meet together in prison because of their common stand against oppression. Out of their common consciousness emerges the archtypal myth of Antigone. The play is a celebration of a community of women whose names have

been forgotten by many but who have played a vital role in social change."[28]

The moveable set pieces in Antigone are the benches, which are arranged in many formations, and ladders that lead to gallows and Creon's platform. The play is a feminist adaptation of the Greek original, with three actresses playing against a chorus of seventeen to nineteen, depending on the production. The cast may be composed entirely of women.

The stage directions state that the stage space suggest an enclosure that contains and detains the women with their captor (Creon) apart from them on a separate platform. Within the women's enclosure, the captives create a community as they tell their stories, enacted throughout, and develop their rituals. One especially effective enactment is the bus scene which Rosa Parks tells, in which the benches are lined as though they are bus seats, and the women are riders on the bus. Each story is represented by such enactments so that, even in prison, the women are freed through their common histories.

The combination of the Greek story with the women's actual stories concludes with the women's ritualization of the death of Haimon, Creon's son. In Boesing's usual manner, the death becomes the death of all sons, and the weeping is the weeping of all fathers and mothers. Although the Greek tale ends tragically,

Boesing's Antigone concludes with statements of victory from the women, who are then released from the cell.

The plays in this second grouping use enclosures and objects (ladders, towers, ropes) as external controls placed over characters struggling to be freed. In Mad Emma, Emma alternately escapes from and flees to the cart; Calamity Jane uses her wagon to roam freely, away from the structures of society; the junkies use their ladders and stools to confront themselves, and ultimately throw their symbolic bags away; Miriam in Ashes hallucinates about towers containing power, both nuclear and human, that threaten to destroy our planet; and the women in Antigone escape from prison through their words and songs. The set pieces seem to represent oppression, and the movement of the plays is consistently away from those oppressive pieces toward the freedom of individual choice and community commitment.

## The Detailed Space

The last group of plays contains built sets. The props are more numerous, they are placed in more realistic sets, and they are used, for the most part, literally. The costumes, however, may be realistic, symbolic, or allegorical. Four of the five plays in this group were single-authored by Boesing: The

Gelding, River Journal, The Web, and The Mothers of Ludlow. The only mixed-collaborative play is The Moontree.

The Gelding was one of Boesing's earliest one-acts, written in 1973 as a companion piece to Pimp. It is the story of three men. The father, Eban, his mute shadow self, Beethoven, and his son, Jules, struggle to make contact through "the barriers of convention and frozen emotion. The father's eventual castration of the son is an insane gesture of compassion and hope."[29]

Boesing describes this play as a patriarchal ritual staged in any competitive arena: a boxing ring, law court, race track, or duelling ground. Each scene should be marked as one "would the rounds of a sports event."[30] The set is multileveled because Jules places his father on a platform representing an altar, and, in the final scene, Eban castrates his son, who is hung by his feet. Although the set is less detailed than the other plays in this group, the competitive arena provides an environment that defines the action of the play. In addition, Beethoven is placed in and out of a box, the major set piece. The box alternatively represents Eban's feelings, his inner self, his escape, and both his power and his powerlessness. At one point in the action, Jules destroys the box, so that

Beethoven, who is also the musician, is forced to go another part of the stage out of the immediate arena.

The set in The Gelding literally sets up the competitive movement of the play so that an outcome in which there is a winner and a loser is predictable. The moveable, destructible box symbolizes the contradiction to the overt use of force and power in that even though Eban wins, his inner self has clearly lost, as he wheels his de-masculinized son off the stage in a wheelchair.

River Journal, written in 1975, is Boesing's first full-length play and has been called her "feminist morality play."[31] She commented recently that she is embarrassed now by River Journal, for she thinks the content is dated.[32] However, as a theatrical piece, the play effectively explores ". . . the masks (The Care-Taker and The Seductress) all women are trained to wear in their relationship with men and the madness these roles engender. Ann, pushed into these roles by her marriage to Myles, finally lets herself go into her madness through fantasies she records in her journal. . . pushed and abetted by Snake, the High Priestess of the Terrible Goddess of the Blood-Seed, who sees Ann's journey into the depths of her crazed anger and pain as the only way out."[33] In her introduction to the play, Boesing describes the set:

> In a space created communally by all the participants in the ritual are found objects: in the center, an old wooden table and four chairs--rough, hammered together; over the table, a hanging light bulb with a paper shade; in one corner, a bench with a working hot plate and a hugh pot of soup; over this, on a wall, many pots, soup ladles, tin cups, bowls, spoons, etc.; in another corner, a chopping block with a double-headed ax (a sagaris) on it; over the block, a gigantic, blown-up photograph of Ann's Mom (actually a portrait of Ann about twenty-five years older). Above all this--hanging on wires from the ceiling or covering the walls--are dolls, every kind of doll imaginable: small, large, dressed, undressed, rag dolls, china dolls, headless dolls, old dolls, new dolls. On a higher level still, and visible to the audience, is Snake's domain, from which the lighting and the music can be directed by Snake and, again, in the sight of the audience. Snake's domain [is] dominated by an altar on which stands an effigy of the Terrible Goddess of the Blood-Seed.[34]

In the same introduction, Boesing describes the costumes and masks.

> The actors are dressed in secondhand, "found" clothes suggesting a circus or a school pageant. Ann wears an old bridal gown and flowers in her hair, while Myles dressed in a tattered tuxedo jacket, pants that are too big, suspenders, and sneakers. Carla wears large, false breasts, or a Mae West, along with full skirts, an apron, and boots; Vera a little girl's party dress--a very short skirt--and high heels. Dad's costume combines a tweed jacket and an old felt hat with sneakers and long johns. Snake wears a red, slinky gown, the headdress of a vulture, and bones; her face is painted with a mask, extravagant and savage.
>
> The masks Vera and Carla use should be life-masks of the actors playing them, and these should be made up in exaggerated caricatures of their roles--the coquette and the old crone. These two masks must be able

> to be burned during the performance of the play. Mom's mask, used by Snake, is the life-mask of the actor playing Ann made up to look twenty-five years older--like the photograph over the chopping block.[35]

The set and costuming of River Journal represent a departure from the plays previously discussed. The detailed notes that Boesing provides for the set and costuming demonstrate the meaning that is applied to every aspect of production. While she describes the space as created communally by the participants, the objects that go in the space are specified, and the set requires a kitchen to be stage center with Snake's platform on another level. Whenever Ann reads from her journal, which represents a trip into another consciousness, she moves to a different part of the stage, which is designated for Ann and her journal. "As the journal readings are related to the dream and other supraconscious worlds of all the participants, they are heightened moments in the ongoing ritual and should be treated as such."[36] In describing the theatrical setting in general of River Journal, Boesing writes:

> River Journal is a myth of feminine consciousness. It should unfold before us, not with artfulness--because sophisticated art traditionally asks that we bring our minds and our reason to witness its unfolding--but with a childlike ingenuousness--because judgment is not appropriate in the presence of our childhood rituals. What is asked for is participation

> and an open heart. The actors should come to the script as children, because the ritual of marriage in our society is childlike in its naivety and innocence. The injuries perpetuated by the corrupt institution and its insane rituals are not caused by evil or malicious people but by ignorant people who have a childish, blind faith in the customs of their parent society. The feelings given off by the theatrical setting seen upon entering the performing space will let the audience know immediately what is expected of them, and they, too, will perhaps become as children.[37]

The theatrical setting creates feelings that are part of the ritual drama. Boesing uses a detailed set specifically to create a mood that draws the audience into the performance by stimulating images of their own childhoods. The movement of the play is through Ann's consciousness, and the stage space becomes the place where that consciousness is personified as the consciousness of all women. The set and costume suggestions made by Boesing "befit the idea of a ritual and spring from the only rituals that had any deep meaning: school and church pageants, the circus, town parades. The actors need to be dressed in these somewhat outlandish, cartoonlike images so that the audience will know immediately that [they] are not about to witness a day in the life of this or that particular individual, but rather that [they] are being brought into the presence of archetypes (such as those that people our dreams) and, hence, ultimately into the presence of [them]selves."[38]

Like River Journal, The Moon Tree deals with the issue of "lunacy." Three women who have coincidently been married to the same man at different times have been committed to an insane asylum. They have the good fortune to be put in the care of a loving nurse who thinks that one method of assisting them to recover their sanity is by "re-exposing them to their own pain and anger. . . [to] heal themselves. . . To help this healing come about, the nurse invites their husband and his current wife to act out their life, as it is now, in the form of a short play to be presented at the asylum for the three wives to attend."[39] As they watch and enter into the action of the play, the former wives gradually discover their own powerful independence as "Lunatics, i.e. one who lives under the influence of the moon."[40]

The set contains a mini-stage for the play-within-the-play, a centrally placed moon tree, and, opposite the mini-stage, the asylum with chairs for visitors. A door leading into the asylum is guarded by the nurse, leaning on a crutch, who is dressed head to foot in bloody bandages. She greets the visitors, all male, who enter and are ushered to their seats by the inmates. The set for the husband's play is a representation of his study/living room containing a desk, couch, table, many books, papers,

files, clipboards, lamps, and other paraphernalia typical of a writer's study.

The action of the play-within-the-play includes the wives who are watching the play, so that the actors move freely between the two parts of the set. However, in this play, the set remains the same; no parts of it transform, and, while the action includes the past experiences of the "mad" women, their understanding of their own lunacy occurs during the course of the play. Even though The Moon Tree is Boesing's one mixed-collaborative play (written skeletally by her and rewritten with the company), the way in which the set is used parallels the single-authored plays of this third grouping more closely than it parallels the other collaborative pieces.

The set of The Web also contains a stage for a play-within-the-play, in addition to the most complex of Boesing's sets. Of all the plays, Boesing considers The Web to be her most finished piece, and the care with which she has detailed the set illustrates that polish.

Centerstage is a large "multifaced, raked platform which serves as the main playing area. . .At the opening, there are kitchen table and four chairs [recurring set pieces in Boesing's plays]; on stage left there is a crude wooden stage with a tattered curtain on a wire and several stage lights on poles."[41]

Down to the left of this stage is a telephone. Upstage right is a long and steep stairway leading to an area which is Toby's room with a bed, dresser, desk, chair, rug, and a collection of clutter. Below on a raised dais is a lecturn. "Down center on a lower level than any of this is a straight-backed chair, facing upstage."[42] As in The Moon Tree, the set for The Web does not change throughout the play and is fully utilized. Frequently double scenes occur with narratives taking place in two parts of the stage. The pivotal point, however, is the chair downstage center where Abigail, the lead, begins and ends the play.

The play is the story of "Abigail Sater, playwright and mother, [as she] watches the tapestry of her life emerge in front of her. It is made up of images from her plays, scenes from her childhood, snatches from her lectures on feminist aesthetics, and immediate, interruptive calls from her two teen-age daughters. She obssesses [sic] about the meaning of the threads, finally lets go and accepts the richness and love which abound through her life."[43]

Boesing admitted that The Web is partially autobiographical.[44] The use of the chair down-stage center that faces upstage serves to reinforce the impression that Abigail is watching her own life on the multileveled set that she faces. Viewing not only herself as a child, but also her mother, aunt, cousins,

uncle, and brother while rushing repeatedly to answer the phone from her unseen daughters and give lectures to unseen students (or the audience), Abigail compresses her life into two acts that conclude with the Child, Abby, and the Adult, Abigail, facing a collage of scenes as all of the other characters appear in different parts of the set simultaneously. Looking at her past captured on one stage, she comments, "I'd like to hoard you all up, save you--the way you are right now; the way you fit."[45]

The last play in the third grouping, The Mothers of Ludlow differs from the other four because it is a historic collage piece rather than a personal journey. The set is not as fully described as in River Journal, The Moon Tree, or The Web; however, there is definitely a set that contains realistic items.

The Mothers of Ludlow is a "musical drama about Mother Jones at the time of the miner's massacre in Ludlow, Colorado, April 19, 1914. In song and dance, the play explores the effect of Mother Jones' life and presence on the lives of five striking miners' wives and mothers as they struggle through the cruel Colorado winter, homeless, banded together in make-shift tents, and finally face the terrible Easter Sunday massacre of their friends and families."[46]

The two-act play takes place inside a tent that contains bunk beds, clothes-lines hung with clothes, a

large oil drum, rough-hewn tables and benches, and a dilapidated rocking chair. On another part of the stage is an underground prison cell.

As in Antigone Too, the tent is like a holding cell for the women who are waiting for the strike to end. Also, like the women in Antigone, these women's sharing of their common history brings them closer together, encloses them; their enemy is external. There are references to the armed car that is perched on the hill outside the tent, so again, height represents power. Because the play is tied to a historical event (the Ludlow massacre, April 19, 1914) and to an individual (Mother Jones) to which Boesing had to be faithful, The Mothers of Ludlow is less complex in both action and characterization than the three journey plays. The action occurs in the tent without movement to inner stages or upper levels. The underground prison cell is used only when Mother Jones is writing to the women while she is imprisoned. Boesing wrote the play the same year as Antigone Too (1983) and employed a similar conceptual framework to The Mothers of Ludlow, applied here to one historic situation rather than many.

In summary, the plays of this last grouping are placed in sets that are both metaphorical and literal. They contain multilevels, multiscenes, and prop pieces that are used both symbolically and literally. The

sets and set pieces that Boesing uses in her detailed spaces clearly communicate the degree to which her plays are multilayered.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the stage space in the world of Boesing's plays is typified by the word multi. In the empty space plays, there are multi-transformations of character and multi-meanings in the use of the props. In the defined space plays, the moveable set pieces organize the multi-narrative arrangement of the action as those same set pieces are used in multiple ways. In the detailed space plays, multi-scenes, multi-levels, and multi- characterizations are contained in specific sets.

In addition, there are other observable patterns: first, from the beginning, Boesing experimented with both open and literal space. Her earliest plays, Journey to Canaan, River Journal, Pimp, and The Gelding represent the simplest as well the most detailed of her stage uses, so that she has not progressed or evolved from simple to complex in her use of the stage but has worked with both throughout her career. She also seemed to imbue the most mundane properties with meaning beyond themselves, so that the properties are usually both symbolic and literal if they are literal at all. Second, the plays she wrote, alone, either had

sets or did not have sets, so that it was only when she was working collaboratively to combine visions, that she used a kind of half set of the large moveable set pieces. This might suggest that she was unable to fuse the vision of all the people that she worked with to produce one stage concept. Third, the pattern of expansion evident in Boesing's stage use is of circles and orbits, moving outward and upward, rather than of lines built horizontally or vertically. Drawing circles rather than lines may be associated with a conscious attempt to contradict the linear thinking of traditional theatre, and, thus, may be linked to Boesing's feminism.

# CHAPTER FIVE
# ENDNOTES

[1]Martha Boesing, Personal Interview, December, 1986.

[2]_____, Journey to Canaan (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1974), p. 1.

[3]_____, Love Song to an Amazon (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1976), Preface.

[4]_____, Trespasso (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1977), Preface.

[5]_____, Labia Wings (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1979), p. 1.

[6]_____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," A Pamphlet (Minnapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1981), p. 2.

[7]Ibid., p. 2.

[8]Ibid., p. 2.

[9]_____, Journey to Canaan (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1974), p. 23.

[10]Ibid., p. 24.

[11] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," op.cit., p. 3.

[12] Ibid., p. 2.

[13] Ibid., p. 3.

[14] Ibid., p. 2.

[15] Ibid., p. 2.

[16] Ibid., p. 2.

[17] _____, Dora du Fran's Wild West Show or the Real Lowdown on Calamity Jane (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1979), preface.

[18] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," p. 4.

[19] _____, Calamity Jane, p. 4.

[20] Ibid., p. 5.

[21] _____, Junkie! (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1981), preface.

[22] Ibid., preface.

[23] Ibid., p. 28.

[24] Ibid., p. 28.

[25] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," p. 3.

[26] _____, Ashes, Ashes We all Fall Down (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1982), p. 15.

[27] Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1987.

[28] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," insert.

[29] Ibid., p. 2.

[30] _____, The Gelding (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1974), p. 1.

[31] Meredith Flynn, The Feeling Circle, Company Collaboration, and Ritual Drama: Three Conventions Developed by the Women's Theatre At the Foot of the Mountain (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, Published on Demand, 1984), p. 24.

[32] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[33] Martha Boesing, "Plays by Martha Boesing," p. 3.

[34] _____, Journey Along the Matrix (Minneapolis: Vanilla Press, 1981), p. 33.

[35] Ibid., p. 34.

[36] Ibid., p. 35.

[37] Ibid., p. 33.

[38] Ibid., p. 33.

[39] _____, The Moontree (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1977), frontspiece.

[40] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," p. 3.

[41] _____, The Web in Plays in Progress, Vol. 4, N. 1 (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1981), p. 1-1.

[42] Ibid., p. 1-1.

[43] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," p. 3.

[44] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[45] _____, The Web, p. 2-36.

[46] _____, "Plays by Martha Boesing," insert.

# CHAPTER VI
# THE WORLD OF THE PLAYS: MARTHA BOESING'S CHARACTERS

Karen Malpede described Joe Chaikin's Open Theater as a place in which dualities merged:

> Watching them perform was always personal and public. The two worlds met on their stage. The actors were messengers come into that space to report what is knowable about the unknown. It was as if they had slipped inside my head and lifted my imagination so that I might know it. Actually, they went into themselves, not me, and brought back a notion I could also grasp. Now there was a place in which we met the other in ourselves. This was the fact. It was also the intention. Joe Chaikin often said, "The actor is the audience in action."[1]

Like the Open Theatre, the Firehouse Theater "was involved in everything the sixties offered. . . from politics to drugs, from burning draft cards to running around nude on the stage." [2] In these experimental theatres, the traditional lines that divided actor from character, or role from characterization, or even actor from audience became blurred, redefined, and inverted.

Traditionally, character was defined as the sum of the individualized and personalized traits of an agent (the mover of the action),[3] the material out of which the plots were constructed. By contrast, the characters of experimental theatre reflected an entirely different aesthetic, which Boesing described in her lecture at Smith College in April, 1986:

> The central aesthetic which emerged was that of transformational theater. One actor often played many roles, characters transformed mid-scene into alter-egos, animals, even trees. We questioned the notion of a single or static personality as we began to notice that each of us is really made up of many different images, feelings, attitudes and styles that are constantly changing depending on who we are with and what is expected of us. And we tried to create theater that relected this multitude of personalities within.[4]

When women began to create their own theatre, these techniques of character formation were fundamental to their process of creation:

> . . .transformational theater became the aesthetic format of many women's theater's in the seventies. . . . Companies of five or six actors were called upon to play twenty to thirty roles in an evening. A women's aesthetic began to emerge based on this prism-like perspective of our own lives, as we gathered across the nation in 'consciousness-raising' groups to tell our stories and talk about the many facets, the many roles we had been asked to play--wife, daughter, mother, lover, colleague, nymph, crone. We were 'getting our feelings out'--some of us for the first time. And we were finding friends, sisters, who shared these feelings--anger, grief, and a common sense of having been silenced.[5]

As a consequence, when Boesing and the actors of At the Foot of the Mountain worked, they brought to rehearsal their personal problems, their headaches, their memories, their feelings toward each other. Boesing commented, "We were creating plays out of our own lives, our own issues, and there was no way that we

could create characters and situations which had a true life of their own on stage unless we were willing to share the emotional fabric of our own lives with each other."[6]

Boesing and the company used this type of group work to create characters for the collaborative pieces. In the historic collage works, Boesing quoted the original words of historical figures from documents, such as speeches and biographies, around which the characters were built. In the single-authored pieces, Boesing originated the characters.

## General Patterns

In Boesing's plays, a number of patterns in her characters are discernible. In the plays studied, the casts range in size from three to twenty-six, and out of 124 characters, only twenty-one are male, that is about six women for every man. Moreover, possibly with the exception of The Gelding, the male characters can be played by female actors.

In Western theatre, plays with predominantly female casts are revolutionary. Beginning with our earilest plays, the number of male characters overwhelmed female characters; for example, in the extant Greek and Roman plays, the ratio of male to female characters was about three to one. In addition, a genre breakdown occurred, for in the tragedies the ratio of male to female was

two to one while in the comedies it was four to one. In Aristophanes' works alone, there are 110 male characters to twenty-four female characters. In Elizabethan England, Shakespeare's plays had roles for 872 males and 150 females, a ratio of about five to one.[7]

Even in this century, the trend of male dominance on the stage continues. From 1953-1972, 30% of the roles on Broadway were for females and 70% were for males.[8] Thus, Boesing has contradicted historic and contemporary theatrical patterns by creating roles predominantly for females.

Another pattern in Boesing's plays is in the central character types that occur. They include mothers (Pimp, A Song for Johanna, The Web, Calamity Jane, The Mothers of Ludlow, The Story of a Mother), women in search of themselves--who are, in some cases, also mothers--(River Journal, The Web, Song for Johanna), and fathers (Journey to Canaan, The Gelding, Antigone Too). Most of her characters are related through family ties with a central emphasis on the relationship between mother and daughter. If other than a family relationship dominates, it is a relationship of women in a community in which they create a sense of family without male and female as the basis. An example of this occurred in Antigone Too in which a group of women with no blood ties extended

itself by reaching out to one another, while the blood-related family of Greek characters ended itself.

The plays that vary from the nuclear family or the community family are based on other groupings: larger families or tribes (Journey to Canaan, Las Gringas); lesbian lovers (Love Song to an Amazon); and female friends (Trespasso). Thus, as Boesing groups her characters, she is mostly concerned with relationships among women, either in the family or in the community, so that a traditional theatrical preoccupation with love between men and women is subverted.

Finally, in Boesing's works, the characters seem to exist on a continuum from characters indicated by more realistic details (as described in the stage directions) to characters that appear to embody an idea and to carry names with a mythic resonance. The more literal characters are usually connected to a family structure--for example, Ann in River Journal, and Abigail in The Web. The more abstract characters occur in the mythological pieces and are usually indicated by names that carry specific cultural meaning, such as Mary and Joseph (Labia Wings), and Babaganoose and Faggot (The Last Fire: An Illumination).

In summary, the patterns of character in Boesing's plays contain both experimental and political elements. First, her creation of characters is significant for at least two reasons: the availability of so many roles

for women contradicts the current state of Western theatre, and the preponderance of women's roles in the plays suggests that there will be a radical change in subject matter. Second, in encouraging collaborative character development, her creation process contradicts the "star system" common in Western theatre. Third, her grouping and composition of characters point to an ideology that rewrites traditional relationships, for, although her characters are mostly women who are related to other characters through family ties, those ties are viewed by the playwright without sentiment. In addition, familial-like relationships which are often stronger than the nuclear family are created outside of that family. Fourth, her characters vary widely in style--the collaborative pieces contain characters constructed from the actors' experiences so that the actors are virtually playing themselves in a somewhat naturalistic style (Junkie!); other pieces contain characters in which two actors play one character (Labia Wings, The Story of a Mother), approaching a style associated with commedia dell'arte.

## The Historic Collage Works

The historic collage pieces contain Boesing's least experimental characterizations, perhaps because she chose to be restricted in much of her text to the actual words spoken by historical and living people. The plays in this grouping highlight significant roles that women have played in history, roles that have not been dramatized. Also, the historic pieces emphasize specific events through the characterization of women who were present at those events. I have grouped these plays together because of their obvious similarity in the use of actual historical figures. Dora du Fran's Wild West Extravaganza or the Real Low Down on Calamity Jane, Antigone Too, and The Mothers of Ludlow comprise her pieces of rewritten history.

Calamity Jane is a rollicking musical about a colorful figure. Dora Du Fran introduced Calamity:

> This is the story of Martha Jane Canary. It was written by one who knew her for many years and is based on actual facts and happenings in her life. I met her one night when she was sittin' in the middle of the main street of Deadwood. Her feet was in a tub of water, her head was thrown back, and she was howlin' like she was fit to kill. . . . I asked her what was ailin' her and she said, "Let me go to Hell my own route!" So I recognized her for a woman after my own heart and I took her home. She was a diamond in the rough. She was an outlaw. Her crime was she was a woman and she didn't see anything wrong with living exactly how she wanted.[9]

With that introduction, Calamity Jane "howled her way" through the entire musical, leading her sisters around the country in a wagon, joining the army as a man, riding with General Custer, serving as an Indian scout, burying her mother, birthing her daughter, and parading on a buffalo "nakid" as Lady Godiva in the Buffalo Bill Show. Calamity Jane seems unbelievable, but she provided a fine role for an actress, permitting the audience to rediscover a woman who was self-maintaining. The character is a vivid representation of the Wild West from a woman's perspective.

Mother Jones in The Mothers of Ludlow is less colorful than Calamity Jane. The eighty-seven-year-old woman was involved in the Ludlow massacre in 1914, but her speeches did not lend themselves well to dramatization, so that Boesing has expressed dissatisfaction with this play.[10] However, in addition to Mother Jones, the play's cast has five fictionalized mothers and their children, who provide the drama. Their participation in the strike preceding the massacre at Ludlow and their devastation at the death of their children, shot by strike-breakers, make the horror of the historical facts tangible. Thus, The Mothers of Ludlow is more important as a dramatization of an event than of a historical individual.

The most complex of the collage pieces is Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance. The speeches of seventeen to twenty historical and living women (the text is flexible in this interest) are woven throughout the Antigone myth. The women represent a wide range of oppressions that women have suffered from the 1700s (Mary Dyer) to the 1980s (Starhawk). A collage of speeches and writings from each of the woman, the play's power is in the balance that Boesing achieved in crossing different centuries, races, nationalities, religions, and political issues. As a sampling of the contrasts, the characters include the American Quaker Mary Dyer who was hanged in Boston for preaching the right of each individual to a personal inner light; Fannie Lou Hammer, a Black woman, from the twentieth century South who was jailed for trying to vote; Jessie Lopez de la Cruz, a migrant worker for the cash crop businesses in the San Joaquin Valley, who was arrested for her work with the United Farm Workers; and Starhawk, a witch originally from New York and presently residing in San Francisco, who was arrested for anti-nuclear demonstrations against the Diablo Canyon plant. Each woman committed an act of civil disobedience, and their words and actions are dramatized in the play. The full cast of women includes Anna Mae Aquash, Dorothy Day, Barbara Deming, Mary Dyer, Emma Goldman, Fannie Lou Hammer, Mother

Jones, Jessie Lopez de la Cruz, Majorie Melville, Rosa Parks, Lucy Parsons, Alice Paul, Margaret Sanger, Agnes Smedley, Starhawk, Rose Winslow, and any local women appropriate for the area of the production.

Serving as the chorus to the Greeks (Creon, Haimon, Ismene, and Antigone), the women attempt, first, to show Antigone that she is not alone in her act of civil disobedience, and, second, to cause Creon to change his laws. Antigone never recognizes the sense of community the women give her, but Creon is changed emotionally and thus politically, although too late to prevent the death of Antigone and Haimon.

To underscore a political issue, Boesing uses the conventions of theatre as well as the conventions of the drama. In a reversal of the Greek tradition in which all roles were played by male actors, in Antigone Too, the Greeks may be played by women. Thus, some of the characters are male, but the actors are female, Therefore, through her use of characters and her use of a theatrical convention, Boesing has made simultaneous points about the oppression of women: first, the selected cast of characters illustrates the oppression of women in society over centuries; second, the all-female cast makes the point about the oppression of women in the theatre by turning the convention of theatre in on itself--to show how women have been "cast out."

## The Single-Authored Plays

Boesing's concept of creating original characters tied in with her experience in transformational theatre. She explained:

> Transformational theatre developed over the idea that we could find a way to theatricalize the truth that the notion of the personality is a mistake, and it's a capitalist mistake. It's very related to private property and to ownership. That we can catch things and hold on to them. It's not even an accurate view of the world. Because first of all we are multiple personalities. And second of all, we're always changing. So transformational theatre developed as a way to try to articulate that in theatrical terms. We did alot of experimenting in jumping up and being one character and then if another person came in, we would interrupt the character just like that, and play with them. And then we would be going along in a scene and change into a dog, or something, and then everybody would have to play along with that.[11]

In the single-authored plays, four groupings appear: first, mothers and daughters, both related to each other or unrelated, recur the most frequently across the plays; second, female lovers show what it means to be woman-identified; and, third, females as friends explore non-competitive and non-sensual bonding.

Mothers and daughters recur most often as Boesing's characters. When asked to comment on the repetitive use of this relationship, Boesing answered:

> It's the primal bond, isn't it? If you look in the large sense at the earth, the earth is seen as the great mother. The ground of being is the mother. We live in a society that has denigrated the mother. She is seen as less. Even the feminist movement has not helped because women have been trying to get into male roles. . . . If you ask a woman what she does, she'll say, "Oh, I'm just a mother." And if the mother is seen as not important, then the kids are not important. There is still that primal bond, so the mother becomes the covert power, the bitch, the manipulator, the viper in the nest. She becomes the source of all evil because her power is covert. Then we grow up as daughters and many of us become mothers, and we have all these messages coming at us that mothers are evil. As daughters we rebel against our mothers and hate them and see them as the source of our wounds. So a lot of feminists hate their mothers. . . . Furthermore, in the tradition of theatre, how many mother/ daughter relationships can you think of? The only one I can think of is Marsha Norman's <u>'Night, Mother</u> where the mother gives the daughter permission to off [kill] herself. No wonder the patriarchy likes it.[12]

We can see the contradictions implicit in this primal relationship by looking in detail at the characters of one of Boesing's earliest plays, <u>Pimp</u>. Jo, Adrian, and Ruth are characters that represent traditional roles for women. However, Boesing presents these roles in conjunction with the contradictions that they engender, and while the mother and daughter try to make Ruth the Other, they are forced to realize that her needs are no different from their own.

The play opens with a doll, alone, on the stage, soon joined by Adrian, the daughter, whom the doll

represents, and Jo, the mother, and Ruth, the Other. Singing, the characters establish the theme of the play,:

> I have these to sell:
> I have to sell
> old rags and dust,
> my names,
> dried-up passions,
> wasted hours;
> who will buy them?
> dancing dresses,
> pressed corsages,
> banished books,
> worn-out affections;
> I wish to sell them all.
> And I will sell
> my last week's dream,
> broken mirrors,
> used-up prayers.
> Oh, who will buy
> legs that never moved me forward fast
> enough?
> Oh, who will buy them?
> I have flesh for sale:
> flesh and fiber,
> fish and foetus.
> I have babes,
> these babies up for sale:
> old promises,
> and names
> and rags
> and used up prayers,
> and all my babies,
> all my babes for sale.[13]

The song breaks and scene two opens with Jo brushing Adrian's hair. Jo tells Adrian, "Such pretty hair, Adrian. (Pause.) Who was that boy I saw you with yesterday?"[14] The hair brushing and the dialogue continue simultaneously as Jo learns of Adrian's exploits with Eddy, whom Adrian kissed even though she thought he was "kind of dirty," but it "felt good," and

"can you get pregnant if a boy touches your tongue. . . with his tongue?"

J. No, dear. Whatever gave you that idea?
A. Well, Margaret said. . .
J. Well, you can't. Your ends are splitting, dear. We must get them trimmed.
A. Does it feel good?
J. Does what feel good?
A. Getting pregnant.
J. Not before you're married it doesn't. Only whores like it before they get married. . . After you're married it will feel good. Then he'll stay with you and love you. I wish you'd let me curl your hair--not tight curls, just soft little waves, all around your face.
A. Mama, why do you smoke?
J. Because I didn't have the good sense to listen to my mama when I was your age.
A. Did Daddy smoke?
J. A pipe.
A. Did you like that?
J. Uh-huh.
A. Sometimes I think that I can still smell him around.
J. Well, you can't. . . .
A. Why did Daddy leave?
J. It's too complex. Have you ever thought of cutting your hair short like Emily's? It would be so pretty.
A. I love you, mama.
J. I love you too, dear.[15]

In an apparently naturalistic dialogue, a mother and her daughter encapsulate their relationship, as well as their separate relationships with the unseen males in the play. As the scene changes, Jo embraces her daughter, and, placing a bow in Adrian's hair and a photograph of a man in her hand, the mother becomes the pimp who has just sold her child in order to to buy her own lover. The two-dimensional photograph and the

three-dimensional pipe are the only pieces of maleness that appear in the play. So holding the photograph, Adrian whirls out of Jo's space and into the space of the wife of the buyer-- Ruth--thereby completing the threeway competition.

Separated from each other because they need the same thing from the same man, the characters become antagonistic; at the same time, they identify with the other's needs, so their feelings for one another are ambivalent. As Jo concludes the sale of her daughter, she says:

> I want to feel sure that you'll be kind to her, I said. She's still a v. . . baby, you know. I would feel so much easier about the whole thing if we could just talk. You've got to understand how painful this is for me. No, I'm not backing out. After all I am her mother. When she was little I'd tiptoe into her room late at night and just look at her. She was such a beautiful child--always smiling in her sleep. I'd touch her ever so lightly, tucking the covers up under her chin. . . . I had to resist waking her up and pushing her back inside of me somehow! Don't you understand? She was my flesh! But now she thinks she's separate from me! What does she know of that? She said I smothered her! That ungrateful litte wart! That's when I decided to sell her. . . Take her! Take her! [16]

In another scene that expresses not ambivalence but mutual hatred over their competition for the man, Adrian and Ruth are provoked into a wrestling match that is "violent and terrible to watch."[17] Adrian and Jo then follow with a scene of antiphonal speeches in

narrates the painful description of being
rubber," and Jo responds, drunkenly, by
nd Adrian's body and telling her, "I could
through your hair, your young hair, caress
rms, my thighs, belly, toes, breasts. . .
be like two little animals, snuggled in
e could be like one little animal. One.
Me. Mine."[18] A loving mother who
daughter's hair, pushes her into a lover's
to avoid holding her, herself; daring to
st, Boesing touches an untouchable cultural
s possibly a basis for love/hate
s.

final monologue, Jo defends her case for
daughter in a plea of the traditional
who is trying to fulfill romantic notions of

want someone to say he loves me.
want to be the most important person
in someone's life.
want someone to speak all the
languages of love to me:
t'aime!
te adore!
h liebe dich!
ago po!
want someone to call me his petite
chou.
s darling, his precious. . . .
want someone to say
would sail the seven seas for me,
at he would rather die a silent death
of despair
der the stars
r me
an forgo one more touch,

one more moment with me.
I want someone to tremble when he
touches me, and say:
"O, your skin is so soft!
Your eyes are burning with love!
Your thighs are stronger than my
father's arms!
Hold me!
Hold me!
Never let me go!
I will stay with you forever!"

It is so much to ask?[19]

The three characters answer this monologue in which they each tell a story, Adrian of a concubine, Ruth of a barren queen, and Jo of a crotchety old woman. The three new characters of the stories within the play live in submission until one day:

> Adrian. . . . she found a way to escape from the palace. And following one of the servant girls down to the well in the center of the village, she threw off the fine harem silks which the Sheik had given her and cried out to the people gathered there: "Look at me! I don't belong to anyone! I'm free!"
>
> Ruth. . . the queen remembered that spiders often trap the creatures they lure into their nets--and eat them. And so she decided to leave all that was familiar to her, and to walk alone up and down the highways of her kingdom until she found out who she was.
>
> Jo. The days passed, and the stranger in her dreams never came. She just sat waiting and growing older and older, colder and colder. One night the stranger did not appear in her dream. Instead, she dreamt that she herself built a fire inside her house, just big enough to warm her, to take away the cold. When the fire went out, she woke up.[20]

In Pimp, Boesing presents the emotional matrix surrounding mothers and daughters, their primary bonding and their forced competitions. She suggests that these contradictory needs create a learned ambivalence that is at the root of female oppression. She also shows a way out of that oppression; very simply, the characters talk to each other while enacting their own stories. In the enactments, the characters transform from one age to another so that the experiences the characters have had in common as children and adolescents contradict their sense of separation.

Thus, Pimp boldly interrogates women's traditionally assigned roles by allowing the ambivalences and contradictions between mothers, daughters, and "others" to surface. The empowerment of the three women in the fairy tales occurs when each realizes she is complete--alone.

Two of Boesing's strongest characterizations are a mother and a daughter although neither is mother nor daughter to the other, nor do they appear in the same plays. The daughter is Ann of River Journal, and the mother is Abigail of The Web. As in Pimp, the characters each interrogate their roles as mothers and daughters, so that, even though they are not related to each other, each relates to the issues surrounding mothers and daughters. When asked how the issue of

motherhood is relevant to women without children, Boesing responded, "We're all daughters, aren't we?"[21] Thus, clearly, in asking questions about mothers, Boesing is also asking questions about daughters.

The major struggle for Ann involves her confrontation with the masks she wears to please the men in her life. However, throughout the play, Ann interacts, verbally, with her dead mother, whose picture is always on the stage (an older version of the actor), as though she is seeking approval or support. In the opening of the play, the Snake approaches Ann, "holding up Mom's mask: Pssst! Annie! Annie! I got something for you. . . It's a present."

> Ann goes to the wedding.
> The river is choked.
> No one breathes.
> No one speaks.
> The virgins go to the wedding.
> The old crones go to the wedding.
> The child who was lost
> Becomes the wife who is lost.[22]

The Snake then pretends to be her mother, and Ann responds, "Don't be absurd! My mother is dead, and you're not the least bit like her anyways."[23] However, the book that the Snake gives her is the journal that represents her subconscious; each time she retreats to her inner world, she reads from the journal, sharing the reading with the Snake/Mom. Her mother thus becomes her inner self, her inner voice, to

whom she runs for comfort, to whom she sings a lullaby because "I need to hear you singin' One last lullaby."[24]

Lost to marriage, Ann allows her two sisters to take the required roles of caretaker and seductress while she loses herself in the river of her journal. Then, quietly at first, she begins to call for her mother until she builds to an eerie, primal scream, "Mama!" The Snake descends like a deus ex machina wearing Mom's mask, and with her head in Snake/Mom's lap like a young child, Ann realizes that the masks can be dropped. At this point, "Snake/Mom gets up to leave."

> Ann. You're not going, are you?
> Snake/Mom. Yes, Annie. I am going.
> Ann. You'll come back, won't you?
> Snake/Mom. You won't need me, Annie.
>
> (She takes the mask off and reveals herself as Snake. She gives the mask to Ann who fits it to her own face exactly, it being her own life mask. Snake leaves.)[25]

Thereafter, Snake performs a ritual in which Ann burns the masks. The journey to self-discovery was actually a journey through her mother and back to herself. The "primal scream"[26] for her mother's help was the desperate cry of the young woman facing the contradictory roles that she had learned from her mother, and she returned to that mother, to that primal

connection, with her only possible form of self-expression--screams.

The creation of the character of Ann was closely tied to the artistic relationship between Boesing and Jan Magrane, an actor who had worked with the Boesings since their time in Atlanta. Magrane decribed her early experiences in working with Boesing:

> Martha was the first person I'd ever worked with who demanded honesty. . .it was impossible to do her exercises without being present in the moment, doing it at the moment. We were learning to develop characters. We were told to go out of the theatre and let an object find us. I think I found a daisy. It was just a real turning point for me. I suddenly understood that taking on a role meant letting the role grow from me like a seed. I took on the essence of that flower and brought it into the theatre. . . The discipline over the years was being able to enter that state of presesnce at will. Sometimes I was there and sometimes I wasn't.. . And we started doing primal work [primal therapy] because the acting work was very oriented towards feelings. We thought that feelings were definitely a tool; instead of pretending to be angry, tapping our own anger. To be present in the feelings the way we developed it was our work. For me the primal work was shattering; I broke into a million little pieces and came outside a new person. . . . I was directly affected in River Journal by the therapy. "Did you see that girl scream?" people said. For me it was an enormous outpouring of emotion on the stage. And Martha wrote the play for me, the play in which I screamed alot. The play over the years has been my teacher. It taught me to look at the masks I wear in relationship to men. . . It was also about spirituality. I was twenty four when I did that part, and had just begun to have any sense of my own individual personal power. I was always trying to do what I was supposed to do, and what happened for me, personally, was that

> Ann decided she was her own person. And that was true for me, too. The role and I just intertwined. That's what happened in the ensemble. Martha would write roles that fit, hand and glove, and if they didn't quite fit, you would have to stretch to make them fit.[27]

The character of Ann was created to fit an actor, and the actor simultaneously grew to fit the role. Thus, in this scene, many strands of Boesing's emotional and theatrical fabric are connected: Ann, as a character, seeks her primal bond with her mother when she falls deepest into the river of her subconscious; Magrane, as the actor playing Ann, tapped her primal feelings of being in the crib and feeling enormous emotions because she didn't get enough from her mother;[28] the playwright merged actor and character as she oversaw the development of both.

Abigail is an older, more mature version of the confused young Ann. Abigail has established herself as a playwright and professor; her daughters are teenagers, and, instead of questioning of her roles, she is focused on reclaiming her child-self, drifting somewhere between present time and memory, whereas Ann swam in the river between her conscious and subconscious. Abigail is really mother to herself as a child, and the child, Abby, is played by another actor. Abigail wishes to understand everything. She states in the first scene, "I have this malady: I try to make sense out of everything that happens to me. I cling to

the neurotic belief that if I could understand what events mean, then I could stop obsessing about them."[29]

The struggle to understand dominates Abigail as she lectures, talks to her daughters by telephone, and relives emotional peaks of her past enacted by her child-self, Abby. At the end of Act I, Abigail calls out, "So, how far is it, anyway, from where I've been to where I'm going? God! I just want to establish a few ground rules. Like what's the plan in all of this? That's all I want to know. Who's in charge anyway?"[30]

After watching her life performed, Abigail finally joins Abby as the two actors view the rest of their family in performance. Abigail says, "We have to risk everything for the truth, Abby, you and I. . . Anything less is but 'honey on the razor's edge.' I read that once in a book."[31] In a reconciliation with her own life, Abigail joins the family chorus in the last scene.

As they journey through their subconscious minds, Ann and Abigail grow in their understanding of their roles as daughters and mothers. Primal bonding connected to primal therapy and finally connected to the personal experiences of actor and playwright give both of these roles a personalization that, I believe, results in two of Boesing's best developed characters.

In contrast to what Boesing calls the journey plays (<u>River Journal</u> and <u>The Web</u>), both of which are

full length so that the characters change emotionally over time within the narrative, Love Song to an Amazon is a one-act with multiple character transformations that occur rapidly. The stage directions note that the play is a celebration of the multiple masks and deep bonding of a friendship between two women. The play was written by Martha as a gift for Phyllis. In an act symbolic of extended giving, Martha and Phyllis performed the play, house to house, for other women in love relationships.

The characters, Rose and Aisha, change constantly, as they reexperience different ages in their lives, nonchronologically. As in Pimp, re-experiencing incidents in childhood and adolescence allows the women to discover their commonalities so that, in loving each other, they also love themselves.

After a short exchange in which they set up the "game" for the play, the actors pause and start the story: "Once upon a time, there was a little girl."[32] Rose begins the story of a child, and Aisha becomes the child. Immediately, Rose joins her in their song and the "Once upon a time" is interspersed with images and memories of childhood. Gradually, the rhythms increase as the song turns from a lullaby to a love song as "She leaned over and kissed me. She kissed me on the mouth. I held my breath."[33] The poem reverts to "Once upon a time." The children change into women carrying rocks

to build a temple, and then Aisha asks Rose, "Is this a play?" Rose answers, "This is a song." Using the stones, they build a new structure, and begin again with a new rhythm that builds gradually and steadily until Aisha says:

> I imagined.
> (Pause)
> I saw.
> By the fire's side.
> I saw.
> Your skin was
> golden.
> Your breasts
> golden.
> By the fire's light
> you lay naked
> to me.
> I massaged your body.
> You were a warrior.
> (Pause)
> And I was a warrior.
> I had done this
> Many times before.
> I rubbed the oil
> Into your body.
> Your skin was golden.
> I massaged your body,
> And you lay naked
> to me. . .

Rose: What went wrong?

Aisha: "What went wrong?" I asked.
There was space within.
The attack was from
outside.

Rose: Barbarians!

Aisha: Invaders!

Rose: From outside!

Aisha: We were contained.
We were too contained.
We must reach them all.

Rose: And be responsible to all.

Aisha: There are thousands now.
Returned.
We must reach them all. . .

Both: IT WON'T BE LONG NOW, SISTER.
WON'T BE LONG, WON'T BE LONG.
IT WON'T BE LONG NOW, SISTER.
WON'T BE LONG.[34]

The play is a song that begins with two separate women who discover in a series of transformations their child selves, their adult selves, their mutual love, and their love for all women. Bonding first to each other, they extend their bond in rising rhythms to "thousands" in which:

The space was open.
There was an open space
for each of us
to walk in.
The love for one
was also the love
for another.
There was no difference.[35]

Love Song to an Amazon is Boesing's only play that deals specifically with lovers. Sensual in imagery, the piece is ultimately political because Boesing strives to extend the circle of love to include all women. Love Song to an Amazon shows where lesbian love can end--women can love women--not only in intimate relationships but also in friendships in which women as women are valued. The characters are part of a vision of a planet on which misogyny is overturned, for as long as women resist competing for men and resist the

antagonisms such a competition instills, women can love women.

Love Song to an Amazon is an extension of the ideas presented in Pimp, and, as usual, Boesing takes those ideas beyond their normal limits. Women loving women could subvert patriarchy. Thus, this short one-act play makes one of Boesing's most daring political statments.

Trespasso, another one-act, approaches love between female characters psychologically rather than sensually. Introduced by the singer, Mick and Agatha dare to cross their barriers to encounter each other.

The Singer: Two stand apart.
On either side of the chasm.
Look!
You can see it happening
everywhere.
To change the picture
is risky.
It means you must leave
your own view of the world.
The friend
crosses over the chasm.
And sees the other.
It is a sacrament.
And a blessing.
If the crossing has caused her
much hunger,
she eats the other.
She has gone too far.
It is the more common event.
It makes the crossing
dangerous.
Only the brave
Should attempt it.[36]

Mick greets Agatha by saying, "Look, lady. No one made me up." And Agatha, who believes the world is the

creation of her hallucinations, responds, "Now, now, that's not a very kind way to speak to a woman who is drowning."[37] With the tone of their interaction set, the two women duel each other with their own distresses until they finally recognize the world of the other. Agatha appears to be frail and dreamy, while Mick is the hard-nosed tester of reality. In a reversal of characterizations, Mick concedes when she builds an imaginary boat for Agatha, who demands some evidence that she is not being swallowed in her own hallucination. Mick is tough, and Agatha is soft, but Mick softens so as to toughen Agatha, and they both experience a benign reality when they discover that the other actually exists.

In this brilliant encapsulization of human interaction, Boesing places a metaphor at the center of the friendship of the characters:

> One could sit waiting
> An entire lifetime
> For one's ship to come in.
> It's been known to happen.[38]

To prevent Agatha's waiting, Mick builds her a ship, which, Agatha claims, ". . . looks like a coffin. . . [but] I do like it, Mick. I like it very much."[39] They pull the ship out of the theatre together.

<u>The Gelding</u> and <u>Labia Wings</u> are metaphorical pieces whose characters are matriarchs and patriarchs. The plays have nothing else in common. <u>The Gelding</u> is

painfully serious, and Labia Wings is a romp, but through their characters, they do tangibly represent patriarchal and matriarchal images.

As the only play by Boesing that she wishes played by male actors, The Gelding shows the ways in which the system of patriarchy forces males to be separate from each other, and, even when they are in contact, to castrate each other. Opening with the song to Absalom, Eban establishes his posture as a father suffering for the loss of his son. Speaking in images of separation, blood, knives, and war, Eban attempts to teach his son, Jules, the ways of a man. When Jules asks Eban what the cardboard box contains, Eban responds:

> Eban: Nothing.
> Jules: Something.
> Eban: Nothing concerns you.
> Jules: I'd like to know, though.
> Eban: I'm telling you, it's none of your business, Jules. It's my business and no one else's.
> Jules: I heard an old priest once who said secrets were the most terrible thing we got inside us.
> Eban: Priests! Women! Children! You're all alike! Pry, pry, pry! Always wanting to know things. About me. About everybody. Saying secrets are bad. Well, that's bullshit, son. That's bullshit! A man's got to have some things to himself! Some things no one can take away from him and no one can possess--not even God. If you didn't have something special which is all yours, at your very center, some special place, that no one can every get into, why then you'd be just like every one else--and that's nobody. Nobody! You'd

> just wash away like the rain on dry, flat land. You'd be dead, son. Dead![40]

Using the theatrical device of the box that contains Eban's inner self and feelings, Boesing suggests that the character's emotional isolation is a root cause of his compulsion for violence; isolated from his own feelings, he cannot feel his son's hurt. Watching the boy become an aggressive man, Eban's fears slowly overcome his fatherly interest, driving him to castrate the son whose very manliness he has created. To maintain his power as patriarch, Eban has to force his son back into babyhood. The dual characterization of Eban, as a father and a box (played as another character, Beethoven), is a dramatic device that effectively theatricalizes separation. Unlike Abigail who joins her younger self, Abby, Eban never unites with his inner self, and thus, as a character, personifies what Boesing sees as a fundamental problem with patriarchy.

Labia Wings comically removes patriarchy and welcomes matriarchy. Called a "dream play" by Boesing, the tale begins as three "ancient and ugly women sit shrouded on a long bench," resurrecting only Mary from the old mythology to cast her in a new role because there "would be no more resurrections of sons. She isn't a son. Never was. Never will be."[41] Joseph enters followed by a donkey, and in the course of the

play commits suicide several times, and each time Mary mourns for him as, "My husband! My lover! My father! My paramoor! My son! My sweetheart! My swain! My flame! My cock a too! My cunt-Tickler! My meatgrinder!"[42] Henriette, the third in a trinity of father, mother, and daughter, represents woman, transforming from a six-year-old to a governess, a wife, and back to a child who greets the three goddesses and rides off on the donkey led by Mary, carrying a balloon wrapped in a blanket which she pops "with a great explosion as a church bell rings. Henriette throws her arms up in the air with delight. All laugh and cheer."[43]

The play carries with it more generalized meanings. Joseph, who symbolizes patriarchy, ends the age of violence with his own shooting, matriarchy is introduced while three old crones look on. The new age is greeted by the female child/woman, Henriette, Mary, a donkey, and three goddesses dressed as a bird with a woman's head, a fat whore on stilts, and a woman with four arms and huge feet. With exuberance and humor, the women bring in the new order.

The Gelding is a serious play that illustrates the problems of patriarchy; Labia Wings is a funny play that lampoons patriarchal mythology. Both plays emphasize a need for change, and as the characters change radically in their self-perception, Boesing

reveals herself, ultimately, to be an optimist who believes that change is possible once the issues are understood. The way to understanding is through reexperiencing the past, and probing the subconscious. As an artist, Boesing tries to help her audiences reexperience and probe, so that, ultimately, they will change.

## The Collaborative Works

Boesing's political and theatrical statements are perhaps most visible in the characters and characterizations of the collaborative works. In explaining the connection between actor and character, Boesing elaborated on her understanding of the relationship between art and life. She commented:

> I really get bored with theatre that is so removed from experience that there's no way of looking at it to learn anything about this play that we are playing every day of our lives. Theatre offers us the opportunity to understand more about the nature of life than any other art form because it impersonates it. Because you have living people walking through drama that approximates our everyday experience. In theatre we have the opportunity of seeing ourselves as others see us in a way that we don't in other art forms because the other art forms are more abstract. . . In theatre you have living human beings recreating in the moment characters whom they are not. . . We are seeing life recreated right in front of us. Living images of our unconscious. Our dream life can come to life in a passing moment. It's not an art form that is caught. A painting, a poem. It's a passing thing. Like life is. So all you have, the clay, is

> this moment, that's all the clay you have. And then it's gone. . . The actor can be the highest artist in the world because the actor can notice that we are really made up of many different personalities. So the actor can teach us that, of being a shaman in that life experience.[44]

In the collaborative plays, the actors created the characters through ensemble work directed by Boesing. The actors presented their own personalities, their own experiences, and brought them into rehearsal where the characters and the drama were created. Phyllis Jane Rose, Producing Director of At the Foot of the Mountain, considers the collaborative pieces Boesing's best work because her architectural skills are brought to the experiences of others. "She has some movement that she wants to play out and makes visible."[45] The process of creating characters collaboratively reflects Boesing's assumptions about life and theatre, actor and character.

The four collaborative works, The Story of a Mother, Junkie!, Ashes, Ashes We All Fall Down, and Las Gringas are clearly different from Boesing's other works in terms of characterizations. The Story of a Mother and Junkie! contain no fictional characters: the actors' names are used to identify changing lines. Ashes, Ashes We All Fall Down and Las Gringas contain fictional characters, but each actor transforms many times either to create those or additional characters. The collaborative nature of these works is probably

most fully expressed in the ways in which the characters were created, because, as a result of the feeling circle and improvisation, the actors made extensive contributions to character development.

The notable trait of characters in the collaborative works is their mutability. The Story of a Mother contains thirty-nine scenes with five named actors transforming literally minute by minute throughout the play. The effect is the creation of kaleidoscopic images, mostly of mothers and daughters, in scenes such as "Baby Feeding," "It Says in the Book," "Closed Doors," "Goodnite Ritual," and other moments in the daily existence of mothers and children. The play is a tribute to mothers, and Big Mother's final speech is spoken in honor of all mothers.

> J. becomes a Child curled up on the floor and then grows into the big mother. [The reverse of the opening image.]
> J. How could anyone tell this story? It's too long. It's hundreds of thousands of years long. It's been writing itself since the world began--everyday of every year and every minute of every day. I mean, history is so much simpler than this story of a mother. . . We've survived. That's something to tell. Through the dirty dishes and the children sitting on our laps and the men leaning on our arms and the tyranny of their myths and their movies and their songs, we have survived. And who could say what it is like? In the end the only thing to say is that we go on loving--with all or our beings we go on loving. And the entire planet depends upon our ability and our willingness to do it.[46]

The Big Mother is the only character in this work not created out of the experience of one actor but as a fictional character represented as a costume piece composed of two actors. In much the same way that a collectively produced play may focus on the result and not the producers, the collaborative pieces emphasize the message coming from and filtered through the performers. Paradoxically, in the collaborative pieces the performers--who as actors have contributed to character creation--also clearly serve as windows for the ideas that Boesing has inspired. The characters in the collaborative plays reflect a collective view because, as Boesing explained, the actors really look "at all the female energy and bring that to bear on an issue."[47] However, the characters they create are part of the movement of the entire play, which relies on the constant transforming of one character into another, so that no one role is central, and no actor stars.

Ashes, Ashes We all Fall Down seems at first to break this model because of Miriam's apparent centrality in her nuclear family. However, upon closer examination, it is clear that the transformations required of all the actors make their roles in the family central to the narrative rather than as central roles. The five characters in the nuclear family appear in seventeen scenes and, in addition, they transform as political, historical, and fictional

characters in an additional seventeen "hallucinations." In the dramatization of the double death of Miriam and her planet, Ashes contains the largest number of character transformations in any of Boesing's plays.

Las Gringas also makes a political statement about war, the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. Six actors play three characters each, and each character creates a thread of narrative woven throughout the fabric of the play. The characters are fictional and yet are made to seem historical so that they are a blend the imaginary characters of the single authored plays and the historically derived characters of the collage historic pieces.

Junkie! tells the story of addiction as seven actors who are addicted to chemicals (marijuana, nicotine, alcohol, caffeine, heroine), food, work, and love translate their own stories into their characterizations. The purpose is to assist audience members to recognize and thus overcome their personal addictions. Thus, the focus of the play is on the audience, so, as the actor changes, the audience member may also change.

One of the actors, Kay Bolstad, described the experience of working in Junkie as life-changing. Bolstad was working at At the Foot of the Mountain as the office manager at the time that the work on Junkie began. She auditioned along with many professional

actors and told Boesing that she wanted no special consideration when casting. Consequently, Boesing did not cast her. Only at that point did Bolstad realize how much she wanted to work on the play, so she called Boesing, pleading to be cast, and Boesing cast her, in large part because of her commitment to the theatre. Bolstad commented:

> It turned out to be an incredible experience. With as much humility as I have, I think I can say I did an incredible job. . . . The work started when we got together with Martha and started doing improvisations. We started telling our stories. She had a whole bag of tools to use to get at our personal stories. All of the stuff came out, I mean we worked for three months, nine hours a day on Junkie!. All the people were from the outside except myself. . . and all were addicts in one form or another. . . The process was one of revealing one's innermost secrets. The process was very dependent on being an ensemble. We were working off one another and being thoroughly connected to one another. It's that pushing the edge of telling our thing that's just shocking about Junkie!. . . I beat the shit out of one actress at one point in a mother/daughter scene. There were some real cathartic kinds of experiences for people. . . Junkie! changed my life.[48]

The character that Bolstad created was a food addict. Bolstad, the actor, is a mother of six who was deserted by her husband after twenty years of marriage, so she carried her own experiences directly into the play. Her need for love became translated as a need for food, and in her characterization of herself, created with Boesing's skills in therapeutic work, Bolstad exposed her addictions. After the scene in

which Kay, the character, beats her daughter, she also begins to dream of love.

> Kay: (Sings) "Some day he'll come along. . . the man I love. . ." (Laughs, moves center stool downstage, and talks to audience). Well, I used to believe in fairy tales, too. Take this guy I met New Year's Eve. He was real tall and a wonderful kisser. I thought about him all day every day. His big bushy beard, his wonderful brown eyes. Does he golf or bowl, I wonder? I bet he could fix the front porch. I bet he's good in bed. Anyway he gave me his phone number. He said he wasn't married. I didn't believe him. Carol said wait a week or so. She's good at games like that. Not me. First thing Monday morning, up at 7:00, make-up on, I dial the phone. He said, "Who?" I said, "Me, the one with the brown hair." What'd ya expect me to say? The short, fat one? . . .Well, I don't need it. Him. I don't need him. You know what I like in bed? A lot of room. Between the sheets. On both sides. You know what I mean? Who likes getting kicked in the stomach in the middle of the night? Who likes being strangled by a stray arm? Not me. I like being alone. Some people are celibate you know. That's my cup of tea. I like being alone. I like it like that. I like being alone! I like it like that!! (She has built herself into hysteria).[49]

The interaction between Bolstad, the actor, Kay, the character, and Boesing, the director and writer, illustrates the collaborative process developed by Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain. Boesing with the actors created characters that came out of the actors' lives; the characters expressed the actors' encounters with their own addictions to move the audience to a recognition of similar addicitions. <u>Junkie!</u> is a particularly good example of the means by which the "actor becomes the audience,"[50] and because

the play was later filmed, its effects are still being experienced by new audiences.

## Conclusion

Boesing described the collaborative process as emergent:

> I still believe that women working together collaboratively have something to bring to the art--some real questions about both the form and the content which seem to limit much of our mainstream theater. There is a kind of work that emerges from this intense collective longing to communicate which is never equalled in the plays by a single writer, mounted as a single production in a season. It has to do with community, with Jung's ideas about a collective unconscious perhaps, and it is a healing voice which is sorely needed on our planet right now. There are stories residing in the deepest parts of our souls which continue to be wrapped in silence. Our tale is not yet finished.[51]

Thus, the collaborative works display Boesing's beliefs about creating dramatic character and her techniques that aid an actor to achieve those creations. Working without the hierarchical assumptions that would result in plays centered on one main character and so on an actor or star, the ensembles of Junkie!, Ashes, Ashes We All Fall Down, The Story of a Mother, and Las Gringas created characters collectively, guided by the playwright and director, Boesing, who faciliated their self-expression as, through improvisation, they created the script.

The characterizations in the three types of plays reflect the differing skills of the playwright. First, in the single-authored works the characters express the

single vision of the playwright and, therefore, are more consistent than those in some of the other works. Second, in the historic collage pieces, the characterizations are molded around historically accurate words, and, thus, Boesing's skills in creating characters has somewhat fallen before her loyalty to exact words. Third, in the collaborative works, the beliefs and the techniques of the playwright are synthesized as the merging of actor and character displays Boesing's preference for collectivity in production.

In creating characters, Boesing focuses, paradoxically, on the individual and on the collective. She views the individual actor and the character as collectives in which multiple personalities reflect multiple human traits. To express those multiple personalities and traits, she causes her characters to transform many times throughout the plays, from one character to another, or from one age to another within the same character. The most constrained of her works, the historic collage pieces, contain the fewest character transformations, but in both the single-authored works and the collaborative works, characters change often within each play.

Boesing also views the group's effort in bringing out each actor as a means of opening communication between actors and audience by enabling the audience to

understand the experience of the actors. Her hope is that the changes or transformations that occur to the characters will be understood by the audience members as potential change for them, or, further, that the changes occurring to the characters as witnessed by the audience will actually cause the audience to change.

Thus, ultimately, Boesing's characters are "windows for her ideas."[52] She creates characters who speak words for the rhetorical purpose of "changing the world."[53]

# CHAPTER VI
# ENDNOTES

[1]Karen Malpede, Three Plays by the Open Theater, (New York: Drama Book Specialists/ Publishers, 1974), p. 11.

[2]Martha Boesing, "Process and Problems," Lecture delivered at Smith College, Helen Krich Chinoy's Retirement Celebration, April 18, 1986, p. 1.

[3]Hubert Heffner, Samuel Selden, & Hunton D. Sellman, Modern Theater Practice (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1947), p. 38.

[4]Boesing, p. 1.

[5]Ibid., p. 1.

[6]Ibid., p. 1.

[7]William Shakespeare, William Shakespeare, The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage, The Complete Pelican Shakespeare (Baltimore, Maryland: Penquin Books, 1969), p. 31.

[8]"Creative Women," IWY Conference, South Carolina, 1974, p. 1.

[9]Martha Boesing, Dora Du Fran's Wild West Show or The Real Low Down on Calamity Jane (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1979), p. 2.

[10]Martha Boesing, Personal Interview, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1987.

[11]Martha Boesing, "Process and Problems," p. 1.

[12]Ibid., March 20, 1987.

[13]Martha Boesing, Pimp in A Century of Plays by American Women, edited by Rachel France (New York: Richards Rosen Press, Inc., 1979), p. 210.

[14]Ibid., p. 210.

[15]Ibid., p. 211.

[16]Ibid., p. 212.

[17]Ibid., p. 214.

[18]Ibid., p. 215.

[19]Ibid., p. 219.

[20]Ibid., p. 220.

[21]Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 20, 1987.

[22]Martha Boesing, River Journal, in Journey Along the Matrix (Minneapolis: Vanilla Press, 1981), p. 37.

[23]Ibid., p. 38.

[24] Ibid., p. 50.

[25] Ibid., p. 72.

[26] Jan Magrane, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 20, 1987.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Martha Boesing, The Web in Plays in Progress, vol. 4, n. 1 (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1981), p. 1-1.

[30] Ibid., p. 1-18.

[31] Ibid., p. 2-35.

[32] Martha Boesing, Love Song to an Amazon in Journey Along the Matrix (Minneapolis: Vanilla Press, 1981), p. 2.

[33] Ibid., p. 3.

[34] Ibid., p. 9.

[35] Ibid., p. 8.

[36]Martha Boesing, Trespasso (Minneapolis: Vanilla Press, 1981), p. 1.

[37]Ibid., p. 2.

[38]Ibid., p. 12.

[39]Ibid., p. 14.

[40]Martha Boesing, The Gelding in Journey Along the Matrix, p. 4.

[41]_____, Labia Wings (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1979), p. 7.

[42]Ibid., p. 5.

[43]Ibid., p. 8.

[44]Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, March 19, 1987.

[45]Phyllis Jane Rose, Interview with Lynne Greeley, At the Foot of the Mountain, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 20, 1987.

[46]Martha Boesing, The Story of a Mother (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1978), p. 21.

[47]Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 20, 1987.

[48]Kay Bolstad, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 19, 1987.

[49]Martha Boesing, Junkie! (Minneapolis: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1983), p. 13.

[50]Karen Malpede, Three Plays by the Open Theater, p. 11.

[51]Martha Boesing, "Process and Problems," p. 4.

[52]Martha Boesing, Interview, March, 1987.

[53]Meredith Flynn, "The Feeling Circle, Company Collaboration, and Ritual Drama: Three Conventions Developed by At the Foot of the Mountain" (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1984), p. 59.

# CHAPTER VII

## THE FORM AND STRUCTURE OF MARTHA BOESING'S PLAYS

Phyllis Jane Rose, producing director of At the Foot of the Mountain, began working with Martha Boesing in 1974 when Rose left an academic position, mid-year, to work specifically with Boesing, who as "a writer in residence [was] willing to do political experimental theatre."[1] Referred to Boesing's works by Linda Walsh Jenkins, Rose had found them "extraordinary" and arranged for the presentation of Pimp and The Gelding at the American Theatre Association's Conference in Washington, D.C. The professional connection between Boesing and Rose began with that performance, leading to Rose's commitment to the work of At the Foot of the Mountain. In describing her reaction to Boesing's scripts, Rose stated:

> They were extraordinary. . . because of the structure, the way the architecture of the play worked. Nothing was talked about in the play but through the way the play was structured, what happened in Aristotelian terms, the plays have integrity. . . . They have plots in the best sense of the word. They are not linear time plots. . . They are always emotional, a movement from one place to another. Things happen on an emotional level. To the audience, I mean. The audience goes on a journey. It is linear in the sense that you may move from here to here, but in the process you have gone [gesture of jagged angles with sound effects]. But you definitely end up over here.[2]

Rose described The Web as an example of Boesing's architecture in which "it looks like nothing happens" as a character has memories, all in the same moment, with "things happening. . . practically everywhere."[3] Rose described an instant in which the audience has a kind of "epistemological experience, a new way of knowing" that comes not only from thinking, and not only from feeling, but from these "multi-layered perceptions. . . "[4] that allowed them to open up for the rest of the play.

In contrast to Rose, when Boesing was asked to comment on the dramatic form of her plays, she responded, "Oh. That concept doesn't do much to me."[5] Clearly, however, Boesing's plays do have form, for without it, their content would be chaotic and perhaps incomprehensible.

To begin, the plays are organized around ideas. Her structural organization, her dramatic form, expresses "all the personal stuff,"[6] her feminism, her experimentalism, her perfectionism, and her wish for "choreographed theatre . . . [that] is inside [the] form"[7] of carefully crafted theatre. "I don't like flab. I don't like the stuff around the edges. There is an aesthetic that I need to live and work inside of."[8] Thus, Boesing's plays, organized around ideas, express an aesthetic derived from her respect for the

craft of theatre and from her political and personal experience.

In surveying Boesing's plays, traditional generic classifications, as with most modern pieces, are not helpful. Therefore, in analyzing the plays, I will not consider the ways in which they are tragedies, comedies, or melodramas. I will seek instead to understand the means by which the playwright's nontraditional approach to the art of theatre accomplishes the rhetorical purpose for which the plays have been designed--to persuade, and more importantly, to transform the thinking and the feelings of the audience.

Because traditional classifications do not seem to describe Boesing's work, other patterns must be sought. Others, including the playwright, have described this work as a mosaic structure.[9] In a sense, the mosaic image describes the composition of the plays if upon calling "Stop!" to the action, one steps back and looks at what is happening both on the stage and in the scripts. For example, the layering of the set and the scenes in The Web allows several separate sequences to occur simultaneously. However, the disadvantage in conceiving of the structures as mosaics is that they do not suggest the movement of the plays. Rather than freeze-framing a play to examine it, an analysis that

locates the internal movement might give a sense of the motion and ferment of the action.

In the following analysis, I will explore any organizing structures that comprise Boesing's plots, beginning with the structures Boesing identified as rituals.[10] To discover how the rituals contribute to her plots, I will survey the plays and specifically analyze The Story of a Mother. In addition, I will examine the film of Junkie!.

Because the dramatic form of Boesing's plays grew out of her experience in political theatre, her experience in the women's movement, and her experience of her own imagination as a feminist artist, perhaps structures can be located that are circular rather than linear, fluid rather than static, and changing rather than codified.[11]

## The Rituals

Ritual is a term that became fashionable among experimental theatre groups in the 1960s. It has a variety of meanings in theatre. Anthony Graham-White asserts that "If critics would speak of routine and ceremony and reserve ritual for the fullest sense of the term, . . . they would be infinitely clearer. It is, of course, ritual in the fullest sense that is attractive to the avant garde," the fullest sense being

a "richness of experience lacking . . . in our society. . . so that the emphasis upon 'ritual' is a criticism of our society."[12] Graham-White asks, "Are we 'primitive people,' too, who turn to ritual because we feel that we lack control over our socio- political and technological world? Or do we turn to it simply to try to create, temporarily, a sense of shared belief and communion?"[13]

Ritual as used in anthropological terms never exists for its own sake but contains "moral, religious, practical, or psychological significance."[14] Furthermore, ritual is often distinguished from ceremony on the basis of its efficacy in changing some aspect of the social conditions of the performers or other participants. That is, among anthropologists there is agreement that ritual carries its effects beyond its performance.[15] In most drama, ritual is not identified for its efficacy outside of the performance, but for its ability to entertain. Richard Schechner, however, identifies the efficacy of theatrical ritual as in the performance when the "audience as a separate entity is dissolved into the performance as 'participants'"[16] so that in the union of actors and audience, the alienation in everyday life is contradicted.

Martha Boesing uses ritual as the experimentalists have used it, for creating meaning and spirituality

that is lacking in our culture, and as the anthropologists have used it, for its efficacy. In addition, she uses ritual at three different levels as she dramatizes routine events, ceremonies, and what Graham-White calls "ritual in the fullest sense." By making women and women's issues significant in the theatre, Boesing's works transform her audience so that the "magical"[17] sense of importance created for them in the theatre survives in the hard reality outside. One of the techniques she uses to emphasize that significance is to ritualize daily routines and ceremonies, preparing the audience for full rituals that are communal experiences. Thus, through ritual, Boesing gives theatrical form and language to women's lives, bringing their actions out of the shadows and their words out of silence.

The rituals in Boesing's work occur at the three levels distinguished by Graham-White: the routines, the ceremonies, and the high or formal rituals. The routines consist of many kinds of daily activities that have been heightened by Boesing so as to be given significance. As she focuses on the lives of women, she gives importance to their repetitive activities, such as feeding the baby, brushing the child's hair, saying goodnight. The ceremonies are the ceremonies of everyday life such as weddings, funerals, birthday parties. They are used in the plays both in the

context of their real life referents, that is, as weddings or funerals and, through changes in rhythm and intensity, as overtures to the formal rituals. The formal rituals, or rituals in the fullest sense, are either formalized sacraments in which the actors perform ceremonies as theatrical events that have no connection with everyday life, or they are communal events that involve the audience. For example, in several of the plays characters perform ceremonies before altars, and in most of the collaborative works, prompted actions are asked of the audience.

The plot is built as the rituals are heightened so that the routines mark the beginning of an emotional climb, and the formal rituals mark the peak. In this way, the rituals contribute to the development of the plots.

## The Routines

The dominant set of routines occurs between mothers and daughters, usually involved in everyday activities that are repeated in several of the plays: brushing hair, talking on the telephone, serving food, drinking tea, ironing clothes, or playing with dolls. Pimp, The Web, The Moontree, and The Story of a Mother each contain scenes in which one or another of these everyday activities is dramatized. The best example of the dramatization of the routine tasks of mothering,

however, is in The Story of a Mother where early in the play a chorus sings of these daily chores:

THE MOURNERS CHORUS

P: She died washing the dishes.
M: She died hanging out the laundry.
J: She died mashing the potatoes.
P&M: She died flushing out the diapers.
P&J: She died lying on her bed.
J&M: She died playing solitaire.
P&J: She died standing on her ear.
PMJ: She died reaching out for love.[18]

The chant is a song to unsung labor. Following the song to unrecognized activities is a series of exchanges between a mother and daughter that serve to ritualize everyday conversation, in a kind of dialogue that many adults may have experienced as children but remember only when they hear it in the context of the play. The set of exchanges is called, "Images of loving and fighting."

C: Oh, look! There's a big storm coming.
P: Isn't it beautiful?
C: Those clouds look scary.
P: They won't scare us.
C: It's going to rain buckets.
P: We'll be safe inside.
C: It's going to hit down trees. . .
P: We'll light a fire. . .
C: . . . and be very loud!
P: . . . and drink cocoa.
C: Ooooooooo! Did you see that?
P: Of course. It's the magic show. I ordered it specially for you. Do you like it!
C: Oh, Mom, you're so silly!
P: I inherited it.
C: What?
P: Being silly.

C: From who? 19
P: From you.

Continuing with a new set of actors, the same type of dialogue picks up on a different theme.

J: Hi, Mom, did you get my blouse at the cleaners?
R: I didn't get around to it. Sorry.
J: What? But you promised, Ma. You just ruined my whole day! What were you doing all day?
R: What are you talking to me like this for? I don't have to tell you what I've been doing.
J: You were lying around on your bed.
R: I was doing what had to be done.
J: Are you mad at me? Is that why you didn't pick up my blouse?
R: This is a stupid argument! I don't want to talk about it any more!
J: All right. I just wanted to know why. Ma?[20]

In another cycle in The Story of a Mother, the listing of a mother's things to do clearly displays everyday activities in the theatrical context.

THE MOTHER'S LIST OF THINGS TO DO

ALL:(SING, FROM CHANT)

I want to see you, I want to see you,
Mother.
I want to see you.
Come on the blood-rush, woman.
Come in sister
I will sing you a song
A song more ancient than the song of my birth.

R:(SITS IN ROCKER)

clean the house
call the doctor about measles shot
make casserole for dinner
In a minute!

shop for: chicken, orange juice, bread,
milk, toilet paper, cream cheese,
shampoo, popsicles
make dentist appointment for Daniel
cancel hairdresser
enroll Rachel in ballet class
In a minute!
give Jennifer a bath
soak beans
water the plants
buy birthday present for Paul
find time to play with Robyn
In a minute!
fold the laundry
write to Aunt Rose
send flowers to Helen
find time to play with Robyn
In a minute!
take chair to upholsterer
put up storm windows,
get driver's permit for Curtis
call furnace cleaner
In a minute!
take Ruffy to vet
make costume for Christmas pageant
tell Robyn I love her. . . [Robyn is
herself]

J: A minute's up![21]

The Story of a Mother is composed of routines, leading to ceremonies and high rituals. Other everyday segments include: The Calls for Dinner ("Everything's getting cold on your plate." "What's for dessert?"); Baby Feeding; "It Says in the Book"; "Goodnite Ritual" ("Now I lay me down to sleep"; "Yes, I'll leave the light on"); The Shampoo.

The striking quality of the routines is the extent to which they are created out of the experience of females. As I read the play, I realized that probably fifty percent of the exchanges were the actual words that I spoke with my own mother. The play was created

collaboratively, a factor which has contributed to its breadth, but within that general appeal is the intimate, personal quality of the dialogue. The phrases that mothers and children share are rarely heard in any other relationship, so that the capturing of those phrases brings voices out of silence. For audience members who are not mothers (or fathers for that matter), the dialogue revitalizes forgotten memories, and for parents, conversations from the privacy of the home are made public as the relationship between mother and child is brought into the spotlight. As private dialogues are dramatized, a part of the adult, the child-self, begins to re-emerge.

Thus, the routines begin the seduction of the audience member into experiencing feelings. Routines therefore begin to build the "emotional plots," to echo Rose.[22]

## The Ceremonies

The ceremonies are of two kinds. The first kind are those which in real life may be formal events or ceremonies. Weddings, funerals, story-telling, birthday parties, wrestling matches, gift-wrapping, family portrait-posing, massages, and lullabies . Unlike the routine rituals, they are not particularly focused on mothers and daughters. Whereas the routines ritualize everyday activities to give them recognition,

the ceremonies theatricalize heightened events that occur occasionally in everyday life.

The second kind of ceremony is not built on formal events such as weddings, but it is constructed in language and form so as to serve as a transition between the routine and high ritual.

The Story of a Mother effectively illustrates the ceremonies. The first kind occurs in the first cycle of the play. Big Mother enters and walks downstage. The opening lines are, "'Hello! Is anybody home?' (She listens. There is no answer. She removes her Big Mother costume, . . . and curls into a small child-like position)."[23] Thereafter, the "dead mother" sings, the mourners chorus explains how she died, and the daughter appears at the graveside. At this point, the first ceremony occurs: the daughter kneels beside the coffin. As part of a funeral event, the action functions as a ceremony in itself. At the graveside, the daughter begins to deal with the guilt and anger her mother's death has inspired:

> C: I told them don't open the coffin. That's the only thing you've got to promise me. Do you understand? For God's sake, don't open the coffin! I'll take care of everything. I'll phone the minister; I'll order the flowers; I'll choose the music; I'll invite the guests; I'll even bury her, I said. I'll dig up the cold ground with my own hand if I have to, I'll bury her! But don't open the coffin. I can handle everything but that; for god's sake, anything. Just don't open the

coffin. I don't want to see her. Do you understand? I don't want to see her.

Oh, Mama! Oh, Mama. I would have done anything for you. I would have done anything! I'd have fed you, dressed you, taken you to the movies. I'd have held you at night. I would have, Mama; I'd have held you all night in my arms if you had wanted that. If only you could have looked at me. Just once, Mama, just one time. If only you could have seen me. (PAUSE) Oh, god, it isn't finished with you, Mama. I told them don't open the coffin and it isn't finished. Why did you do it? Why did you close your eyes? Why did you? Why did you, Mama? Why did you die? I'm not done yet, Mama! Look at me! For god's sake, Mama, tell me: why did you close your eyes?! Look at me!!. . .

(FOR A LONG TIME SHE LOOKS AT HER MOTHER) I love you, Mama.[24]

As the cycle continues (Boesing identifies the scenes as cycles), the second kind of ceremony occurs as a chant that is the prelude to the first High Ritual of the play. The chant is sung chorally by all the actors in language that is repetitive, in a rhythm that increases tempo, and with an intensity stemming from the choral participation. In the style of a Catholic mass, the chant builds to a higher and higher pitch:

I. I am calling
I am calling for you, Mother
I am calling you forth
from the womb
from the blood
from the eyes of the dead
from the edge of the world where you
have remained after walking
away from yourself.
I am calling you back.

(WHITE SOUND, INHALE, EXHALE)

II. I want to see you
I want to see you, Mother
I want to see you
come on the blood-rush, woman
come in, sister
lean on my breast
I will sing you a song
more ancient
than the song
of my birth
It is too late
It is too late, my mother, my sister
It is too late
Not to surrender

(WHITE SOUND, EXHALE)

III. I see you
I see you
still
you are still
I see you still

(FAST, BITTER, BUILDING)

don't go away
don't go away before I get it all out
get it all out
all out in front of me
in front of my eyes
in front of your eyes
which are also my eyes
my eyes which are burning
my eyes which are
burning with heat
burning with oils
medicinal oils
burning with oils
which you have poured into my eyes
endlessly poured
into my eyes
your way of doing
your way of seeing
your way of seeing it all
which ended up hurting
in fact almost killing
not healing
my eyes
Mother!
Listen to me now
Look at me now

See me now
Don't lose sight of me
I am coming into your way
I am coming into your space
I am coming into your skin

Let me in
Let me in, Mother,
Let me in

Let me in
Let me in, Mother
Let me in[25]

Another example of a ceremony is in the fourth cycle of the play, the "Plate Scene." The scene is not a routine ritual because everyday items are used rhythmically, rather than as items for eating. The theatricality of the scene builds rhythmically to the final high ritual in the play ("The Song of the Mother"). The scene expresses a range of feelings about motherhood punctuated by the manipulation of the common household item.

ALL: (SING FROM CHANT)
Listen to me now.
Look at me now,
See me now,
Don't lose sight of me.
I am coming into your way.
I am coming into your space.
I am coming into your skin.

TABLEAU OF ANGRY MOTHER (MAKING ANGRY SOUNDS: PFFFT! HAH!) AND NEEDY MOTHER (WHINING) PULLING ON MOTHER.

THEY COME DOWN STAIRS AND SURROUND C. AT TABLE. P. (MOTHER) HAS 6 PLATES; R. (ANGRY MOTHER) HAS 9 PLATES; J. (NEEDY MOTHER) HAS NONE.

C: What's for dinner?
P: Toast. (PUTS ONE PLATE DOWN)

C: Toast?
R&P: Toast.
C: It's burnt.
J&P: I know it's burnt. (EACH PICK UP ONE PLATE)
C: I don't like burnt toast.
R&P: It's what there is. (EACH PUT ONE PLATE DOWN)
C: Why are you so angry?
J&P: I'm not angry. (J. PICKS UP ONE PLATE, P. PUTS ONE PLATE DOWN)
C: Are you angry at me?
R&P: I am not angry. (EACH PUTS ONE PLATE DOWN.)
C: You sound angry.
R&P: Eat your toast. (EACH PUTS ONE PLATE DOWN.)
C: What's wrong?
J&P: There's nothing wrong. (EACH PICKS ONE PLATE UP.)
C: You act like there's something wrong.
R&P: Everything's wrong! (R. PUTS ONE PLATE DOWN, P. PICKS IT UP.)
C: I'm sorry.
J&P: It's not easy to be a mother. (EACH PUTS ONE PLATE DOWN.)
C: Don't cry.
J&P: I'm not crying. (EACH PICKS ONE PLATE UP.)
C: You act like you're about to.
RJP: I am not crying! (J. PICKS ONE PLATE UP, P. & R. EACH PUT ONE PLATE DOWN.)
C: Did I do something wrong?
R&P: Eat your toast. (THEY EACH PUT ONE PLATE DOWN.)
C: What'd I do?
R&P: Nothing! (THEY EACH PUT ONE PLATE DOWN.)
C: Don't yell at me.
J&P: I'm not yelling. (THEY EACH PICK ONE PLATE UP.)
C: You were yelling.
RJP: I am not yelling! (J. PICKS ONE PLATE UP, P.&R. EACH PUT ONE PLATE DOWN.)

PAUSE.

C: Thanks for the toast. It's good.
J&P: It's burnt. ( THEY EACH PICK ONE PLATE UP.)
C: I like it that way.
R&P: You do not like burnt toast. (THEY EACH PICK ONE PLATE UP.)
C: What's wrong, Ma?

RJP: Nothing! (P. PUTS HER WHOLE STACK DOWN, TURNS UPSTAGE, COVERS HER EARS AND SHUTS HER EYES. J. AND R. DIVIDE THE REST AND PICK THEM UP.)

C: What do you want?

J: (SHE CAREFULLY PUTS HER PLATES DOWN ONE AT A TIME. C. PICKS THEM UP, TRYING TO HELP, HOLDING THEM CLOSE TO HERSELF.) Why do I always have to ask? Why don't you ever just see I need help and help? Do you think I am a slave? Is that what you think? Hired help? I don't do this for pay. I do this for love. And you take it out of my blood, drop by drop. Nobody cares about me. Nobody cares what I feel. Who am I? I am nobody. That's who I am. Nobody likes me. Nobody even notices me.

R: (SHE PUTS HER PLATES DOWN ONE AT A TIME, LIKE PUNCTUATION MARKS. C. PICKS THEM UP, TRYING TO HELP, HOLDING THEM CLOSE TO HERSELF.) Why do I always have to ask? Why don't you ever just see I need help and help? Do you think I'm a slave? Is that what you think? Hired help I don't do this for pay, I do this for love. . . .

THERE IS THE SOUND OF A PLATE BREAKING. . . J. SLOWLY TURNS ON HERSELF WITH THE SHARD AS IF TO SLIT HER OWN THROAT. R. TURNS ON C. WITH HER SHARD, PULLING HER HEAD BACK, AS IT TO SLIT HER THROAT.[26]

Beginning the last cycle, the plate scene compresses conflicting feelings of motherhood with a visual representation of plates, food, and children. The pitch reached by the conclusion of the scene builds into the last ritual when the audience joins in to celebrate mothers rather than motherhood.

## The High Rituals

The high rituals in the plays occur at different points in the plots. Containing elements of ceremonies from real life (altars, candles, water, songs), these theatrical rituals take what is sacred from life to celebrate the holiness of the theatre and to create for the audience what a sacrament like communion does for people involved in religious worship. The high rituals always occur after a build-up through the routines and ceremonies, and they serve to capture a moment in which Boesing hopes that the audience as a group experiences a sense of the collective unconscious, in the Jungian sense.[27]

Certain processes are celebrated in the high rituals; for example, building a physical structure occurs in several of the plays. In Journey to Canaan, the performers build a wall; in Love Song to an Amazon, the women build a temple; in Trespasso, the friends build a ship; in The Moontree, the actors and the audience build the moontree. Each of the building sequences celebrates the coming together of at least two people in an act of collaboration represented by the process of building. These rituals contain stylized movements, slowed-down rhythms, chants, or songs.

Other processes that are ritualized are hangings (The Gelding and The Last Fire), ceremonies before

altars (River Journal, The Gelding, and Journey to Canaan), and friendship represented as actual circles among actors or between the actors and the audience (Junkie!, Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down, The Story of a Mother, and Antigone Too). Many of these rituals are celebrated with the use of one or all of the elements of fire, air, earth, and water.

Again, the play containing the clearest examples of the high rituals is The Story of a Mother. In the first cycle, the routines and ceremonies lead to "The Calling Forth of the Mothers," (Ritual #1: All high rituals in the play are literally labelled by number). Concluding with "Let me in, Mother, Let me in," the dialogue continues:

M. (SPEAKS TO THE AUDIENCE IMPROVISATIONALLY FROM THE FOLLOWING OUTLINE)
Be aware of your breathing, just breathe.
Call for your mother. See her in front of you.
Standing or sitting, notice age, what she is wearing, how her hair is, hands, all physical characteristics, what she is doing.

Approach her or let her approach you. Look at her. Speak to her. Touch her.

Ask her: can I enter you?
Slowly enter in whatever way is right for you. Turn around. Fit feet, legs, thighs, genitals, pelvis, hips, stomach, spine, chest, breasts, shoulders, arms, wrists, hands, fingers, neck, head, chin, cheeks, mouth, nose, forehead, eyes, skull, into hers (one at a time).

Be aware of self: what are you doing, where are you living, how are you feeling, etc.

When ready, open eyes, see world as she saw it.

M: ASKS EVERY WOMAN IN ROOM TO INTRODUCE SELF BY SAYING:

The name of the daughter is . . . (HAVE LISTS OF NAMES OF EVERY WOMAN PRESENT AND CALL OUT THESE NAMES ONE AT A TIME)

The name of the mother? (AT THE END OF THE LIST, M. INTRODUCES HERSELF AS HER MOTHER).

M: There were certain things which I always said over and over again. Are there things that you always said that you would like to say again now?

THE MOTHERS SHARE THEIR OFTEN SPOKEN WORDS BEGINNING WITH THE PHRASE:

I always said. . .

(WHEN EVERYONE HAS SPOKEN)

M: Close your eyes.
Get in touch with that part of you which is not your mother.
Leave her in the same way that you entered.
See yourself as separate from her.
You might want to tell her what it felt like to be her.
Say goodbye.
When ready, open eyes, and see the world as you see the world.[28]

The ritual concludes, and a new cycle in the play starts. Each cycle contains the same processes. Beginning with everyday activities (the one immediately following Ritual #1 is "Hide and Seek"), the build-up begins again, ending in Ritual #2. The power in the rituals is that they encourage the audience to become participants, rather than mere observers. The activity in Ritual #1 not only encourages everyone in the theatre to become active, but it also encourages

everyone to relate the process to herself. For women who are alientated from their mothers and who will be the right sort of audience, this imaginary reconnection forces confrontation with that alienation and may introduce the beginning of healing.

Significantly, the next high ritual is called "The Healing."

> M: (Brings a bowl of water and a wash cloth to
> P. Chants) The mother says to the daughter.
>
> P: Says something truthful to the daughter and washes her. J. and C. also do this. M. invites the audience to speak as mothers or become their mothers and say something to the daughter. Beginning with the phrase: "I want to know." P. washes B. in response to each one who speaks.[29]

Cycles one and two inaugurate communication between mothers and daughters as the adult actors confront the possibility of their mothers' deaths and as they return to childhood through dialogues from childhood. Cycle three continues chronologically as the child becomes the woman who faces her view of her mother's relationship with her father and her own prospective relationships with men. Dealing with menstruation and the anger that accompanies it, this cycle of a woman's life also includes the fury the "monthly curse" brings. Ritual #3 handles the silences

between mothers and daughters that usually begin as the daughter goes through puberty.

THE WORDS NEVER SAID.

M: The mother said to the Daughter. . .

(C. AND J. AS MOTHERS SHARE THINGS NEVER SAID, BEGINNING WITH THE PHRASE: "I never said. ." OR "I, too, wanted to scream."

M: (INVITES THE AUDIENCE TO SPEAK AS THE MOTHERS THEY ARE OR TO BECOME THEIR MOTHERS AGAIN AND SAY SOMETHING THEY NEVER SAID OR TO SCREAM.)

WHEN IT IS FINISHED, P. SPEAKS FROM BEHIND THE BANDAGES.[introduced in the preceding scenes]

P: I've been bleeding my whole life for you kids.

R: STIFLES HER FROZEN SCREAM BEHIND HER HANDS.[30]

The fourth cycle becomes increasingly theatrical and nonrealistic, leading to another high ritual (#4 "The Words Never Said") that contains lit candles and is followed by the plate scene that introduces the last cycle of the play. Crying huge red tears, Big Mother reappears in cycle five just before the last high ritual, "The Song of the Mother," in which reconciliation between mothers and daughters is sought.

THE ACTORS CARRY BREAD TO THE AUDIENCE. THEY GIVE SOME TO EACH MEMBER OR THE AUDIENCE SAYING SOFTLY TO EACH:

EITHER: Nurture yourself with this food.

OR: Let the mother within feed the daughter (child) within.

M: (SINGS)
We will walk through the streets of this
city which sleeps, my daughter,
you and I.
You carry the bowl,
I'll bring the grain,
on this parade through the city.

We will walk through the streets of this
city which sleeps,
which sleeps, my daughter,
you and I.
I'll take the ashes,
you bring the jonquils, daughter,
on the parade through the city.

We will walk thrugh the streets of this
city which sleeps,
which sleeps, my daughter,
you and I.
You carry my heart,
I'll carry you, my little daughter,
on this parade through the city.

THE INTRODUCTIONS.

C: I am Cecilia, daughter of Margaret.
P: I am Phyllis, daughter of Mary Jane.
J: I am Jan, daughter of Marilyn.
R: I am Robyn, daughter of Lelah Mae.
M: I am Martha, daughter of Mary.
A: (FROM THE AUDIENCE.) I am Aurora, daughter of Lena. . . ETC.[31]

In this play, mothers experience motherhood, and daughters experience daughterhood. The involvement of the audience in the high rituals is a result of the building towards those rituals through the routines and the ceremonies. In the development of the three kinds of ritual, Boesing effectively integrates the individual experience with the general experience. She finds events and words that are common to many women,

and she uses them as the material with which to construct plots for the purpose of engaging and changing the emotions of the audience.

Boesing builds her plots through the gradual integration of everyday actions with theatricalized actions in the three kinds of ritual. Everyday comments ("Is anybody home?") and everyday tasks spiral into theatrical choruses and chants in events drawn from the ceremonies of everyday life (the graveside). As the audience hears words from childhood, unconscious emotional responses are provoked and then enlarged as the ritual on the stage becomes both more intense and more theatrical. By the time the high ritual is reached, the audience's involvement is almost compulsory.

In addition to illustrating Boesing's rituals, The Story of a Mother illustrates the movement of the plot through what Boesing calls cycles. The play is written in five cycles indicated by the letters, A through E. Each is divided into units. Cycles A, B, and C each have eight scenes, the eighth being high rituals 1,2,3. Cycles D and E have six and nine units, respectively, including high rituals four and five. The play thus has a total of forty scenes, including the five high rituals that involve the audience.

Within the cycles, the plot follows a pattern of routine/ceremony/ritual. Each cycle ends in a ritual,

and the new cycle begins with a change of subject that returns to the routine level and repeats themes, or images, or words from earlier scenes. However, as the play continues, the level of routine is slightly decreased, so that each new cycle begins more theatrically than the one preceding it (that is they are less realistic, less drawn from everyday life, and more ceremonious). The three levels of "ritual" are heightened in each cycle, a device that appears to create a spiralling effect as remnants of previous scenes are repeated with larger effects.

Starting with cycle A, for example, the first high ritual is the calling forth of the mothers. The scenes preceding this ritual began with Big Mother entering. The daughter at the graveside introduces the idea that mothers are being called from the past, out of the death of forgetfulness, and as the cycle continues, the mothers become more visible in dialogues drawn straight from childhood. The chant that introduces ritual one brings the performers to a pitch that enlivens "The Calling Forth" ritual so that, for the audience, real mothers may seem actually to appear (that is, audience members may feel they are really remembering their mothers).

With the intensity of "The Calling forth" as the beat before its beginning, cycle B starts with the game of hide and seek (routine). The dialogues are broken

into four segments with five or six exchanges each that are as every day as, "Ouch! My throat hurts." "Someone's at the door!"[32] The day of the mother continues with "lists of things to do," "calls for dinner," "baby feeding," "it says in the book," "behind closed doors," and "good nite rituals." After high ritual two, "The Healing," cycle C begins on the theme of males and includes "The Daddy Jig," "The Rape Dream," "The Shampoo," "Making up," "'Your Father is a Wonderful Man,'" "Menses Image," and "Menstruation Scene," leading to ritual three, "The Words Never Said."

Cycle D is increasingly is more removed from everyday detail. Beginning with the "Do you like yourself cliches?", the titles move to "Hysteria," "The Chicken Monologue," "Licking Scene," ending with "The Lighting of the Candles" that leads to high ritual four, "Words Never Said." The evidence for the gradual removal from everyday detail is in the use of chicken, an everyday food, to represent a mother's silencing by her husband. ("Dad said, 'You shut up!' Mom didn't say anything. The bone! I swallowed. . . I. . . can't. . . sp. .e. . a. k. . . Mom!"[33])

The last cycle, E, is the most heightened theatrically; starting with the plate scene, the scenes that follow are "Lena,""The Big Mother Weeps," "The Birth Scene," "The Lullabies," "Acknowledging the Woman

Hating," "The Big Mother's Final Speech," and the last ritual of the play, "The Song of the Mother." The increased theatricality of this cycle is visible as routine items are used in theatrical ways, but the scene concludes with the juxtaposing of the Big Mother, an obvious theatrical piece, with the invitation to audience members to introduce themselves and thereby participate in the action. By increasing the theatricality of the cycle through the use of routine items to actual theatre pieces, the audience member is seduced into involvement in action.

The five cycles of The Story of a Mother follow a definite pattern. The increasing theatricality of the rituals causes each cycle to swing away from mundaneness. That is, cycle B is less everyday than cycle A, C than B, D than C, with E being the most theatrical of the five. In addition to the increase ritual formality, the action in each cycle intensifies in the involvement of the audience.

In this sense, the dramatic form developed by Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain ties tightly with their artistic and political purposes. The plays themselves seem designed to provide the audience with a "high," a "rush," a spiritual experience that makes mundane living more significant as those "unimportant daily tasks" are understood, not as routine activities, but as everyday celebrations that can lead to both

ceremonies and high rituals of the activities of female human beings. As Rose said, "Martha's plays take political and emotional responsibility to follow through. . . . She pushes to some inevitable conclusion where if you're going to go with it you've got to change. . . She speaks to the moral dilemmas of our times. . ."[34] To accomplish this end, Boesing has used a dramatic structure that appears to be a spiral that circles through the mundane and moves to the mystical so that women are lifted out of the commonplace into an awareness of their significance.

## Junkie!, The Film

Junkie, as a film, communicates differently from the play in performance because "cinematography itself is a form of inscription, rather than a capture and reproduction of the world."[35] That is, the cinematic apparatus controls the way the play is seen so that how the camera is used in capturing Junkie! is significant--not only as part of the analysis of Boesing's plays, but also to indicate how a movie camera can be used to enhance this feminist work.

Issues that are controversial among feminist film-makers seem to disappear as the medium is applied to Boesing's play. As a feminist play produced by a feminist theatre, Junkie! contains no "voyeuristic-scopophilic"[36] looks, a phrase used by film critics to describe the ways in which classical narrative cinema is constructed for the male viewer's look. Voyeuristic refers to looking at a subject who is unaware and scopophilic to the pleasure of looking. Thus, woman serves as "image object of this look, both within the narrative's development and as spectacle apart from the narrative."[37]

Because Junkie! was filmed from a feminist perspectiveby and for women, there are no instances in which the camera is used to objectify the female figure for the pleasure of the viewer, a major contradiction

to the classical cinematic narrative. Like other feminist films, particularly The Riddles of the Sphinx (written and directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen), the cinematographic apparatus is directed in Junkie! to upset classical narrative techniques. A primary method involves using the camera to emancipate the design of the script and to inscribe the film with that design through the movement and positioning of the camera. Thus, Junkie! makes Boesing's dramatic form visible through the shots and angles of the camera.

The play is about addiction. Six actors dramatized their personal experiences, so that the actors developed their characters from themselves while Boesing shaped their experiences and scripted the play. Thus, each of the addictions was the actor's own. In addition to the addicts, a seventh cast member, Esther, plays a clown serving as a dramatic device to both lighten the dialogue and integrate the stories as a nonaddicted character that the others can interact with in spite of their various ways of disconnecting. As the film opens, the women are meeting on a set where the only props are ladders, a board, a few chairs, and two stools. They first greet each other, and then, individually, turn to the camera and introduce themselves as addicts:

> My name is Anne. I'm an alcoholic.
>
> I'm Kay. I'm a compulsive overeater.

> I'm Randa. I'm a sugar and consumer addict.
>
> I'm Holly. I'm chemically dependent and a recovering anorexic.
>
> I'm Lorraine. I'm a recovering pothead and a nicotine addict.
>
> I'm Rachel. I'm an alcoholic.[38]

The film opens with a sequence called "The Party" in which each actor on her own high weaves around the others. The women seem to circle around each other, and then end with an actual circle when Randa the work addict is in the center addressing the rest:

> (INTERRUPTING, SLAMMING HER BOOKS ON THE FLOOR)
>
> This is disgusting. I can't work with all this clatter and frivolity going on. You are wasting your lives! Have you no pride? You are all lazy, decadent, and worthless.[39]

With this scene, the camera technique used for the rest of the film begins. As monologues overlap and the actor in the shot changes, the camera begins with a long shot of the whole figure, moving closer as the story becomes more intense and more personal. Five stories may be in process simultaneously, and the camera focuses on each from the same distance, moving left to right while shooting one figure. The technique forces an intimate look at each woman and each problem and creates the effect of confrontation. Also, in moving from left to right rather than showing a still

shot, the camera creates a circularity in its movement from one actor to another, even though there are cuts between individual shots.

The structure of the dialogues follows a another kind of circling pattern. Each actor wants to tell her story in Junkie!, and in the same way that a person in therapy may start mundanely and then probe more deeply, so do the dialogues in the play. The camera closes in on the characters as the pith of each addict's problem is dug out; each actor is moved in on as closely as possible without the lens actually touching her face. As the next sequence with the next actor begins, the camera is distant, moving in as the intensity builds. The dual movement of dialogue and camera sutures the viewer into one woman's story as the camera backs away for another shot and another story.

Two scenes can illustrate this process. Four actors are in what the stage directions identify as "The Food Quadrangle." The camera shows full shots of each actor on the first round of speeches, moving closer with each round, and, as the speeches become shorter, the shots are faster.

> Anne: (Running in place) One boiled egg, slice of whole wheat toast, raw, no butter; six ounces orange juice, 230 calories. Run around Lake of the Isles twice. Got on the scale this morning, weighed 121 pounds. Yesterday at the gym I was 119. What went wrong? Maybe I should weigh myself at night instead of in the morning.

Lor: (Gorging herself with food [sitting on the floor in front of a pole]) Lincoln Dell sour cream cherry pie. God, I can't believe it's so good. Sunflower seeds, good for protein. two candy bars, no more.

[Randa]:(Holding onto her stomach) Every time I eat, I panic. The thought of putting food in my mouth makes me afraid. Every morsel of food could turn into a layer of fat. It sits in my stomach like cement.

Holly:(Doing Yogic postures and Body contortions) I only care about what is essential, close to the bone. If you never eat, things become clear. If you never eat at all, the edges stand out. Things have their own perfection.

Lor: (As before) When did they start putting those crunchy things in chocolate chip ice cream? O, God! I've eaten half a pie. What if Angela comes in? I have to finish it.

Anne:(As before). Gotta get down to a size eight by the end of this month. Half a grapefruit, half a cup of yogurt. 900 calories a day. Have to get down to 500 a day to lose ten pounds.

Holly:(As before) If you eat, everything is shattered, spoiled instantly. Clarity goes. Nothing is worth that loss. No amount of pain is worth that loss.

[Randa]: I only ate two wheat things this morning, but they feel like poison in my stomach. Churning and churning. I can't stop thinking about it. It gives me a headache. I want to throw up. (Does)

Anne: Lettuce, 25 calories; celery, 15.

Lor: I want something. Potato chips. Pizza? Anything!

Holly:When I don't eat, everything is clear.

[Randa]: But I have to eat. I'll die if I don't eat. I can't go on living like this. I'm so hungry.

All: I'm so hungry, hungry. Do you have anything to eat?[40]

The blending of dialogue and camera movement in this scene projects a visible spiralling movement. Each character is given equal time; each speech winds narrower, beginning with longer stretches of language to shorter ones, winding closer and more tightly on an inward-moving spiral. In the final sequence, rapid close-ups of each character looking directly into the camera are accompanied by the repeated line, "I'm so hungry." The "look" and the "word" unite to create a new form for the new content.

Probably the most imagistically powerful scene in Junkie! is that of the family portrait, in which the dialogue and the cinematography again combine to create a trip deep into the Anne's subconscious memory. The women arrange themselves for a family portrait with Lorraine, the mother, in the middle. After several different shots before a camera on a tripod, Anne breaks from the portrait and "creates a family sculpture of the emotional reality in her alcoholic family system: the mother being pulled apart by her own mother, and by her husband; the children hiding."[41]

Anne: (As she places Lor, the mother) My parent's house always smelled of clean laundry and freshly baked

> chocolate chip cookies. (As she places Kay, the father) My father sat at the head of the table and dished out all the food. (As she places Holly, the Grandmother) It rained the day we buried my grandmother. (As she places Randa, her sister) My sister, Mary, was the best jump-roper on the block. (As she places Esther, herself) I went into my bedroom and I pulled down the shades. (As she puts herself into the sculpture) When my mother told me she was pregnant with my sister, Elizabeth, I cried.[42]

The actors are in an arrangement in which Lorraine is pulled in the position of a crucifix, with her "husband" pulling one arm and her "mother," the other; the children are at her knees like mourning women. With her head dropped backwards, Lorraine sustains the same expression of anguish throughout, and the camera moves slowly in on her. As they break out of the sculpture, the characters murmur the thoughts no one ever hears:

> Lor: I agree not to notice that I am being destroyed.
> Kay: I agree not to notice that I am tearing you apart.
> Es: I agree not to notice that I am part of this family.
> Holly: I agree not to notice that I will never let you go.
> Randa: I agree to remain invisible.
> Anne: I agree not to notice how needy you are.[43]

In the scene that precedes the major changes in the play, the women begin to understand what they are seeking.

Lor: (ON THE BEAM) I can remember being six or seven years old, sitting out in the summer, watching the Northern Lights. And I remember my Uncle Nick telling me that if I watched the Northern Lights long enough and hard enough, I'd be able to smell them. He said they'd smell like a lime flavored chew candy. And it really worked. When I watched closely, I could smell the line so clearly, it made my mouth water. (PAUSE) I don't know when it was that I lost that faith. (PAUSE) I'm always returning.
Anne: But never returned.
Lor: Yes.
Anne: That's why I drink.
Lor: To forget?
Anne: To remember.
Lor: The taste of lime.
Anne: To fill up the hole.
Lor: Does it help?
Anne: For awhile.
Lor: And then?
Anne: Hold on. For God's sake, hold on.
Lor: When will it end?
Randa: Exhaustion will end it.
Esther: Death of spirit.
Ran: Or failure. Loss of perfection.
Es: Despair.
Ran: To know you will never be good enough. Never.
Lor: It's awful.
Ran: Terrifying.
Anne: Hold on.
Es: Or let go.
Lor: Are you out of your mind? If I let go, I'll fall.
Ran: Get hold of yourself.
Lor: Yes. Get hold of myself. Stay in control.
Holly: The needle gives me control.
Lor: Really?
Hol: For awhile.
Lor: And then what?
Hol: Panic.
Lor: I tired of feeling afraid all the time.
Hol: Live with it. Hold on.
Lor: I don't want to live with it. I'm hungry!
Kay: Isn't everyone?
Lor: What will plug up the hole?
Kay: You have to plug it up yourself.
Lor: With what?

Kay: Anything.
Anne: God, anything.
Kay: Ice cream.
Anne: Booze.
Ran: Work.
Hol: Needles.
Kay: Clothes.
Anne: Sex.
Ran: Coffee.
Hol: Love.
Lor: Dope, cigarettes, boyfriends, pizza. I feel sick.
Kay: Dis-eased.
Lor: What does that mean? I have diabetes? Cancer? The plague?
Kay: Hold on.
Lor: Holding on makes me feel sicker.
Es: Let go then.
Lor: Are you serious? I'm dying.
Kay: Hold on to your life.
Lor: I can't hold on to my life if I'm dying.
Anne: Everyone's dying.
Ran: What are we holding on to then?
Lor: A dream. . .
Es: A memory.
Hol: A fix.
Lor: Of the way things ought to be.
Hol: Perhaps we're not holding on to anything.
Es: We're not holding on to anything real.
Lor: What should I do?
Hol: Nothing.
Es: Let go.
Ran: We're already out of control.
Kay: Powerless.
Anne: There is nothing to do.
Es: Only to see.[44]

During the scene, the women are in various positions around the beam where Lorraine is sitting. In the style of the earlier scene, the camera focuses first on the full figure of the character speaking, and then moves in closer, gradually, until in the end, as the single words are spoken, only the upper part of each face with the eyes emphasized is visible in each shot, as Esther concludes, "Only to see." The actual

transformation from addiction to freedom is captured on film as Lorraine jumps from the beam, flying in slow motion through space, her blond hair suspended above her as she falls into the bridged arms of the rest of the women.

The play ends with a high ritual which Boesing describes in the script as "a gathering that is unstaged, informal, and totally honest."[45] In the film, the women are in a circle, talking about their addictions, the process of letting go, and the conflict of relating to old friends still addicted with whom contact is difficult without the influence of their specific high. Each woman gives another a symbol of their cleansing--incense to Lorraine, the pothead; water to Anne, the alcoholic; grain to Kay, the food addict; a poem to Randa, the student; a candle to Holly, the heroin addict; and white and red paint to Esther, the innocent, symbolic of her wounds. The ritual unites all of the women in their healing and powerfully captures the intensity of the pain that preceded the cure.

The power in the film is a result of many elements: the methods used to develop the characters from the actors' life experiences, the scripting of their stories into carefully built scenes, and the repetitive use of the camera in conjunction with the

words to produce what appears to be Boesing spiralling dramatic structure.

## Conclusion

After an examination of Boesing's plays, the evidence would indicate that in her dramatic structure certain elements recur: three levels of ritual organize the plots, and the movement through the plots occurs as the rituals intensify their level of formality; within the plots, a pattern repeats in which mundane, objective reality is gradually translated into a more abstract, subjective reality as the characters reveal their private thoughts and feelings. As the movement into the psyche of the characters takes place, they do not end up where they started, for they discover truths about their internal world--that is, they have insights into their personal experiences--and they discover truths about their external world as they connect their own experiences to the experiences of others. Consequently, the structure of the dialogues appears to spiral because as the characters penetrate their experiences, images, words, themes repeat; however, with each repetition new information is acquired and therefore the action spirals.

In addition, the plays are structured so that the audience is included in the experience of the characters. The high rituals occurring in the

collaborative works, and the cultural references in the single-authored works strive to pull the audience into the action through emotional engagement. Rose concluded that the emotional engagement Boesing's works engender is a result of her skills in building plots so that the multilayering effect causes the audience to suddenly understand--and as they do, they are emotionally pulled into the action.

Rose cited an example in Ashes, Ashes We All Fall Down when in one scene (viewed in the video of the play), the actors slowly take off their clothes and in dimmed lights with hands above their heads line up before a dark door frame. Rose imitated an audience's reaction as, "Oh, they're going to take off their clothes--they're taking off their clothes--oh, God, look what it is!" At that point, the audience realized the scene represented the Jews at Auschwitz.[46]

Boesing structures her plots so that her audiences understand as they are emotionally involved. The emotional engagement causes the understanding and the need to understand causes the audience to become emotionally engaged. Thus, through wanting to understand, the audience is pulled into the action as though they have been suctioned into a vortex.

Because her purpose is always rhetorical, Boesing has developed a dramatic form that works to move the action into the audience by moving the audience

emotionally and thus into the action--she makes the audience the actor. Through forms that can be conceived as cycles, spirals, and vortexes, Boesing has created a drama which contradicts traditional linear dramatic form and engages an audience intellectually as it engages them emotionally. As a woman and a feminist, Boesing has developed a dramatic form and a dramatic structure which expresses a different rhetorical method and a different kind of imagination.

# CHAPTER VII
# ENDNOTES

[1]Phyllis Jane Rose, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 19, 1987.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]*Ibid.*

[4]*Ibid.*

[5]Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 21, 1987.

[6]*Ibid.*

[7]*Ibid.*

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]*Ibid.*

[10]*Ibid.*

[11]Martha Boesing, Chart of Polarities, presented by Patti Gillespie at the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, Spring, 1984.

[12] Anthony Graham-White, "'Ritual' in Contemporary Theater of Criticism," Educational Theatre Journal 28 (October 1976): 318.

[13] Ibid., p. 319.

[14] Margaret Croyden, Lunatics, Lovers, and Poets: The Contemporary Experimental Theatre (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), p. 203.

[15] Graham-White, p. 321.

[16] Richard Schechner, Paper given at Rassegna Internazionale de Teatri Stabili, Florence, April, 1974.

[17] Martha Boesing, Interview, March, 1987.

[18] Martha Boesing, The Story of a Mother (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1978), p. 1.

[19] Ibid., p. 2.

[20] Ibid., p. 2.

[21] Ibid., p. 6.

[22] Rose, Interview, March, 1987.

[23]Boesing, The Story of a Mother, p. 1.

[24]Ibid., p. 2.

[25]Ibid., p. 4.

[26]Ibid., p. 17-18.

[27]Martha Boesing, Interview, March, 1987.

[28]The Story of a Mother, p. 5.

[29]Ibid., p. 9.

[30]Ibid., p. 14.

[31]Ibid., p. 22.

[32]Ibid., p. 5.

[33]Ibid., p. 16.

[34]Rose, Interview, March, 1987.

[35]Peter Wollen, "The Field of Language," October 16, 19 (1981): 60.

[36]Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16, 3 (1975): 7.

[37]Chris Straayer, "Personal Best: Lesbian/Feminist Audience," Jump Cut 29 (February 1984): p. 40.

[38]Junkie!, Produced by At the Foot of the Mountain, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1983.

[39]Martha Boesing, Junkie! (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1981), p. 3.

[40]Ibid., p. 12.

[41]Ibid., p. 24-27.

[42]Ibid., p. 10.

[43]Ibid., p. 10.

[44]Ibid., p. 24-27.

[45]Ibid., p. 28.

[46]Rose, Interview, 1987.

# CHAPTER VIII
# THE LANGUAGE IN MARTHA BOESING'S PLAYS

Martha Boesing uses language with respect. She dislikes theatre in which "people don't really respect [careful] language because they've listened to too much T.V. and gone to too many movies. . . . mostly there is no language in the movies."[1] She observes that movies in which the language is notable have usually been written by playwrights. And in theatre, the language of the plays often does not meet the poetry of the art form.

> So many people write things that are so dull; the language is so mundane. Like T.V. drama. Everything is the same. You can't tell one character from another except for the content. There's no style of language that creates a distinction. Everyone sounds the same because the language has no poetry in it. Theatre is heightened life. You have to heighten it at every level, and the language is an essential component of that.[2]

For Boesing, the language of theatre must be heightened, and it must differentiate characters. To discover the speech of individual characters, Boesing approaches each as an actor because, as she says, "Actors have tools to help them get inside a character . . . and then the character can find her own voice."[3]

> My best writing is when I'm inside the character. I use acting techniques, often meditation, or concentration, or condition work. If I'm clear about the character, sometimes I start with a person, or I'll use a model. I get into the body of a person.

> Of course, for the collaboratively created works, I'll use the material that's given me by the actors.[4]

Therefore, Boesing self-consciously develops language that expresses her characters as they would express themselves. In the collaborative and collective pieces, this process has created a dilemma: there is a tension between her desire to be faithful to collective contribution and to be faithful to her work as a creative poet. This tension displays itself in the collages (where she wants to use particular words from history), and in the collaborative pieces (where she wants to retain the feelings and thoughts of the actors as they create the characters).

In March of 1987 after the first public reading of Free Reign (a new historic collage piece about the Firehouse Theatre in the 1960s), Boesing was challenged by both her former husband, Paul, and Phyllis Jane Rose for remaining so loyal to the language used by the women represented in the script. "But the language expresses them!"[5] she responded, and after several hours of being battered for not rewriting in her own style, Boesing was still convinced that a personality, especially a living one, expresses herself better than she, the playwright, can.

As I have analyzed Boesing's language, I have discovered that her manipulation of language serves two

primary functions: to create her characters and to forward her plots.

First, in Boesing's plays, as in most good plays, language is the material out of which characters are created, a function designated by Aristotle as "the stringing end to end [of] speeches that are expressive of character."[6] But, in addition, Boesing uses character transformations and her language must differentiate the several roles an actor may play. Each transformation <u>for the same actor</u> is signaled by changes in language.

Second, language signals the levels of ritual--routine, ceremony, or high--which organize her plots. From larger segments of language to smaller, it possible to discover three patterns of language use which signal ritual changes:

<u>Function</u> of the larger segments of discourse
- monologue
- dialogue
- direct address to the audience
- song

<u>Syntax</u> (sentence structure)
- full statments in affirmative or negative
- questions
- fragments
- phrases
- single words used as sentences

<u>Lexicon</u> (actual word choice)
- literal use
- figurative use

At each level of discourse, the changes in function, syntax, and lexicon also change the style: formal or literary, informal or colloquial, or vulgar. Boesing's manipulation of these linguistic elements, enables her to use language to move the audience from one ritual to another.

Thus, in Boesing's plays, language characterizes and signals character transformations, and it indicates composition of ritual and makes transitions between rituals. Through the analysis of representative examples, I will try to discover how Boesing's use of language contributes to the cultural transformation she seeks. Thus, in the final section of this chapter, I will explore how through language, Boesing constructs a feminist reality in the world of her plays.

## Language and Character

Boesing's characters are of two types: historical, both living and not living, and original. The historical characters have been the most problematic for her because she believes she must restrict herself to their actual words. Probably the best example of the complex process involved in her collage work is Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance.

Antigone Too is interesting not only because of the extensive work required to integrate the speeches of seventeen disparate women, but also because those speeches were woven into the Sophocles' version of Antigone. Boesing used several translations as the basis for the orginal Greek rewriting the dialogue to colloquial American English. The characters are thus re-created in that they are the Greek originals, but they are made to speak in language understandable to contemporary American audiences.

The contrast between Boesing's American English translation of earlier English translations of the original Greek illustrates her methods of using language to characterize.

Six English Translations of Sophocles' Antigone

ANTIGONE

Ismene, my sister, mine own dear sister, knowest thou what ill there is of all bequeathed by Oedipus, that Zeus fulfills not for us twain while we live? Nothing painful is there, nothing fraught with ruin, no shame, no dishonour, that I have not seen in thy woes and mine.

And now what new edict is this of which they tell, that our Captain hath just published to all Thebes? Knowest thou aught? Hast thou heard? Or is it hidden from thee that our friends are theatened with the doom of our foes?

ISMENE

. . .Nay, we must remember, first, that we were born women, as who should not strive with men; next wthat we are ruled of the stronger, so that we must obey in these things, and in things yet sorer. I, therefore, asking the Spirits Infernal to pardon, seeing that force is put on me herein, will hearken to our rulers; for 'tis witless to be overbusy.

Sir Richard Jebb, 1900[7]

Antigone. Ismene, dear in very sisterhood,
Do you perceive how Heaven upon us two
Means to fulfill, before we come to die,
Out of all ills that grow from Œdipus
What not, indeed?
No circumstances of scandal or of shame
I have not seen, among . . . griefs.
And now again, what is this word they say
Our Captain-general proclaimed but now
To the whole city? Did you hear and heed?
Or are you blind, while pains of enemies
Are passing on your friends? . . .

Ismene. . .We must remember we are women born.
Unapt to cope with men; and, being ruled
By mightier than ourselves,we have to hear
These things and worse. For my part I will ask
Pardon of those beneath, for what perforce
I needs must do, but yield obedience
To them that walk in power; to exceed
Is madness, and not wisdom.
Sir George Young, 1906 [8]

Antigone:
Ismene, dear sister,
You would think that we had already suffered enough
For the curse on Oedipus:
I cannot imagine any grief
That you and I have not gone through. And now—
Have they told you of the new decree of our King Creon?

Ismene:
. . . . We are only women,
We cannot fight with men, Antigone.
The law is strong, we must give in to the law
In this thing, and in worse. I beg the Dead
To forgive me, but I am helpless: I must yield
To those in authority. And I think it is dangerous
business
To be always meddling.
Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, 1939[9]

Antigone: Come, Ismene, my own dear sister, come!
What more do you think could Zeus require of us
To load the curse that's on the House of Oedipus?
There is no sorrow left, no single shame,
No pain, no tragedy, which does not hound
Us, you and me towards our end. And now,
What's this promulgation which they say
Our General's lately made to all the state?

Do you know? Have you heard? Or are you sheltered
From the news that deals a deathblow to our friends?

Ismene . . . . Remind ourselves that we
are women, and as such not made to fight.
With men. For might unfortunately is right
And makes us bow to things like this and worse. . . I bend
before authority. It does not do to meddle.
Paul Roche, 1958[10]

Antigone: My own flesh and blood—dear sister, dear Ismene.
How many griefs our father Oedipus handed down!
Do you know one, I ask you, one grief
that Zeus will not perfect for us
while we live and breathe? There's nothing,
no pain—our lives are pain—no private shame.
no public disgrace, nothing I haven't seen
in your griefs and mine. And now this:
An emergency decree, they say the Commander
has just now declared for all of Thebes.
What, haven't you heard? Don't you see?
The doom reserved for enemies
marches on the ones we loved the most.

Ismene: . . . Remember we are women,
we're not born to contend with men. . .
so we must submit in this, and things still worse.
I, for one, I'll beg the dead to forgive me—
I'm forced, I have no choice—I must obey
the ones who stand in power. Why rush to extremes?
It's madness, madness.
Robert Fagles, 1982[11]

In contrast to the earlier works, Boesing's translation is in colloquial American English.

Antigone: Ismene, sister--oh, do you know anything about King Creon's edict? Have you heard?. . .

Ismene: . . .It's too dangerous. Oh, Antigone, we are only women. We can't fight against men! Creon is stronger than us. We have to obey him. It's useless to meddle.
Martha Boesing, 1993[12]

The differences between Boesing's work and the five other translations are significant. For example, Boesing's first two speeches in the prologue contain forty words. By contrast, the other translators have an average of 130 words. Fitzgerald's translation contains only ninety words, so Boesing, who is interested in "spare"[13] writing, understandably preferred that rendition. The change from various levels of formality to modern colloquial American English is also demonstrable in the two-word line that opened the play spoken by Antigone, "Ismene, sister--"[14] In each of the earlier translations, the line read as "Ismene, my sister, mine own dear sister. . ."[15], "Ismene, dear in very sisterhood. . ."[16], "Ismene, dear sister. . ."[17], "Come, Ismene, my own dear sister, come!"[18] and "My own flesh and blood--dear sister, dear Ismene. . ."[19] Boesing followed Fitzgerald's model, removing the "dear" so that the three became two lines.

In addition to quantity of words, the connotation of word meanings has been carefully adjusted by Boesing. Ismene's speech began with the admonition to Antigone to remember they were only women and concluded with a statement of their powerlessness in the face of confrontation with men, that it is "witless,"[20] "madness,"[21] "madness, madness,"[22] or "It is dangerous to be always meddling,"[23] and "It doesn't do to

meddle."[24] Boesing selected the idea of meddling rather than stupidity (witless) or insanity (madness), and she also changed "dangerous" to "useless," a less violent connotation.

The full prologue as translated by Boesing reads:

Antigone: Ismene, sister--oh, do you know anything about King Creon's edict? Have you heard?

Ismene: Heard what? I've had no word--good or bad--since our two brothers killed each other in battle and the Argive army fled in the night.

Antigone: I have to tell you something.

Ismene: What is it? You frighten me, Antigone-- there's a shadow over your face.

Antigone: Listen, Ismene--Creon buried Eteocles with ceremony and honor, but he ordered that no one can bury or even mourn for Polyneices! Creon left him out in the fields for the birds to pick on and eat. We have to bury him, Ismene!

Ismene: You just said that Creon forbids it!

Antigone: But he is our brother--think of it!

Ismene: It's too dangerous! Oh, Antigone, we are only women. We can't fight against men! Creon is stronger than us. We have to obey him. It's useless to meddle.

Antigone: You can do what you want, but I'm going to bury him. If I die for it, I'll die content. We have to please the dead longer than we do the living. But you, Ismene, you seem content to dishonor the laws of the gods!

Ismene: I do not dishonor them! But I am powerless to act against the laws of the state.

Antigone: Such excuses! I'm going to bury him.

Ismene: How can you? It's impossible.

Antigone: At least I can try. When I can't do anymore, I'll stop.

Ismene: It's foolish to try impossible things!

Antigone: Oh, stop, Ismene. Let me be. If it's foolish as you say and I have to die, at least I won't die a coward's death.[25]

Thus, Boesing translates into language with which speakers of American English are familiar. "The doom" that "marches on the ones we love the most"[26] becomes, simply, "Have you heard?"[27] Colloquial and idiomatic expressions replace obviously literary ones in "You just said. . . ,""I have something to tell you," "Such excuses,""Oh, stop," "Let me be," "It's foolish," and ". . . a coward's death."[28] One effect of interpreting colloquially is to render the language accessible to the audience. Another is to blend the Greek story more smoothly with the stories of the North American women, mostly twentieth century, who interrupt the Greek myth with the histories of their own forms of civil disobedience. Another is to downgrade the original by making the language more ordinary.

Giving Antigone and Ismene colloquial speech causes them to fit in the twentieth-century context, but does not cause them to lose their particular identities as Greek characters. Also, while the lines of the Greeks are made accessible, they still maintain formality because consistently they follow a full subject/ verb/object structure, not abbreviated or shortened as are the lines of the chorus later.

Following the Prologue in Boesing's work, the women of the chorus are introduced as they are brought the holding cell of the prison. All were arrested for acts of civil disobedience, so with their names the warden announces their crime. The language takes on a staccato beat as the warden speaks in phrases rather than full sentences. For example, "Anna Mae Aquash--North Dakota. Jailed for her work with the American Indian Movement at Wounded Knee."[29] The phrase "jailed for" is used after each name with an insistence that matches the clanging of the prison door after the entrance of each prisoner.

As the women talk in prison, they omit subject pronouns, or they introduce sentences with a past participle ("voted, asked, opened"). One such sequence occurs as Antigone meets the prisoners for the first time.

THE GATES CLANG SHUT FOR THE LAST TIME.

ANTIGONE LOOKS AROUND AT THE OTHER WOMEN.

SILENCE.

Antigone: Who are you? What are you doing in Creon's prison?

Marj: We are those who came after you. We have disobeyed the law, like you.

Mary Dyer: For a higher law.

Antigone: What did you do?

Fannie: Voted.

Alice: Voted.

Mother J: Asked for a decent day's wage.

Margeret: Opened a clinic for women.

Mary D: Talked with God.

Marj: Poured napalm on draft files.

Antig: They wouldn't let me go to my brother.[30]

After the exchange of telegraphic comments, Antigone asks Lucy Parsons, "What did they do to you?" and Lucy begins a long monologue mostly in the words spoken by the historic figure. Her speech is followed by short questions from Antigone. The pattern is then followed with Jessie de la Cruz and Marjorie Melville and other members of the chorus. Thus, the language of Antigone Too is structured differently for the Greeks and for the chorus of women: First, the Greeks speak words translated by Boesing in colloquial American English so that the lines from the myth are blended into the play in a style that matches the language of the American women. Also, Boesing adds lines for Antigone that do not come from Sophocles so as to facilitate that blending. Second, the speeches of the women occur in two forms: their dialogues while in prison are composed mostly of sentence fragments which reinforce the sense of tightness and fatigue imposed by the prison environment; their long monologues, containing the words of the historic women, are rewritten to blend the differing time periods and class

levels. Also, in the monologues the use of direct speech in quotations from original texts provide scenes that may be enacted.

Antigone Too and The Mothers of Ludlow several identical lines for Mother Jones. Both plays were written in 1983, and some of Jones' calls to action recur:

> No! I say pray for the dead, but fight like hell for the living! Awaken your minds! You pity yourselves, but you do not pity your brothers or you would stand together to help one another. Stike, my children! Stike out against the corruption and greed of those who make a profit on the broken hearts and backs of the heroic workers of this country! Strike![31]

In her confrontation with Rockefeller, Mother Jones argues in both plays that "God made the women, but it was Rockefeller's gang of thieves made the ladies."[32] Also, in both plays Jones narrates the story of the army of housekeepers who attacked the scabs with their mops, brooms, pans, and spoons, telling them,"You form an army of women housekeepers. And you march up to the mines and tell those men just exactly what you think of them."[33] In Antigone Too the scene is enacted by part of the chorus of women, and in The Mothers of Ludlow the same scene is enacted by the mothers. In both plays, the original words of the character from history are the basis around which the action of the scene is formed.

Calamity Jane presents a slightly different variation in the use of the language of historic figures. In the preface to the play, Boesing wrote: "Note about the dialect: The language is not meant to be an accurate representation of nineteenth century western dialect. This story is a myth. The language is meant to suggest the mythic dialect we all grew up with: Hollywood Hillbilly."[34] The play is thus structured around the events of Calamity Jane's life, rather than around her actual words. The dialect as it is transcribed is not only "hill-billy" but vulgar, with a free play on words presumably used by a nineteenth-century woman daring to prove herself not a lady. In response to the accusation that she was a "fake," the character of Calamity Jane answered:

> Why you lop-eared, slab-sided, knockkneed, pigeon-toed, splay-footed bitch! I'll show you who's a fake! (SHE SHOOTS AT EACH SIDE OF CHARLOTTE'S FEET, MAKING HER DANCE.) I'm the real Calamity Jane. I'm a howlin' coyote from Bitter Creek. The further up you go, the bitterer it gets and I'm from the head end. Now apologize 'fore I shoot the toes off yer damned feet!. . . (LAUGHS AND HOWLS) Yes-siree, I'm Calamity Jane and the drinks are on the house![35]

The language with which Calamity Jane speaks characterizes her perhaps more than the actions that accompany her outrageous words. The orthography ("Yes-siree,""I'm a howlin'") communicates intonation

as well as meaning so that Jane can be read with the twang that marks "Hill-billy."

Thus, Calamity Jane illustrates well the playwright's use of language to characterize: the facts, incidents, and some of the words are historic; the bulk of the dialogue is invented, with characterizing elements built in to permit the historic character to emerge. By blending the two techniques, Boesing is able to create the historic figure in a heightened style suited well to theatrical form.

River Journal illustrates a work unconstrained by translation or collaboration and historical words. Therefore, no where are Boesing's techniques of using language in characterization clearer. They are magnified because of the nature of the way in which the characters transform.

Ann is a character who transforms her language and thus herself depending her context. When she talks to herself by way of her journal, she speaks in complex structures and images, expanding in metaphors and allusions until her "language borders on the poetic."[36]

> Ann: (Reading from the book): From the journal: I walk to the river to watch the last of the snow melting away. I crouch down in the tall brown grass and stare out at the river. A creature rustles the grass behind me. I am startled. I turn to see him. He is a lizard, a long green lizard. . . . He looks merely asleep, not dead. On the surface of the water a face appears. It

> is the face of an old man with a forked tongue. He laughs at me. It is the face of God.[37]

As Ann closes the book, she looks "into the stony eyes of Snake," and speaking to Snake, Ann's speaks in direct questions that are confrontational, as though arguing with a peer. She demands of Snake, "What do you mean by that? And who are you anyway? I didn't invite you to my wedding."[38]

Finally, as Ann talks to Myles, her husband, her language goes through a metamorphosis. She speaks in monosyllables and fragments, with detachment and indifference.

> Myles: You okay, Honey?
> Ann: Yeh. . . yeh. . . sure. . . I'm okay.
> Myles: You're okay.
> Ann: That's what I just said.[39]
> Myles: It's all gonna be okay.

Thus, Ann transforms her speech when speaking to herself, to Snake/Mom, and to Myles.

Ann also illustrates Boesing's second kind of transformation, from character to character, as she becomes Vera (her seductress sister), and Carla, (her wifely sister), by placing their masks over her face in scene ten so that the character transformations are indicated by both masks and language. Her language changes as first she is talking to Snake. She speaks in the sentence structure typical of that role: complete sentences or questions that demand a response.

Next, even before Ann speaks as Vera, Myles addresses her with the contraction, "'Bout," forewarning of Vera's conversational style. Ann, as Vera, responds with the same "'bout" and projects an image of a happy "little bird." Lastly, when it's time to eat, Ann puts on Carla's mask, and proclaims, "Dinner's on me," a trite expression that carries the connotation of paying the bill and thus, being in control.

The scene thus demonstrates Ann's change of language, as she converts style from Snake to Myles, and character from herself to Vera to Carla. Vera's cooing phrases ("Don't worry 'bout me") become Carla's insults ("cotton in your ears") and commands ("Sit,""Eat").

The scene is pivotal in the play, for Ann had previously denied the roles represented by Carla and Vera, but realizing that Myles needs something that she is not giving him, Ann cries to Snake for help:

> Ann is running in place, hunting for Snake.
>
> Ann: Snake! Snake! Help me! I need your help! Someone, please, anyone, Snake, help me!
>
> (Finally she falls down exhausted.)
>
> Snake: Come on, kid! Buck up! It's not as bad as all that.
>
> Ann: (looking up): It is bad, Snake. It is as bad as all that. Something is really wrong with me. I don't know what to do.

Snake: Well, since you asked, I'll tell you what I thing. . . You could take the masks they gave you for a wedding present and give them a whirl. Prediction: In the end it'll be a bust.

Ann: The masks! Of course! Why didn't I think of them?

Ann hunts down the masks and tries them on one at a time, getting more and more into playing Carla and Vera, parading around in them. . .

Myles: (enters) Ann! Ann! There you are. I've been looking for you.

Ann: (behind Vera's mask, snuggles up to him): Hi, Myles. You look worried.

Myles: I am worried, Honey. 'Bout you. Haven't you noticed?

Ann: Don't worry 'bout me, Myles. I feel happy as a little bird today.

Myles: You do?

Ann: Really, Myles. Thing'll be different now. You'll see. . .

Myles: Where's Carla? What's for dinner?

Ann: (switching to Carla's mask): Dinner's on me.

Myles: Huh?

Ann: I said: Dinner's on me tonight, Myles.

Myles: You made dinner?

Ann: What's-a-matter? Cotton in your ears? Sit down. Eat. I'm gonna be a good wife to you, Myles. I'm gonna do it right.[40]

Thereafter, whenever Ann puts on either Vera or Carla's masks, the costume change is accompanied by language changes marked with the same structural

indicators. Each change in language creates a character: Ann, who is confused, asks constant questions; Vera, who is whimsical and flighty, drops sounds (contractions) and speaks with bird-like images; and Carla, who is care-taking and bossy, speaks with trite phrases, commands, and moderate insults.

The other characters in River Journal are also identifiable according to their ways of speaking. Dad, Ann's father, speaks in "polysyllabic mists, spinning simple remarks into elaborate verbage"[41] ("Falling apart at the seams? Not a totally undeniable statement. There is a certain foundering, an absence of direction, a kind of dancing atop the treadmill which threatens collapse, to be sure. But there are those faithful rocks we can still depend upon. Thank God!").[42] In contrast to Dad, Myles, her husband, is almost non-verbal. As the younger male who receives the responsibility of taking care of the females from the older male, Myles appears to be "castrated" (as Ann is "raped") by marriage, and that castration cuts his use of language. Most of his lines are three to four words in length, frequently containing the word which seems to be his view of reality, "okay."

Vera and Carla are distinguished by their speaking styles (sing-song versus neutral intonation, babyishness versus motherliness) which Ann adopts when she transforms as them; Ann's speech changes as she

changes listeners; and the males speak in either polysyllables or monosyllables. Consequently, language not only differentiates Boesing's characters in River Journal, but also indicates the central character through both quantity and quality of speech: Ann's exploration through her psyche is in language that is more complex and poetic than other speeches in the play. Thus, one of Boesing's dramaturgical devices may be that more complex language indicates the more important original characters.

River Journal contains character transformations that are indicated by both language and masks. By contrast, Junkie! illustrates character transformation indicated by language only.

The characters in Junkie! are the actors playing their own stories of addiction, so that each character is a kind of generic exemplification of that addiction. Thus, two kinds of transformations occur: one is as each actor imitates the language of the addict describing her particular addiction and transforms into that kind of addict. For example, in the Food Quadrangle, the actors each enact a food obsession even though they are not all food addicts: Anne becomes the dieter, Lorraine becomes the binger, Kemi (Randa in the film) and Holly become the anorexics.[43] The second kind of transformation occurs as individual narratives are dramatized, and the actors perform

behind the narrator, who uses the first person in telling her own story. Eventually, the narrator transforms from narrator to performer and joins the scene while the rest of the actors continue the same story as if it were their own. Thus, each actor transforms frequently, and with each transformation her language changes. For example, Esther plays the daughter of both Anne and Kay; she calls Anne "Ma" and Kay "Mom," indicating that it is not the same mother and daughter combination.

Thus, in using language to characterize, Boesing has skillfully integrated original speeches of modern American women with her own translation of Sophocles in Antigone Too, dramatized the actual speeches of Mother Jones in The Mothers of Ludlow, and put into imaginary dialect the facts surrounding the life of Martha Jane Canary in Calamity Jane. In River Journal and Junkie! the actors change their language as they transform from one character to another. Other such language changes occur in the multiple transformations in the collaborative works: Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down, Las Gringas, and The Story of a Mother as well as selected single-authored works.

Boesing's use of language has been one of the major means by which she has created characters. Her language is thus the material out of which her plots are made.[44]

## Language and Ritual

Rituals form the basis of Boesing's plots. The three kinds of ritual, routine, ceremony, and high, are signaled, with spectacle, by the function, syntax, and lexicon of discourse occurring in a scene. So we can discover what kind of ritual a scene contains by locating specific linguistic elements in the language of that scene. Thus, to understand how Boesing moves the plot forward through changes in ritual, it is helpful to locate the linguistic elements of each scene according to the three levels of language, for it is the changes in the structure of the language that help create the three kinds of ritual.

Of the collaborative works, The Story of a Mother provides the best evidence for use of language in the rituals, of the single-authored works, Song to Johanna, as a radio-play exemplifies ritual transitions based exclusively on language use.

## The Story of a Mother

The Story of a Mother provides a framework to examine the use of language in rituals because each of the high rituals is identified by the playwright. The routines and ceremonies leading to those high rituals are not as clearly marked for two reasons: first, the playwright has not identified them as rituals; second,

the routines become "higher" as the play progresses. However, there are linguistic elements that distinguish the routines from the ceremonies even with the gradual acceleration of both.

## The Routines

The function, syntax, and lexicon of each segment of discourse in the routines, contain repeated patterns in the linguistic structure of the routines. Fifteen routines occur in the five cycles. The function of the larger segments is as dialogues or monologues in several permutations. The participants in the dialogue may vary, in that two actors may alternate with two other actors for a total fifty lines in which each pair has two sets of exchanges. When the routines are not dialogues between two people, they are exchanges between one speaking actor and an unresponsive silent actor who is, for example, watching television. Or they may be sets of lines from four actors in which each actor speaks as if she is performing a monologue that is spoken every fourth line with the lines from three other monologues occurring between. The monologues may or may not connect with each other so that the sequence may function like "Password" in that the words are passed along, but the original meanings become distorted. In addition to dialogues with two participants (both speaking, or with one silent) or

several mingled monologues, the routines also occur in straightforward monologues with one participant who speaks directly to the audience.

The syntax of the language of the routines is consistently the word order of a declarative statement or a question. Initially, the exchanges are everyday conversation with references to cliches suggestive of childhood. As the routines progress, the statements are reduced to phrases as, first, subject pronouns drop out and then, objects drop out, until eventually the sentences consist of one word, usually a verb. Questions occur without the interrogative word in a form frequently used by children. ("Promise not to tell?") [45] There are also several routines in which the mother speaks in commands, to her children and to herself. Thus, at the syntactic level, the language of the routines imitates the language used daily by children and mothers.

The lexicon of the routines communicates both by form and content. The level of vocabulary is simple, childlike, centered on everyday needs (food, washing, daddy, mirrors). Probably the most significant aspect of the lexicon is its apparent connection to female concerns with recurrent images of cooking, menstration (blood is referred to frequently), various parts of the body and body functions, feelings (hate, love, want, need, anger), household items (beds, pots, pans,

plates, laundry), and activities of children and mothers (watching storms, calling doctors, feeding dogs, eating food, fixing toast).

Examples of the dialogues give evidence for the function, syntax, and lexicon of the discourse. In Cycle A, a dialogue between mother and child illustrates the linguistic structures and the content of intimate conversation.

Cycle A:
R: I'm home. . . Mom, are you home?
J: 'Course I'm home.
R: You've been drinking.
J: I haven't been drinking.
R: What's that?
J: Gingerale.
R: Let me have some then.
J: Don't touch it. 'Smine.
R: Why do you do it, Mom?
J: Do what?
R: Drink.
J: Leave me alone.
R: What's the matter, Mom?
J: Nothing's the matter. Leave me alone. 46

Thus, the function of the dialogue is an exchange for two in conversational style; the sentence structure is in question word order with short responses; the lexicon reflects daily conversation because it is structurally simple and semantically "everyday" ("What's the matter?"). The technique of introducing serious subject matter in an apparently light exchange is a way in which Boesing presents an issue and begins to engage her audience.

In the same sequence of Cycle A, the last dialogue between P. and C. concludes on a more positive note:

P: I have a secret.
C: What is it?
P: It wouldn't be a secret if I told.
C: Whisper it.
P: Promise not to tell?
C: I promise.
P: I love you.
C: Everybody knows that![47]

The same structures appear: short, simple sentences, questions in full form and with question words dropped, child-like vocabulary in form and content.

In Cycle B, a routine literally expresses the children's view of mothers:

P: Hey! I'm over here!
C: Where are you?
R: What are you doing?
J: What do you want?
R: Don't go away!
J: Say something!
C: What's the matter, Ma?
P: Hey, Ma!
R: Ma!
C: Mommy!
J: Mom![48]

Short sentences, gradually reduced to one word, express the way that children view their mothers because the name, itself, carries significance. Most audience members who are speakers of English have called their mothers one of those names, so the word joins audience and actors in associations and memories,

and by focusing on the name alone, Boesing gives the audience time to experience those memories before moving on to another scene.

"The Shampoo" in Cycle C is an example of the dialogue in which there is no interaction between the speakers. The five characters are really each doing monologues, but the lines are separated by those of the other actors who are also doing monologues. The structure is consistently the word order of a declarative statement, and the lexicon is directly from the experience of the actors as mothers and daughters:

PREPARATION;
R: Upsee-daisy. (She is the mother of a five year old.)
P: Your hair is a mess. It's all matted. (She is the mother of a nine year old.)
C: Pull it back. (She is the mother of a 18 year old.)
R: We'll make you all pretty for Daddy.
M: Leave your hair alone; it looks fine. (She is the mother of a thirteen year old.)

WETTING
R: The water is not too hot.
P: Nobody likes a dirty child.
C: Guys want to respect you.
M: You look pretty enough without doing all that stuff to your hair.
R: When we're all done, we'll put a bow in it for Daddy.
P: You look like a sheep dog with all that hair in your eyes.
C: It is not sexy. It's stringy.
M: What kind of junk are you putting on your hair? It stinks.

SOAPING
R: No, I won't get soap in your eyes.
P: It does not look pretty. It looks scuzzy.
C: A man wants someone he can respect.

R: Such a grand lady. (Set her up to look in mirror.)
C: You're not going to wear your hair like that are you?
M: You primp in front of the mirror entirely too much.
P: Are you brushing every day?

RINSE
R: You have such pretty hair. I'll brush it for you afterwards.
M: You brush your hair too much.
R: You're gonna look very pretty.
M: I don't like it.
C: You're such a good-looking girl. It's a shame to wear your hair like that.
P: Your father doesn't like it when you look so bedraggled.
R: Daddy won't recognize you because you're so clean and sparkling.
M: Boys, boys, boys! That's all you ever think about.
C: You know, I'm just trying to be your friend.[49]

The structure follows the patterns of the routines (word order, conversational style, phrases used between mothers and daughters), and the actual naming of the stages of hair-washing formalizes the process.

Two routines in cycles D and E increasingly distance the characters as in D they recite cliches without answering one another, and in E, the actor in a monologue relates an experience with a chicken:

R: I was sitting at the dining room table. Mom said, "We're going to have another war. That ass hole in the white house doesn't know what he's doing." Dad said, "What do you know about that?" There was chicken. I love the way Mom makes chicken. Mom said, "I know." Dad said, "You don't know anything." Mom said, "Balls." Dad said, "You shut up!" Mom didn't say anything. (Gagging) The bone! I swallowed . . . I . . . ca-n't spe. . .ak. . . ca. n't. . . breathe. . . Mom! . [50]

This speech varies from any preceding routine because of the use of vulgar language and the use of direct speech within the monologue. The connection between the child and the mother through the chicken becomes symbolic when the child gags after the mother is shut up. As the only mundane speech in the play that is a monologue, it is also important because the silencing of both mother and child emphasizes the extent to which language is not sufficient for communication so that a transition to another kind of ritual in which the words are not mundane seems natural.

## The Ceremonies

The ceremonies in The Story of a Mother are distinguished from the routines through: the use of larger segments of language that indicate more formalized language functions, such as chants; the rearrangement of the standard word order of English sentences either through the deletion of words, the repetition of words, the rhyming of words, or other permutations; the use of either more poetic words than the were used in the routines, or nonsense words and syllables; the use of nonverbal language either as gestures, sounds, or miming. The ceremonies can be discerned from the routines because of their obvious upgrading and heightening from everyday language and

events; they are created for a purpose in the context of the play. They rarely connect to familiar scenes from daily life, and thus, their function in the play is to heighten the involvement of the audience created by the routines and to prepare that audience for greater involvement or active participation.

There are sixteen ceremonies in The Story of a Mother. The larger segments are: chants, actor/choral exchanges, songs, and story telling. The larger segments are a more formalized level of language than that occurring in the routines. At the syntactic level, the chants contain lines of usually four to six words that usually increase or decrease in number as the chant continues. Either way, the words are usually repeated from line to line, with words added or removed with each repetition. In less formalized chants, the language may be mundane in sections with one or two lines repeated throughout reinforcing the chanted quality of the entire segment; this type of chant is similar to the choral response that comprises another kind ceremony.

The choral ceremonies usually involve two or three actors speaking with at least one answering in song or one actor speaking with several answering in song. The words of the song are often the last spoken phrase which is repeated several times, again--individually, in groups, or in rounds. The phrases may also be taken

from a previous routine, or from a mundane phrase that occurs in the ceremony. These ceremonies contrast to the songs in isolation precisely because the songs are separate from the dialogue. The actors stop and sing a song as part of the action.

The story-telling occurs in monologues which contain more formalized rhythms and language than the monologues of the routines as well as more formalized content. For example, "The Rape Dream" differs from the "Chicken Monologue" because the content is of a dream, and the language used is descriptive rather than direct speech (as opposed to indirect speech). The distinction, however, between routine and ceremony in the two monologues is strictly because of the level of language (mundane versus poetic), rather than because of the structure of the discourse.

The lexicon of the ceremonies is more figurative than literal, or it is nonsense syllables. Throughout Boesing contrasts mundane images with poetic thereby contrasting sentimental visions of motherhood versus the reality. Possibly the images created through the repetitive occurrence of blood references, combined with the Big Mother costume piece, produce an underlying metaphor of a mother as a sacrifice. The emotional engagement is a result of the words used throughout to describe how children treat their mothers, and how mothers feel about their children and

motherhood. The last low ritual before Big Mother's final speech, "Acknowledging Woman Hating" reinforces a message that issues concerning motherhood are really issues that stem from a cultural misogyny.

An example of the use of nonsense syllables occurs in the second cycle, "Baby Feeding."

J. PICKS UP P AND CARRIES HER TO STOOL, PUTS ON BIB, GETS BOOK.

M: (SINGS IMPROVISATIONALLY DURING THIS)

J: (READS BOOK, PEELS BANANA AND GIVES TIP TO P.)

P: (SHUTS MOUTH, WON'T BE FED)

J: O-pay-yo-mao.

CHO:

| M | C | R |
|---|---|---|
| O-pay-yo-mao | | |
| O-pay-yo-mao | O-pay-yo-mao | |
| O-pay-yo-mao | O-pay-yo-mao | O-pay-yo-mao |

P: (EATS, ENJOYS IT.)

J: (READS BOOK.)

J: Do-doo-da-da

CHO:

| M | C | R |
|---|---|---|
| Do-doo-da-da | | |
| Do-doo-da-da | Do-doo-da-da | |
| Do-doo-da-da | Do-doo-da-da | Do-doo-da-da |
| | Do-doo-da-da | Do-doo-da-da |
| | | Do-doo-da-da |

J: (FEED P. BANANA)
P: (OPENS MOUTH.)
J: At-sa-gu-grrr

CHO: (LOW, DYING DOWN) At-sa-gu-grrrrrrrrr.[51]

The ceremony continues in this style for another page. The sounds are initiated by the baby, then

imitated by the chorus, until another round of feeding, reading, and singing occurs. The ceremony concludes when the baby finally wails and fall to sleep, thus indicating that the feeding is over. This ceremony of the feeding is an example of actors performing with a chorus.

"Acknowledging Woman Hating" is an important ritual in the play, and for that reason, I want to cite it in its entirety. The ritual classifies as ceremony because of the repetitive use of the lines, "Just like a woman" and "Said the mother":

P: (IN ROCKING CHAIR TO J:) What do you want from me?
J: I wish I had your hair, Mom.
P: My hair? Ha!
M: Said the mother.
P: When my hair was black, they used to say I was a tease, that I was trying to seduce them! I was a Jezebel. Just like a woman, they said.
M: Just like a woman.
P: But once I started getting these grey hairs, I was a useless old hag, not worth bothering about. (SHE LEAVES CHAIR, J. GETS IN)
M: Just like a woman, they said.
J: (To C:) What do you want?
C: I want hands just like yours.
J: My hands won't do you much good.
M: Said the mother.
J: Whenever I reached out to touch people, they said I was acting needy, or that I was an easy catch. Just like a woman, they said.
M: Just like a woman.
J: But if I kept my hands to myself, they said that I was cold, probably frigid. (SHE LEAVES CHAIR. C. GETS IN).
M: Just like a woman, they said.
C: (To R:) What do you want me to give you?
R: Your eyes.

C: My eyes? You don't want them.
M: Said the mother.
C: Whenever I close my eyes, shut out the world, you know? They say, "What a dumb broad."
M: Just like a woman.
C: Yeh, just like a woman, they said. But whenever I keep my eyes open and look and see what's really going on--and I do see what is really going on--they said: "Jesus! She's crazy! She's looney! Stay away from her! Don't believe her!" God-a-mighty! If we lived a few centuries back, they'd have tied me up to a stake and burned me! Now they just lock me up in their insane asylums.
M: Just like a woman.
C: Yeh, right. Just like a woman they said!
R: Who said?
C: Fathers said. Teachers said. Priests, bosses, husbands said. Lovers said. Doctors, lawyers said. All of them said it. "You're just like a woman."
M&C: Just like a woman, they said.
R: Why?
C: Why? Why? How should I know why? To keep us apart I suppose.
M: Said the mother.
C: To keep us away from each other. (SHE LAUGHS. R. AND C. EMBRACE.) You and me! That's why they said it! To keep up away from each other! I'll tell you what. I'll give you my arms. They're damn strong. They've carried laundry and groceries and suitcases and dirty diapers and boxes of books and wastebaskets full of cat shit and all my sleeping children upstairs and down. And they're very very soft. They've held all of the people I've loved, sometimes all night long.[52]
MPJ: Just like a woman, she said.

The rhythms, the repetitive use of phrases, the choral answers to questions, the reductive and additive building of chants, the singing, and the words that range from vulgar to metaphorical comprise the language that makes up the ceremonies. The careful building of words, phrases, sentences, and scenes has resulted in

the building of a tempo that slides into the high rituals that follow.

## The High Rituals

The high rituals occur in the plays directly after a low ritual in which the tempo has reached a higher pitch than had been reached previously in the play. Ritual number one, "The Calling Forth of the Mother" occurs after the chant that ends:

> Let me in
> Let me in, Mother,
> Let me in
>
> Let me in
> Let me in, Mother,
> Let me in.[53]

The ritual itself is loosely scripted as the actor speaks in commands to the audience, telling them what to do. The tone is like that of a yoga teacher or a therapist telling student or clients how to complete a particular process, and the magic of the play is that the build-up from the routines to the ceremonies creates enough confidence in the audience for their apparent agreement to participate in such a process.

After the mothers have been called forth, the play proceeds with the accumulative build-up through more routines and ceremonies until high ritual number two the healing. In this ritual, the words are totally

improvised ("P. says something truthful to daughter and washes her") so that the only scripted language is the phrase which M. invites the audience to say as "Mothers or as their Mothers, 'I want you to know. . .'"[54]

Ritual number three follows the pattern of the previous two rituals as the process begins with, "The mother said to the Daughter. . . " Again, the lines are improvised; the actors speak first and the audience is encouraged to imitate.

By ritual number four, the words, "I never said. . . " are enhanced by the action of placing "ribbons on the big mother" with each line. The action is done by the actors and the dialogue continues:

> M: (To the Aud) Is there something you want to say to your mother?
> R: You can say something to her and dress her yourself. . .
> J: Or you can say something to her, and I'll dress her for you.[55]

Ritual number five occurs after the low rituals of "Acknowledging the Woman Hating" and "The Big Mother's Final Speech."[56] As the final ritual in the play, it emphasizes the coming together in communion, and significantly, bread is used. The ritual highlights the process that Boesing considers necessary to cultural healing and cultural transformation: isolation is contradicted through the sharing of feelings of frustration and anger; once the feelings are verbalized, healing can begin as women see they are

not alone in what they feel; the healing is represented through communion which is not verbal, and in which those who had been isolated come together.

Language in the high rituals is secondary to the feelings the previous rituals have built, so that gesture and action encourage words that come from the experience of those in the audience. Content becomes more important than form as the audience becomes the actor.

## Language and the Vortex

Just as the form of Boesing's plays is usefully described through image of a vortex, the language of the plays is usefully analyzed as it contributes to that form. Boesing's language contributes to the emotional engagement of the audience through the introduction and repetition of both words and images in first smaller and then gradually larger units. While the process occurs in all of the plays, none illustrates it as clearly as The Story of a Mother. Also, the single-authored radio play, Song to Johanna, illustrates how language and sounds alone circle and absorb the listener.

The five major divisions of The Story of a Mother are organized around themes. Cycle one, for example, concerns calling the mother back from death, and the

language of each of the scenes reinforces that theme. The cycle opens as "Big Mother Enters" and is followed by "The Dead Mother Sings," "The Mourner's Chorus," "The Daughter at the Graveside." Each of the four scenes is structured differently. Scene one contains an everyday phrase,"Is anyone home?" Scene two is written in verse; scene three contains similar lines repeated by a chorus; and scene four is a long, personal monologue. The rapid changes in the discourse force attentiveness from the audience. Nowhere is there any exposition. What is seen is action as the actors unfold their own experiences with their presumably dead mothers.

After the first four scenes evoke the image of the mother, scene five is the song, "Motherless Child" (for haven't all children felt motherless at some time?), and then "Images of Loving and Fighting." The manipulation then accelerates. The audience has been titillated by memories of their mothers, and the next sequence takes them back to childhood with language that could have come directly from their own experiences as children. Again, the use of the language changes becoming two overlapping dialogues. With familiar language and the unthreatening images, the audience is then pulled into a chant by repeated lines and images ("I am coming your way, I am coming

into you space, I am coming into your skin. . ."[57]), and without warning, Ritual #I occurs.

The movement accelerates because each sequence may elaborate upon an image introduced in the first few lines. The image is then examined from every angle and expressed through a different form of language. Were each of the scenes carried out in the same form (prose, verse, monologue, dialogue), the image would perhaps be overdone, but precisely because the form of the language changes constantly, can the content be absorbed.

The themes of the other cycles which are developed through repetition of specific word images are: daily activities, men and reproduction, self-images, and motherhood. Within each cycle, the form changes, but the images reinforce one another from scene to scene. In addition, in cycle two images repeat that occurred in cycle one; for example, in "The Mourner's Chorus," the first line reads, "She died washing the dishes,"[58] and in cycle B, "Everything's getting cold on your plate"[59]; in cycle C, Aunt Helen got "so mad at [your father] one day that she chased him around the kitchen with a frying pan."[60] In the last cycle, E, the "Plate Scene," the item first talked about has become the stage prop around which the scene is built.

Throughout <u>The Story of a Mother</u> similar repetitions of words or phrases occur that appear in

other contexts later in the play. Recurrent images combined with frequent changes in language create a momentum that contributes to the engagement of the audience.

Song to Johanna contains a combination of elements that create another kind of whirl in which recurrent images and changing language structure engage the listener. Because the play is a radio play, the emphasis on language is particularly clear as Boesing could not rely on spectacle. The play has a cast of three: Johanna, a woman in her late forties, Gerry, her husband, and Matthew, her son. The script is divided into two columns, with Johanna's lines on the left and the men on the right. The stage directions indicate that "All of the words . . . spoken by Johanna. . . take place in her mind, are not heard by the others, and are always accompanied by the recorded songs of the humpback whale."[61]

In the narrative, Johanna has shut herself up in the bathroom, and Matthew discovers that "Mom's sitting in the bathtub. But she's not taking a bath. She's . . . she's just sitting there with all her clothes on."[62] Johanna stays in the bathtub with the water running for ten days while her husband and son are in torment, and then Johanna seeks her freedom, leaving a note saying that she has gone to "Anchorage to study the songs of the Humpback Whales."[63]

The play balances the everyday conversation between the bewildered males with the whale songs and Johanna's words to the whale. Johanna begins speaking as the "Song of the Distant Whale Fades In":[64]

> Yesterday I had this dream
> (I have to tell you this)
> I was living at the ocean
> in a wooden house.
> Not a lick of furniture was there--
> just a captain's walk
> and the huge mast of a whaling ship
> at its heart.
> The women who inhabited the house with me
> had walked across the dunes,
> leaving me behind,
> although I called for them to wait.
> And then I saw him
> walking down the beach
> advancing on the house,
> ancient whaler,
> knotty, weather-beaten,
> skin like leather.
> He said, "She's approaching.
> The White Whale is approaching."
> He said he wanted to harpoon you,
> tie you to our mast,
> something like that.
> It didn't matter;
> I knew he'd soon be gone.
> It was clear he was the simple bearer
> of the news
> that you had come.
> I called out again across the dunes
> summoning the women:
> "The White Whale has returned
> to lead us out!"
> They were gone from sight.
> Only one turned back;
> she had lived but twice before
> and could not understand
> my wild devotion.
> In the end I stood to wait for you
> alone.[65]

Johanna communicates with the whale as female to female, reciting the jobs she has completed as a

mother, "changing diapers on five babies of this terrifying species" and pushing prams "down the aisles of supermarkets." She calmly observes, "I was not born yesterday. I know I am dying."[66]

The communication between the primal creature of the deep and the woman escaping to the water of her tub is counterpoised by the men of the earth who are trying to understand, to show respect and to handle their anger as the care-taker of the house has retreated. Matthew, particularly, is portrayed sympathetically; the son, how could a woman ignore her son to converse with a whale? How long will she stay?

Because it is for radio rather than stage, the play's the plot is built entirely through the structure and the content of the language. The song of the whale fades in as Johanna speaks in words that are connected to unknown waters and dunes, and the song of the whale fades out as the men discuss wife beating and basketball, eating hot dogs and potato chips. Johanna speaks in verse and the men speak in prose. Therefore, the pairing of the two sets of speeches contrasts Johanna's absorption in another dimension--represented by poetic language--with the men's apparent absorption in the mundane--represented by everyday language.

As the speeches are written, the movement from Johanna to the men appears circular as images and specific items repeat. The men frequently refer to

food, and Johanna literally spans the horizon as she looks for the whale. Within Johanna's speeches, another circularity appears as she describes the whale initially at a distance and then brings it in closer. She finally embraces the back of the whale, hugging its rounded mass with her legs:

> I will lay my head against your huge
> humped back
> and straddling my legs across your
> heaving sides
> I will travel down the grey-green-by-
> way of the ocean's sphere. . .
> and I will wind my arms around
> your massive flesh
> and you, goliath, you will breath
> me back
> to the origins of time and sing
> long-voweled songs
> about the meeting of the heavens
> and the earth,
> til Naiad-born again from you fat
> maw, great grampus,
> I will sail unfettered, free at
> last, into the light 67
> from which I first emerged.

Johanna seeks origins that go beyond her lifetime. As the largest, longest surviving mammal, the whale symbolizes the wild not yet destroyed by human kind. Through language that juxtaposes the wild freedom of the deep with the controlled familiarity of hot dogs, Boesing interrogates a social order that permits its members to be the larvae of the natural environment rather than the protectors.

In Song to Johanna the plot moves because the cyclic repetition of poetic and mundane language occurs

in harmony with the call of the whale which increases in volume as Johanna speaks in poetry and decreases in volume as the men speak in prose. The effect is that the sounds and the words create a circling, spiralling narrative in which civilization and its rules (such as women must stay with their husbands and sons) are secondary to the need to protect a prehistoric mammal.

## Conclusion

Boesing's use of language to characterize and to move her plots is for the same purpose as her use of dramatic form--to transform the culture. Like each of the dramatic elements in her plays, Boesing's language is intimately connected to her ideology, and in the world of her plays, she has constructed a feminist reality.

Toni A. H. McNaron illustrates how Boesing's language is used as the oppressor in The Gelding, in which the men vacillate "between the extremes of brutal misogyny and halting pleadings for affection. . .in a world of all-male boasting. . . [so that] language is used to keep isolation in place. No bridge is possible through the words these men inherit. . . "[68] The men in both the The Gelding and Song to Johanna are restricted to language that is in the reality of "knockers,"[69] feeding the dog, making beds, "huntin',"

making the team, and car wrecks.[70] Feelings are untouchable ("Dad, don't cry. God, don't cry."[71]), so that when feelings force themselves into the experience of the male characters, the response is silence.

By contrast, the females in Boesing's plays come out of silence through screams into that "huge circle of female energy reaching back through time."[71] Within the circle, communication abounds as words express feelings and feelings unite all who share the words. Contradicting isolation, words for the women are releasers as for the men they are oppressors.

Inverting the social order, Boesing illuminates ways in which language can restrict, and she provides the means through feelings to eliminate that restriction. Because her reality, her theatrical world, and her ideology are based on changing the ways in which people think about women, and the females in her plays are given the words. Not only can her females speak, but they can also be heard; as they hear each other, they reach out wider to speak to strangers, joining the audience in words they all share: "I am Martha, daughter of Mary."[73]

# CHAPTER VIII
## ENDNOTES

[1]Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 21, 1987.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Martha Boesing, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1987.

[6]Aristotle, Poetics, translated by Gerald Else (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 28.

[7]Sophocles, Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, trans. by Sir Richard Jebb (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1971, reprint of the edition of the Cambridge University Press, 1900), pp. 9, 11, 19, 21, 23.

[8]Sophocles, The Dramas of Sophocles, trans. by Sir George Young (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1906), pp. 1, 3.

[9]Sophocles, The Oedipus Cycle, trans. by Dudley Fitts & Robert Fitzgerald (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1939), pp. 185, 187, 188.

[10]Sophocles, The Oedipus Plays of Sophocles, trans. by Paul Roche (New York & Scarborough, Ontario: A Mentor Book, 1958), pp. 165, 167.

[11] Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 59, 62.

[12] Martha Boesing, Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1983), p. 1.

[13] Martha Boesing, Interview, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March, 1987.

[14] Boesing, Antigone Too, p. 1.

[15] Jebb, p. 9.

[16] Young, p. 1.

[17] Fitts & Fitzgerald, p. 185.

[18] Roche, p. 165.

[19] Fagles, p. 59.

[20] Jebb, p. 11.

[21] Young, p. 3.

[22] Fagles, p.62.

[23] Fitts & Fitzgerald, p. 187.

[24] Roche, p. 167.

[25] Boesing, Antigone Too, pp. 1, 2.

[26] Fagles, p. 59.

[27] Boesing, pp. 1, 2.

[28] Ibid., pp. 1, 2.

[29] Ibid., p. 4.

[30] Ibid., p. 5.

[31] Martha Boesing, The Mothers of Ludlow (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1983), p. 2.

[32] Ibid., p. 12.

[33] Ibid., p. 28.

[34] Martha Boesing, Calamity Jane (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1977), preface.

[35] Ibid., p. 3.

[36] Toni A. H. McNaron, "Review: Journeys Along the Matrix," Minneapolis Tribune 16 Dec 1979, p. 19G.

[37] Martha Boesing, River Journal in Journeys Along the Matrix (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Vanilla Press, 1979), p. 38.

[38] Ibid., p. 38.

[39] Ibid., p. 40.

[40] Ibid., pp. 61, 62.

[41] McNaron, p. 19G.

[42] Boesing, River Journal, p. 41.

[43] Refer to Chapter VII pp. 202, 203, 204 of this dissertation for a full transcription of the dialogue.

[44] Aristotle, Poetics, p. 25.

[45] Martha Boesing, The Story of a Mother (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1978), p. 4.

[46] Ibid., p. 3.

[47] Ibid., p. 3.

[48] Ibid., p. 6.

[49] Ibid., p. 11.

[50] Ibid., p. 16.

[51] Ibid., p. 7.

[52] Ibid., p. 20, 21.

[53] Ibid., p. 4.

[54] Ibid., p. 9.

[55] Ibid., p. 16.

[56] Big Mother's Final Speech is quoted in Chapter VI p. 160 of this dissertation.

[57] Martha Boesing, Story of a Mother, p. 4.

[58] Ibid., p. 2.

[59] Ibid., p. 6.

[60] Ibid., p. 12.

[61] Martha Boesing, Song for Johanna (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1981), p. 1.

[62] Ibid., p. 4.

[63] Ibid., p. 14.

[64] Ibid., p. 1.

[65] Ibid., p. 2.

[66] Ibid., p. 4.

[67] Ibid., pp. 13,14.

[68] McNaron, p. 196.

[69] Martha Boesing, The Gelding (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Vanilla Press, 1979), p. 2.

[70] Martha Boesing, Song for Johanna, p. 10.

[71] Ibid., p. 14.

[72] McNaron, p. 196.

[73] Martha Boesing, The Story of a Mother, p. 22.

# CHAPTER IX

## THE MUSIC OF MARTHA BOESING'S PLAYS

Martha Boesing manipulates music in the same careful way that she manipulates language. Perhaps stemming from her work in writing operas with Paul,[1] Boesing considers music fundamental to heighten the drama. Throughout her plays, she weaves vocal and instrumental music to propel the rituals and to mark the characterizations so that like language, music serves to engage the spectators in their tranformation from audience to actor.

A careful notational analysis of the music in the plays is beyond the scope of this study, and, for this reason, I will simply show how Boesing uses music to contribute to the plot and to the characterizations for the transformation of the audience. To illustrate music and plot, I will do a performance analysis of Antigone Too as directed by Bobbi Ausubel at the University of Maryland in April 1986, where I watched music in action. To illustrate music and characterization, I will analyze the film and script of Junkie! and the script of The Gelding. The comparison of the collaborative full-length piece with the single-authored one-act will demonstrate how Boesing uses music to mark characters. In addition, these plays exemplify Boesing's techniques of heightening the

movement of the plot through original and traditional songs, rhythms, melodies, and musical effects.

## Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance

In the script of Antigone Too, the music and lyrics for eight songs accompany the introductory biographies of the historic characters in the cast. Each song is written into the script, placed by Boesing to further the development of the rituals. In addition, as Bobbi Ausubel directed the play, the songs were choreographed to heighten the ritualistic aspects the text through movement and gesture. Thus, I will examine each song, first, as written by Boesing, and second, as directed by Ausubel.

Many of Boesing's plays open with a song. Antigone Too has a song in the first "Ode," immediately after the Prologue between Antigone and Ismene. "Creon enters with a flashlight. He shines it over the prison and over the audience. He wears boots which are elevated to be at least a foot off the ground. In the distance, we hear the chorus of women singing softly, 'South African Freedom Song.'"[2]

CHO: We do not mind if we go to jail;
It is for freedom that we gladly go.
We do not mind if we go to jail;
It is for freedom that we gladly go. . .[3]

In Ausubel's production, the stage space was a modified thrust stage with the audience in four rows on three sides of the stage. On the fourth side, the thrust portion of the stage connected to a stage area that extended on either side of the thrust so that the shape of the stage was a "T." The back area had a proscenium arch covered by a scrim. As the women entered, they crossed individually behind the scrim, passing through a doorway on stage-left as their names were called.

Before their entrance, the women sang from the backstage area while Creon entered and left with his guards dressed in metal, so that the sweet harmony of the women contrasted with the metallic sounds of the soldiers. The song and its usage set the tone that was sustained throughout the rest of the play: the women in harmony against the men in battle (a reminder--all the characters were played by females).

The freedom song, both in life and in Boesing's play, is a call to sacrifice. The song, which has enormous emotional connotation for the audience, is used, as other songs in the play are used, as a way of making historical women current because, by the use of a contemporary song or an emotionally laden song, the similarity of a historic character, Mary Dyer, for instance, and a contemporary one is made clear. By clarifying these relationships and by joining the

audience emotionally to all of the characters through familiar hymns and folk songs, Boesing uses music as a way of making the audience participate.

Boesing's selection of the South African Freedom Song to open and close the play emphasizes the message repeated throughout: civil disobedience is honorable when it serves a larger purpose. Ausubel's staging of the song sets up the main conflict of the play as peaceful protest is contrasted with military control.

The second song, "Oh, Freedom," reinforces the theme of the first. The scene is written around Rosa Park's story of riding the bus: "Well was riding the bus. (Chorus forms into group of people riding the bus.)"[4] In Ausubel's production in the build-up to the song, the cast transformed from prisoners to bored bus riders. Rosa continued:

Ros: The question of where to sit on a bus wasn't a little thing. It was painful to get on a bus and have to pass by all those empty seats up front in order to go and stand in the rear. Whites would accuse you of causing trouble when all you were doing was acting like a normal human being instead of cringing.

CHO: (Slowly each one transforms from a skeptical passenger to one who supports Rosa's protest, as one by one they join in singing, "Oh, Freedom." Fannie begins the song and leads the others in the singing. Those who are sitting close to the front of the bus, identifying with the white passengers, joining in last.)

Oh, Freedom; Oh, Freedom;
Oh, Freedom over me. . .

And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave;
And go home to my home and be free.

ROS: (Continuing the song) I knew someone had to take the first step. My shoulder ached. I had had a bad day at work. And I was tired. So on December 1st, 1955, in Montgomery Alabama, I made up my mind not to move to the back of the bus.[5]

In the production, as the singing began and got louder, the music seemed to draw the audience in. As they were singing, the actors transformed smoothly from prisoners to bus riders, moving the benches from the sides of the stage to the center thus creating the bus, sitting in positions characteristic of workers returning home after a long day, and then again transforming from shocked whites into protest singers. The blending of the action, Rosa's speech, and the song appeared to create an emotionally powerful effect on the audience. The actor playing Rosa Parks (Sandi McCree) performed with conviction, determination, and volume against the background singing so that from the first word ("Well") to the last ("bus"), she captured the audience's attention.

The gradual buildup of the song as background to Rosa's words provided the emotional effects. Starting with one black bus rider who was joined, one by one, by other blacks and then by whites, the singing of the gospel melody gave momentum to the enactment of the

everyday ritual of bus riding which was historically pivotal in the American Civil Rights movement.

Continuing with the theme of protest, two scenes of women strikers against scabs, Mother Jones' army of women and Jessie de la Cruz's migrant women, were simultaneously staged and enacted contrapuntually. The actions fused as the actors came together at the back of the stage and marched forward in a line, singing "Bread and Roses." The march was staged to remind the audience of the triumphant style of the suffragettes as the two disparate labor strikes were seen, through the singing of the song, to have a common meaning.

The humming of "Bread and Roses" continued as Starhawk and the cast enacted the weaving of a web across Diablo Canyon, crisscrossing pieces of thick orange yarn from one side of the stage to the other, the ends of which were given to audience members, thus literally tying them to the events on stage. Alternately humming and singing as they dashed across the "canyon" closing off a nuclear power plant, the actors seemed to be energized as they sang. Starhawk spoke above the singing, saying, "We fear for the life of this planet, our Earth, and the life the children who are our human future."[6] As Creon entered and cut the strands of yarn, Barbara Demming, above the choral swells, shouted, "We cannot live without our lives!" and Marjorie Melville concluded, ". . . We know there

is a healthy, sensible, loving way to live, and we intend to live that way. . . "[7] As Creon stepped to his platform, the song ended abruptly--silenced.

Victories were not without suffering, and as the weaving of the Greek myth and the histories continued, Mary Dyer entered as the example of the ultimate sacrifice. Played by a tiny actor (Maria Codas), Mary Dyer, carrying her winding sheet and a hanging rope, entered the theatre from the audience and walked across downstage left to stage center. As she entered, the chorus quietly sang, "Oh, Mary, Don't You Weep," a traditional folk melody. Throughout her speech, there was silence. Mary stayed stage center as she spoke with one spotlight shining on her, snapping her rope on the stage punctuating her statements of the "floggings, mutilations, and hangings"[8] of Quakers in Boston in 1658 when "the General Court, in an emotionally stormy session, passed by one vote a law ordering Quakers banished [from Boston] on pain of hanging. Mary Dyer. . . defied the law and was sentenced to hang."[9]

The staging of Mary's hanging, done in total silence, was an extremely effective scene in Ausubel's production. The benches were stacked and stablized on either side by members of the chorus. Mary climbing to the top bench, threw her rope with a noose in it over a cross beam, and blindfolded, reached up and swung herself from the noose. As her body dangled, swinging

back and forth a number of times, the chorus grouped beneath her, and, stretching their arms, they formed a bridge into which Mary's body fell. Laying her in the linen which she had laid on the floor, the chorus wrapped Mary, lifted her to their shoulders, and as if she were a coffin, they carried her in a funeral procession around the stage, and then off through the audience.

As they marched, they began to sing softly, "I'm on my way to freedom land." Moving off the stage through the audience, the actors reached full volume, singing, "I asked my sister to come with me. . ."[10]

Performed as a dirge, the song, in combination with the staging, created a funereal silence in the audience, perhaps because of the contradiction of the lyrics, which were full of hope, and the action, which showed where civil protest could lead. When in the lyrics Mary asked her "sister, to come with" her, the song merged the image of women carrying another woman, honoring her death, recognizing her sacrifice, blending all of their struggles as one in which freeing one is freedom for for all.

Ode IV began with the humming of "We Shall Overcome." Boesing indicated in the script that "The song should be presented quietly and simply, building very slowly to the end. The purpose of this ode is not

to convert. It is simply to inform."[11] The verses of the song were:

CHO: We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome some day.
Oh, deep in my heart
I do believe,
We shall overcome some day.

We'll walk hand in hand, etc.

We shall live in peace, etc.

Each member of the chorus spoke over the singing, stating the effects of the civil disobedience practiced by the individual women. As Ausubel staged the speeches, the actors came forward in threes, one spoke, and the others served as witnesses. Beginning with Mary Dyer's story, Marjorie Melville proclaimed:

Marj: In response to Mary Dyer's death,
Charles II published an edict against
the persecution of the Quakers.[12]
Thousands were freed.

In the production, as the speeches were said, the song was hummed. Between the two speeches, the song rose again, and as new successes were reported and groups of threes came onto the stage, additional voices joined the chorus. By the conclusion of the scene, all of the actors were on the stage, and a full volume of choral singing ended the scene.

The final ritual of the play was performed to one of Starhawk's chants: "The earth, the water, the fire, the air, returns, returns, returns, returns." [13] After the conclusion of the Greek story, and Haimon's body was carried onto the stage, the women created their dance of death around it. As a different kind of dirge, the ritual of the witch was choreographed in circles and swoops as the actors danced around the corpse. Anna Mae Aquash stepped forward, and while using sign language, told her story. The voices swelled, as the chant was repeated over and over, and the dance continued around the body.

Suddenly, there was a hush as Creon entered, saw the body, and, weeping, fell across it.

The combination of the American Indian's story, the rhythmic chanting, the circular movement of the women performing the ritual, and the cries of a grieving father captured the multilayered vision of Boesing's writing and the detailed interpretation of Ausubel's directing. As the performers moved on the stage, they created an image of spirals, circling closer and then opening wider around the prone body of Haimon. In the background was a steady beat of words, drums, and harmonies, punctuated by the agonized pleas of Creon. The two still figures were the male characters while the females were in flux, their singing matching their movements as their voices

chanted single notes and harmonies. In her final chant, Anna Mae sang on a single note, "The mountain-moving day is coming." The chorus answered, "joining her, one-third on her note, one-third a fifth below her note, and one-third a fifth above her note."

> In the past
> All mountains moved in fire.
> Yet you may not believe it.
> Oh, man, this alone believe.
> All sleeping women now will wake and move.[14]

"On the last word, 'move', all three parts move[d] up one half a note. The note [was] held for several beats, and then abruptly stopped."[15] Creon said his final lines and exited. The play concluded as the warden again called the names of the women who exited as they had entered, singing the "South African Freedom" song.

The songs in Antigone Too served two essential purposes: First, they bonded the stories of the women so that historical figures and contemporary ones are seen as fighting the for the same causes. Thus, as seventeenth-century Mary Dyer is hanged, she is united by the song with characters who fought for freedom of speech in later centuries. The audience members are also connected to the performers and the stories they represent as the song addresses Mary's "sisters." Second, the songs joined the language in the build-up to the rituals. The structuring of the plot around

ritual is for the purpose of engaging the audience emotionally. The songs push the audience towards emotional engagment so that those who have resisted will be pulled in by the emotions aroused by music. In this second use, Boesing brushes perilously close to sentimentality, (blatant appeal to emotions), and for those in the audience who refuse to be engaged, the songs may provoke their disengagement. Even in this, however, the use of song is effective, for it elicits a strong emotional response.

In addition, the songs effectively engaged the actors. One of Boesing's purposes is to transform the performers of her works as well as the audience members, and the music in Ausubel's production accomplished this bonding. As the young women sang "Bread and Roses," they projected a sense of their oneness in protest as they marched to the front of the stage.

Thus, the use of music in Antigone Too actively contributed to the building of the plot. In addition to the songs, actors played drums and other percussions throughout as punctuation to intense moments. Because Ausubel understood the importance of music in the script, she directed the songs and the instrumentals to inflate the emotional content of the rituals.

Junkie

The music in Junkie is used in several ways. First, one of the characters is Rachel, the musician, and her part is written in the margins throughout the script of the play. Her role is to indicate which addiction is central to the scene by playing signature tunes for various of the characters. Although her onstage instrument is the fiddle, she also plays drums, the triangle, whistles, wood blocks, the wood flute, rhythm sticks, wooden dowels, and a glass. With these instruments, in addition to providing music to indicate character, Rachel also provides rhythm and music to indicate scene change.

Second, songs reinforce the characterizations. For example, throughout Anne's deliveries, drinking songs occur--"Rye Whiskey," Irish drinking songs, "Good Old Mountain Dew." Thus, whenever the theme of drinking recurs, one of the drinking songs may be sung.

In the film, the music is performed as Boesing noted in the script. Rachel, the musician, opens the film with the other actors, and she is onstage with her fiddle throughout the play. At first, there is no music, an obvious contradiction to the "Hollywood" style of introducing cinema with mood-altering musical themes. Simply, the women walk onto the set, introduce themselves while looking into the camera, and greet

each other; throughout the sequence there is no sound other than their voices. Then to the soprano tones of a triangle, a xylophone, a whistle, and a flute, Esther, the clown, pantomimes her way through the credits. Rachel and Esther appear in the frame together, and as Rachel plays directly to Esther's clowning-around, the scene changes, and the "Party" begins with fiddling in the background as the party-goers "fiddle around" with their drugs.

The interplay of music and drama is established in the party sequence. The drinking song accompanies a rowdy style of dancing; classical music accompanies general party chatter; the melody, "Cocaine Bill" accompanies the sniffing sequence; and a round of "Old Mountain Dew" precedes the first of Esther's interventions in the addiction monologues. When Esther intervenes, she does so by stopping Rachel's playing, and as the actors complain about her as a "drag," there is silence.

The fiddling stops completely during Kay's monologue about "throwing up in the chafing dish," and, as Kay laughs convulsively for approximately thirty seconds, several voices sing "Show Me the Way to Go Home," a cappella. Then there is silence. A single drum beat introduces Holly's walk on the beam, which is then accompanied by slow drum beats, reminiscent of a pulse, as Holly says, "Dare to push the edge. Push the

needle. There's a way out if you dare. (Loud drum at the end of Holly's speech.)" [16] The fiddle breaks in with a round of "Rye Whiskey." All sing and dance:

> If the ocean was whiskey and I was a duck
> I'd dive to the bottom and never come up. .
> Rye whiskey, rye whiskey, rye whiskey I cry. . .
>
> (Esther interrputs by going over to Rachel and banging the drum. She comes toward them, trying to get them to stop. They turn on her as a group, backing her up they sing.)
>
> My eyes are dim I cannot see
> I have not brought my specs with me.
>
> (They all threaten the clown, laugh at her, and return to their party.)[17]

Whenever Esther wishes to intervene in the drug activity, she begins by stopping the music. Consistently, melody in the play is associated with the highs. Conversely, the percussions are associated with the sobering recognition of the addictions.

The melodies and the percussions continue this way throughout the film. That is, the fiddle plays tunes for the actors according to their addictions and provides appropriate background music for segments of the play in which general dialogue takes place without a focus on individual addictions while the percussion instruments accompany actions and words, almost literally as punctuation marks to the statements.

These instruments also provide dramatic impulse to those moments when the actors expose and discover themselves. Finally, traditional songs are sung as background to selected monologues, usually creating dissonance because the content of the monologue and the lyrics of the song are in opposition. For instance, as Kay described her ability to prepare wonderful food and then to devour it, the song describes someone who is lost ("Show me the way to go home"). Thus, the song is a kind of second voice that contradicts the dominant voice of the actor almost as a subconscious speaking to the conscious.

The use of the musician as a participant in the action is a device Boesing has used in other plays (The Gelding, Labia Wings, The Last Fire: An Illumination). Through this technique, music becomes a communicator of truth beneath the babble of the words, and, as such, serves as a form of dramatic irony by allowing the audience and the musician to share information about the characters that they have not yet realized themselves. For example, Kay did not realize while she was describing her lavish cooking that she was using food to fill her emptiness.

The contrast between Junkie! and Antigone Too demonstrates Boesing's consistency and variation in her use of music. She consistently uses music to move the plot of the play; and she varies in her manipulation of

familiar songs, on the one hand to unite disparate people and on the other hand to underscore different forms of isolation. In Antigone Too the audience and actors are bonded through song, while in Junkie!, both audience and actors are isolated through melodies signifying specific addictions. Both plays, however, contain musical commentary that is simultaneously harmonious and dissonant with the story line, depending upon its purpose: to support or to contradict the actor's present state of self knowledge. As the character penetrates more deeply into an issue in her own psyche, the music pushes her in further (through beats, rattles, scrapes, and drums) until the character appears to reach a sense that her problem has created her isolation. As soon as she separates her SELF from both the problem and the isolation, her re-emergence is indicated by music and songs that pull her out of her loneliness into a bond with others.

Thus, the music in both plays serves first as a probe and then as a salve to the hurts that each woman carries from the culture in which she is walking. Similarly, the same music jars and then soothes the members of the audience.

## The Gelding

The music in Boesing's one play about male oppression serves an entirely different purpose from

that in the two previous plays. One of the three male characters is Beethoven, the musician, who like Rachel is on stage throughout the play. However, Beethoven does not serve to stimulate Eban's self-knowledge, but, rather, like Jules, Beethoven is the victim of Eban's refusal to identify his inner fears.

In the opening of the play, Beethoven is "in his cardboard box beside Eban." [18] He is described as a mute, "an adjunct of Eban" who plays an instrument, preferably a horn. "He improvises throughout the play between, or under, or in the midst of the dialogue."[19] Throughout the action, Beethoven functions as a court jester would to a king as he listens to Eban's monologues, reinforces his feelings with actions ("he beats himself with his knife") so that while the father and son are dueling over dominance, Beethoven, in and out of his box, is alternately sympathetic to Eban ("he holds Eban in his lap") and Jules ("he places him tenderly in a wheelchair.")

Beethoven, as a character, is similar to Rachel in <u>Junkie!</u> in several ways: he is onstage the entire time; he never speaks; he plays improvised music in response to the action; and he expresses Eban's feelings before Eban, himself, knows he feels them. As the musician, Beethoven is the inner self of the lead character, implying that music does communicate at a different level from language. While Eban refutes his

feelings as he speaks and acts, the presence of Beethoven on the stage reminds the audience that the refutation is suppression imposed by the learned need to dominate, and not the natural tendency of a male lead. Beethoven serves as a commentary on Boesing's belief that the oppression of men in the culture is based on the forced repression of their feelings.

The music in The Gelding is secondary to the existence of the musician as the adjunct to Eban. Carrying meaning that is not semantic, music communicates emotions directly, so that Eban bypasses language when feelings are expressed, and he needs another self to express those feelings. A mute musician becomes that self so that music is again a form of communication that comes from a place in the character out of the reach of language. The women in Junkie! manage to connect their understanding with their feelings and with their words, but Eban never does. Beethoven and he never achieve union.

## Conclusion

All of Boesing's plays contain music. In the examples cited, most of the songs were familiar, but in other examples the songs are original, mostly written by Paul Boesing (Labia Wings, Journey to Canaan), However, throughout the plays, music serves to propel the rituals, to mark the characters, and to communicate

and stimulate the emotions of both the actors and the audience at a level not achieved by language. Through music, Boesing manipulates the emotions of her audience to foster the transformation she seeks. More obvious than her manipulation of form and language, her use of music directly plays on the feelings of the audience to move them closer to understanding the issue represented by each play.

In life, we are rarely permitted publicly to burst into tears and almost never to burst into song. In theatre, tears and songs are perfectly permissible, and, with Boesing, the range of expressible feelings is endless, and the sounds expressing those feelings covers the distance from silence to full-volume singing to screams to whispers with background beats, clangs, rattles, and chimes. Music in Boesing's drama provides a shortcut through the mental labyrinth of words to accelerate the movement of the participants into full connection with their feelings.

Thus, the music in the plays both expresses and releases feelings. In song, the audience becomes the actor, and the song becomes the message, so that the music brings all the participants in the theatrical event into a moment that vibrates with the resonance of the elusive oneness that Boesing envisions for the planet.

# CHAPTER IX
# ENDNOTES

[1] Paul Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 21, 1987.

[2] Martha Boesing, Antigone Too: Rites of Love and Defiance (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1983), p. 2.

[3] Ibid., p. 2.

[4] Ibid., p. 11.

[5] Ibid., p. 11.

[6] Ibid., p. 15.

[7] Ibid., p. 15.

[8] Ibid., p. 25.

[9] Ibid., p. 25.

[10] Ibid., p. 25.

[11] Ibid., p. 28.

[12] Ibid., p. 28.

[13] Ibid., p. 32.

[14] Ibid., p. 32.

[15] Ibid., p. 32.

[16] Martha Boesing, Junkie! (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain, 1981), p. 4.

[17] Ibid., p. 5.

[18] Martha Boesing, The Gelding (Minneapolis, Minnesota: At the Foot of the Mountain), p. 1.

[19] Ibid., cover.

# CHAPTER X
# MARTHA BOESING--WOMAN, FEMINIST, PLAYWRIGHT
# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## Summary

Martha Boesing was born in the thirties, grew up in the forties and fifties, fought for human rights and peace in the sixties, and, in the seventies, joined the forces of women seeking personal and political equality through her establishment of a politically active feminist theatre. Her journey from an emotionally abusive childhood to a fully expressed life as an artist and a woman was one of struggle, doubt, fear, and even terror, but she persisted. Now in her fifties, she is still circling, still seeking, still searching for the central core that is herself and her art.

Boesing's historical context provided both political and artistic precedents for her work: politically, the temper of the Village in New York in the fifties and the eruption of civil protest in the sixties molded and penetrated Boesing's thinking; artistically, her exposure to the experimental artists in New York during the pre-Kennedy years gave her a view of life on the fringe in which new ideas fused disparate artists and gave status to their originators. She was drawn to both the socialists and the

experimentalists because of her own need to examine the establishment from the perspective of an outsider.

These influences clearly affected her later work. While fighting as a socialist, a pacifist, and a humanist to win equality for black Americans and peace for the world, Boesing was preparing herself for the later recognition of her own internalized oppression as a female in a culture that "hates women."[1] Perhaps she would have been less able to identify women's oppression had she not already seen the oppression of other groups. She began to work with women in the theatre because "women working together can work outside of misogyny and create plays without women-hating in them."[2]

Once established as a playwright in her own theatre, Boesing was able to make the oppression of women visible. She elaborated on theories of training and performance that derived from the experimental theatres of the sixties with a new emphasis on the woman's perspective. Her work was actor-centered, with many group-created scripts; the stage space was used without box sets and proscenium arches; scenes often included interaction between actor and audience; and the audience was made the actor in the content of the play as well as the action of the performance.

She became involved in theories of performance and production that sought alternatives to the

commercial (male dominated) theatre. Such alternatives contradicted commercial theatrical practices in several important ways: first, the casts consisted of roles for women with occasional roles for men; second, as lead characters, females became the subjects who desired rather than the objects who were desired; third, with casts that were almost all female, the content of the pieces became women-centered; fourth, the women-centered content was expressed through language and music orginated by women; fifth, the collaborative play production was based on the feelings of the actors who created the scripts; and, sixth, At the Foot of the Mountain was initially managed and organized as a collective.

Crucial to Boesing's work in the theatre and to her development as a playwright was her realization of her right to make choices. Thus, freedom of choice is a fundamental theme in her plays. While acknowledging that certain aspects of their contexts are predetermined (sex, nationality, race, physicality), characters in Boesing's plays usually discover that their minds are free, and, knowing that, they can make choices to change the restrictive institutions in the culture. Consequently, Boesing examines the cultural institutions that most directly affect women: marriage, motherhood, care-taking, holidays, wifehood, love relationships. She uses these traditional

institutions to demonstrate how they are affected by and affect issues of national and international politics: drug trafficking, civil disobedience, nuclear arms build-up, authoritarian controls, war. The interconnectedness of the (apparently sweet) private domain and the (potentially violent) public domain illuminates the danger that comes from letting choices go unmade.

For Boesing, the only wrong choice is not choosing. To change, to transform means learning that for women and men alike choices are still possible. Her repeated question is: how long will we have that option? How much more can our planet take?

The ways in which Boesing has used the elements of theatre and drama expresses, dramatically, her own circling, outward-reaching, questing intellect. She has manipulated the elements of the drama to seek answers to her own unrelenting questions.

Let us now review each of the elements in turn. First, her nontraditional use of stage space varies from the empty stage to the detailed stage, with sets that range from simple stools to the detailed representation of a home. In spite of the range, all the sets appear to have been created by a mind that slips easily from the conscious to the unconscious, the alert to the drowsy, the insomniac to the deep dreamer. Boesing's view of the stage is that it represents the

minds of those creating the work, and, as those minds imagine, so the stage appears. Consistently, in the ways that she places and maneuvers the actors and set pieces (if there are any), her use of the stage starts centrally and moves outward, reaching steadily toward the audience to pull it to the change, the emotional transformation, that each play seeks to achieve. The physical movement of the actors outward on the stage matches the structural movement of the action of the plot as the characters, through choice, escape oppression and discover freedom.

Second, her characters are "prism-like perspectives on our own lives."[3] Through transformations, Boesing illustrates the many facets within individual personalities, contradicting the "captitalist mistake" that "we can catch things and hold on to them. We are multiple personalities," and tranformations capture that notion.[4] In addition, through her characterizations, Boesing demonstrates that the ambivalence created between women, particularly mothers and daughters, the learned competitions, are at the root of female oppression. She again contradicts that oppression by creating characters, females who love one another, always spiritually and occasionally physically, that reach out to all women in the one embrace that will surely subvert patriarchy. Also, as she created character,

Boesing grappled with the paradox of the individual and the collective as each actor who contributed to the characters in the collaborative pieces was also a collective of multiple personalities herself.

Third, Boesing's dramatic form is structured around three levels of ritual that forward the plots as they increase in formality. Her dramatic form is clearly not linear. It is not the typical Aristotelian cause and effect structure. Moreover, it does not seem to be really circular because characters do not end up where they started out. It can be better visualized as a spiral that builds in force, creating a suction like that of a vortex.

Fourth, her language marks changes in character and indicates the development of the rituals. Thus, her language is fundamental in moving the plots. In the collage pieces the words of historic women are used, and in the collaborative pieces the actors contribute their own words to the dialogues. In her single-authored works, her language achieves its most poetic level and thus is the purest example of the playwright's talent as a writer.

And finally, music accompanies all of the plays to propel the rituals, to signal the characters, and to engage the emotions of the audience. Music in her works provides one means by which the audience becomes the actor and the song becomes the message.

Thus, all of the elements in Martha Boesing's plays (spectacle, character, form, language, and music) are organized around the sixth element, thought, because they express thinking of the playwright and reflect the influences on her through three decades. How those influences have made her particularly feminist, and how her feminism as a filter refracts the light of her orginality in playwriting is a question of primary concern for this study.

## Conclusion

Martha Boesing's works express the intellect, imagination, and experience of a woman who became a playwright and then a feminist. Her understanding of the theory and practices of experimental theatre coincided with her commitment to political beliefs that have in different decades been called radical, socialist, leftist, and human "rightist." Her works remain "windows for her ideas," and, as she develops personally, her ongoing productivity reflects that growth and change.

In the context of feminist criticism in literature and film, Boesing's works relate to several theories.

To begin, theories abound in the feminist literary criticism regarding the use of a woman's language. Elaine Showalter describes these theories as divided between the revision of the "sins and errors of the

past," and the discovery of the "grace of imagination" of the present.[5] She claims that feminist critics have found themselves in a wilderness of ideas from which only the "Jeremiahs of ideology" can lead them.[6] Allegorically, the wilderness of feminist criticism is analogous to Edwin Ardener's "wild zone" of woman's culture where women live "a duality--as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture."[7] Controlled by the language of the dominant order, their subculture becomes muted since they mediate their "beliefs through the allowable forms of the dominant structure," which is to say that "all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they are to speak at all, must speak through it."[8]

Language as it exists in the dominant order is thus insufficient for communicating the nature of the "wild zone." In Ardener's terminology, this zone is "literally a no-man's land. . . standing for those aspects of the female life-style which are outside of and unlike those of the men."[9] For each aspect, there is a male counterpart because the overlapping circles representing these zones have corresponding crescents on either side which are untouched by either of the other orders. However, the male circle or zone is expressive of the dominant culture through the dominant language; it is also the subject of legend and thus accessible to women even if they have never seen it.

By contrast, the female zone is inaccessible to males because it represents that aspect of the female consciousness which is not expressible through the dominant language.[10]

Showalter concludes that the wild zone must be the address of the "genuinely women-centered criticism, theory, and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of the female consciousness, to make the silent speak."[11]

Throughout Boesing's works, the silent have spoken. The journey through her plays is akin to a journey into the "wild zone" as the women-centered content is presented by women in language accessible to them.

Ardener's "wild zone" as a critical model is useful as a means of visualizing the completeness with which Boesing has committed her work to women's issues. It is also useful for contradicting the idea that a wild zone exists at all, for, if the women who collaboratively worked to create the plays Boesing scripted had been in a "wild zone," no one outside of that zone would have understood the plays. In addition, the model is useful to illuminate the need for women to continue the kind of work Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain have begun--to speak loudly so that those on the other side of the forest will

hear--for as long as there is silence, there will be oppression.

Of the critical models summarized by Showalter, Boesing is closest to the cultural model which incorporates ideas "about women's body, language, and psyche, but interprets them in relation to the social context in which they occur."[12] Because of its breadth and its lack of emphasis on predetermined conditions such as biology and language acquisition, the cultural model is the most appealing to feminist critics in general. The theory acknowledges differences between women, such as race, class, and nationality, while finding their commonalities. The theory ties in closely to Boesing's approach to collaborative work--that all women should be represented on issues commonly shared.

At the Women's Conference of the American Theatre Association in August of 1987, Sue-Ellen Case, a radical lesbian feminist critic, objected to "being manipulated" in Boesing's new multi-racial version of <u>The Story of a Mother</u>.[13] She was joined in her objections by women of color. The women were protesting the actions that they were asked to perform in the high rituals because they resented the assumptions the playwright had made about their feelings towards their mothers. Thus, in seeking commonalities, it is dangerous for a playwright to make

assumptions about any audience, for even in an audience of women experienced in theatre, individual differences occluded group commonalities; differences must be acknowledged (sexuality, race, class, religion) before similarities can be recognized. Ironically, Case attacked a playwright who works constantly to represent all kinds of women in the broadest cultural sense.

Feminist film theory focuses on other aspects of the representation of women. A primary issue is the objectification of women in the cinema for the satisfaction of male pleasure. Several feminist film critics think that the feminist literary critics have the advantage because the medium in literary criticism is "signifying material [which] is linguistic, permitting at least the illusion of a certain free play of the signifier divorced from the demands of naturalization."[14] That is, in film, the cinematic narrative appears "real" so that the audience is more easily duped, whereas the word is more likely to be subject to interpretation. Film criticism, in contrast to literary criticism, has a shorter tradition so that feminist film critics have begun to "interrogate the assumptions behind the cinematic language of representation"[15] as they seek woman's "truth"[16] on the screen.

One area of interest in film criticism is the breaking down of the "voyeristic-scopophilic look"[17] by

redesigning the camera looks or positions: "that of the camera as it records. . . the audience as it watches. . . and the characters" as they interact within the film.[18] Each of these techniques serves to make the audience aware of the cinmatic apparatus, so that the film is <u>seen</u> in the act of creation, causing the pleasure to be broken in the destruction of the postion of the "invisible guest," [19] the eye "at the keyhole."[20]

Kaja Silverman asserts that "it is now axiomatic that the female. . .is the object rather than the subject of the gaze in mainstream narrative cinema," [21] so that the emphasis in film theory is moving toward an analysis of discourse with woman as the possessor, indicating a growing trend in filmic theory toward answering the question, "Who is speaking?" rather than "Who am I?" [22]

These theories relate to the works of Martha Boesing in several interesting ways: First, the question of the "look" disappeared in the film of <u>Junkie!</u>, a work created by women, of women, on women's issues. Because virtually no men contributed to the production, if there was pleasure sought, it was exclusively pleasure for women. Second, in the adaptation of <u>Junkie!</u> to film, the redesigning of the camera looks made manifest the spiralling form fundamental to Boesing's plays. Either consciously or

unconsciously, as Boesing directed the use of the camera, a spiralling circularity that moved closer and then moved away from the subject emerged to express the movement of the action. Thus, Junkie! illuminated a different use of the cinematic apparatus. Third, as the camera illuminated that form, it also revealed a new cinematic view of women; at no point were any of the actors objectified of fragmented by the camera shots. When the movement of the camera began, it was at a distance, showing the full body of the actor. As it moved closer, the focus was on the face of the subject, the closest shot showing the only the eyes. In terms of classical cinema, such use of the camera projects an image of women that is connected to a thinking, feeling person, rather than fragmented body parts (classical cinema frequently shows parts of the woman's body, such as parts of legs, parts of breasts), emotional rather than sexual (the movement toward the faces emphasized their expressions), and idea-centered rather than narrative-centered (again, the movement toward the actors occurred as their intensity regarding their ideas increased).

Thus, Boesing's adaptation of Junkie! to film provided an example of feminist film making. Boesing and At the Foot of the Mountain contradicted the major offenses against women committed in traditional cinema as they created a women's film about women.

Feminist literary criticism has attempted to locate the missing women in the canon of the literature; feminist film criticism has looked at women in the images of film and relocated the look of the camera and the viewer. The motive in both criticisms for finding the woman's voice and look has been to obtain representation or power within the culture.

Martha Boesing entered the "wild zone" in 1974 when she identified At the Foot of the Mountain as a woman's theatre dedicated to issues that concern women. She established herself outside of mainstream theatre (in Minneapolis), and, therefore, was literally outside of the power structures of theatre (in New York). Selecting a position from which she could criticize the dominant order, as one of the "culturally disenfranchised or homeless"[23], Boesing was able to view the historical order oppositionally. Edward Said quoted Raymond Williams in saying, "however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities its covers. . . [and] therefore always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated. . . whose advancement is a fundamental human obligation."[24]

Martha Boesing in her work with At the Foot of the Mountain articulated a view of the social order that

represented women. As a woman who felt from childhood that she was a misfit, Boesing appropriately selected a position away from the power structures to develop and practice her theories of theatre and drama. As a result of her ten years of continuous play production, Boesing has demonstrated that women can work collaboratively to produce quality theatre. She has demonstrated that plays written around a political idea can be carefully crafted as theatre pieces so that both in form and content, they can expand the art of theatre. She has demonstrated that through the careful building of the plots of her plays in forms that are spiralling, she can touch audiences emotionally so that the gap between audience and actor is closed, and the audience can become the actor. As individuals are touched in the theatre, they may translate their emotional changes into actions outside of the theatre, and through those changes, affect political issues in the world.

Boesing wishes to change the world. She wishes to prevent the destruction of the planet. She wishes to be active, and to actively effect a cultural transformation. She has articulated a view that begins with an improved relationship to self, and extending to improved relationships to immediate relatives, immediate neighbors, immediate communities, immediate

countries, with the extension continuing outward to encompass wider and wider circles of humankind.

Her plays are microcosms of that process. The stage is the first orbit in her ever-circling orbits outward. As Boesing personally searches, so does she search in her plays, and as she expands, so do her characters. The action of her plots pushes outward, and the intensity of her purpose causes her to relentlessly push into her audiences until she gets them to respond. Boesing has never stopped in her efforts to win peace, freedom, truth, and understanding, and in the 1980s when most of the experimentalists of the 1960s have given up or become comfortable in their successes in the mainstream, Boesing is still pushing into new areas of writing and new political issues. As long as there is violence, repression, and the threat of nuclear war, Boesing will continue to write plays that strive to make her audiences active so that they will fight for the survival of the planet.

Perhaps Boesing is still a misfit. As a woman, as an artist, as a playwright, and as a feminist, Boesing faces her individual terror to know the truth that to her is always unknown. She is devoted to <u>knowing</u> and her truth, as she learns it, fills her plays. In the conclusion of her journal written at Findhorn in 1986, Boesing quoted Rainer Maria Rilke:

I live my life in growing orbits,
which move out over the things of the world.

Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years.

And I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or a great song.[25]

Not knowing what she is, Goesing keeps circling. Her plays are segments in her orbits of knowing, and, insistently, she pushes outward simply because she has not reached the end yet.

# CHAPTER X
## ENDNOTES

[1] Martha Boesing, Interview with Lynne Greeley, March 22, 1987.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Martha Boesing, "Process and Problems," Lecture delivered at Smith College, Helen Krich Chinoy's Retirement Celebration, April 18, 1986, p. 1.

[4] Martha Boesing, Interview, March, 1987.

[5] Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in Elizabeth Abel, ed., Writing and Sexual Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 9.

[6] Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Catharine R. Stimpson, "Theories of Feminist Criticism: A Dialogue," ed. by Josephine Donovan, Feminist Literary Criticism (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press, 1975), p. 64.

[7] Gerda Lerner, "The Challenge of Women's History," The Majority Finds its Past (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 52.

[8] Edwin Arderner, "Belief and the Problem of Women," in Perceiving Women ed. by Shirley Ardener (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 28.

[9] Showalter, p. 15.

[10] Ibid., p. 30.

[11] Ibid., p. 31.

[12] Showalter, p. 27.

[13] Martha Boesing, Interview, 1987.

[14] Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, & Linda Williams, "Feminist Film Criticism: An Introduction," in Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism ed. Doane, et.al. American Film Institute Monograph Series (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, Inc., 1984), p. 6.

[15] Ibid., p. 7.

[16] Ibid., p. 8.

[17] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 16, 3, Screen (1975), p.17.

[18] Ibid., p. 17.

[19] Ibid., p. 18.

[20] Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," in Doane, et.al., p.49.

[21] Kaja Silverman, "Disembodying the Female Voice," in Doane, et.al., p. 131.

[22] Alice Jardine, "Prelude: The Future of Difference," in Contemporary Feminist Thought, ed. by Hester Eisenstein (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1983), p. xxvii.

[23] Edward Said, The World, the Text, and the Critic (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 11.

[24] Ibid., p. 30.

[25] Martha Boesing, "Journey to Findhorn," quoting Rainer Maria Rilke, 1986, p. 69.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Name: Lynne Greeley

Permanent address: 8619 Geren Road, Silver Spring, Md., 20901

Degree and date to be conferred: Ph.D., 1987

Date of birth: September 19, 1945

Place of birth: Washington, D.C.

Secondary Education: Walter Johnson High School, Rockville, Md., 1963

| Collegiate Institutions Attended: | Dates | Degree | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ohio Wesleyan University | 1963-1967 | B.A. | 1967 |
| American University of Beirut | 1967-1968 | | |
| American University | 1971-1973 | M.A. | 1973 |
| University of Maryland | 1983-1987 | Ph.D. | 1987 |

Major: Public Communication--Theatre Division

Professional Publications: Forthcoming, contributions to Women in American Theatre, edited by Alice Robinson.

Professional Positions: Unversity of Maryland, College Park, Md., Instructor of Theatre, 1988, 1986, 1985, 1984, Speech, 1983-1985, English as a Second Language in the English Language Institute, 1985, 1987. Montgomery College, Takoma Park, Md., Adjunct Professor, Technical English, Developmental English, Techiques of Reading and Writing, Reading. 1987, 1986, 1985. Strayer College, Washington, D.C., Chair, Department of English as a Second Language, Instructor of all levels of English, 1979-1983. George Washington University, Washington, D.C., English for Special Purposes, 1975. Montgomery College, Instructor, English as a Second Language, 1973-1981. Fairfax Christian School, Fairfax, Virginia, Teacher of Language Arts, grades 1, 5, 9-12, 1968-1969.