

A Conversation With Sara Lee Lewis: Celebrating Nova Scotia's Mermaid Theatre

• Hilary Thompson •

Résumé: Dans cette entrevue accordée en novembre 1996, Hilary Thompson et Sara Lee Lewis font le bilan des vingt-cinq années d'activité de leur compagnie, le Mermaid Theatre de la Nouvelle-Écosse. Cette troupe a, d'une part, toujours favorisé la créativité chez les jeunes à l'échelle locale et, d'autre part, oeuvré à l'établissement et à la diffusion d'un répertoire de théâtre canadien pour la jeunesse.

Summary: In this retrospective interview which took place in November 1996, Hilary Thompson and Sara Lee Lewis, Managing Director and Co-Founder of Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia, discuss the company's history and mandate, as well as issues such as funding, repertory, and the controversial question of cultural appropriation. Now in its twenty-fifth season, Mermaid Theatre makes its home in Windsor, at the gateway to Nova Scotia's rural Annapolis Valley. The Theatre's focus is two-fold. On the one hand, Mermaid's activist and outspoken Youtheatre program is intensely local, having as its objective the encouragement of creative self-expression among the region's adolescents. At the other end of the spectrum is the Theatre's energetic touring theatre for family audiences, which has won international acclaim for original multimedia productions with a strong emphasis on puppetry.

Mermaid's choice of material is based on the belief that young people can benefit substantially, both in their emotional and aesthetic development, from early exposure to literature, the arts, and the power of imagination. The Theatre commissions new scripts as well as draws upon the rich motherlode of children's stories with universal appeal. These are either contemporary Canadian (Dennis Foon, Ellen Bryan Obed, Sheree Fitch, Margaret Atwood and Joyce Barkhouse, for example), classics from an earlier generation (such as Munro Leaf and E.B. White), or traditional (*Puss in Boots*). Mermaid is best known for its unusual mix of striking visual images, evocative original music, scripts whose language is moderately demanding, and puppets and staging which draw young spectators into a world of fantasy. The company aims to produce work which is good theatre — entertaining, informative and stimulating to all the senses. As important is the goal of encouraging literacy and generating enthusiasm for the art of reading.

Mermaid Theatre's touring productions at home and abroad serve as a continuous showcase for East Coast performing artists, writers, directors, designers and technicians. The Theatre ranks among Atlantic Canada's foremost cultural employers.



*The early days ...
(left to right) Evelyn Garbary, Sara Lee Lewis and Tom Miller, co-founders of Mermaid Theatre, at work in the early '70s. (archival photo)*

Hilary Thompson: *You must be in a reflective mood as you anticipate the Mermaid Theatre's anniversary celebrations for 1997. Can you look back and give us an overview of your role since 1972?*

Sara Lee Lewis: Yes, it is a reflective time. My role within the company has changed over the last 25 years. From Mermaid's inception until 1991, my formal role was administrative. I began as Administrator during the years when Evelyn Garbary [Director of Drama at Acadia from 1967 to 1976] was Artistic Director and then I was General Manager during Graham Whitehead's tenure (1982-1991). I then approached our Board of Directors with the idea of combining the administrative and artistic senior roles — instead of having an Artistic Director and a General Manager, I proposed that we have one person — a Managing Director. In that position, I could weigh and balance artistic and financial matters and make decisions with the help of artistic associates. I think, in the future, once I retire, the theatre will probably go back to a more traditional structure, a structure that is typical of other theatres. But, in the meantime, I'm very happy working the way I do. Ironically, the company is much more artist driven than it's ever been because the active participation of my artistic associates is very full. I work with Jim Morrow who has come a long way since he first joined Mermaid as one of Evelyn's students nearly twenty years ago. He was about twenty then;

now he's forty and has four children and has been involved in all aspects of the company's work as Associate Director/Associate Designer.

Thompson: *Jim's puppets and design work, like that of Tom Miller before him, are an important aspect of Mermaid's theatrical style and tradition. I believe Mermaid's role in the community has developed as well.*

Lewis: Yes. We also work closely with Chris Heide, the Associate Director for youth theatre. Chris runs the non-professional wing of our company and administers our youth outreach program which has been quite influential in showing young people, especially adolescents, the role that theatre arts can play in helping them explore creative self-expression, and also in solving problems in their lives. They write for theatre, and at the same time they talk about what's close to them. Chris has become an important mentor for young writers in the province. We held a major competition last year called "Growing Up in Nova Scotia," and we had two hundred very good submissions. The entries were serious work: stories, poems, songs, short stories. They were touching; they were funny; they were outspoken; they were outrageous and very, very close to the subject matter that interests young people. Then Chris animated some of the stories, with the help of a team of young writers — the Summer New Play Collective — and took the works back to the high schools. In other words, we had young people writing for young people and then performing for young people. We hope to continue those programs. As well, Chris and his group took some of the work to Scotland.

Thompson: *I'd like to talk more about the Summer New Play Collective in relation to subject matter for scripts. With your interest in children's theatre reaching a wide audience, I believe you were associated with the organization ASSITEJ [Association Internationale de Theatre pour la Jeunesse]?*

Lewis: Yes, I was. In the early days when there was an ASSITEJ Canada, I was Chair of the Canadian Centre for four years.

Thompson: *You have brought much experience and know-how to Mermaid Theatre. How did the national position affect the provincial situation?*

Lewis: After that I was involved with UNIMA [Union Internationale de la Marionette/The International Association of Puppeteers]. Sadly, ASSITEJ is no longer active in Canada. I enjoyed it when it was truly a national organization and the French language theatre companies were part of the organization, but with funding cuts some years ago we lost our Executive Director and the ability to do translations. As a result, Quebec kept its own ASSITEJ and the Canadian English-speaking organization is no more. It exists formally, but it is inactive. The same thing has happened with UNIMA, so that sadly we belong to UNIMA USA and remain in touch that way with the international scene. I have become reflective because I realize I'm one of the senior arts administrators in the province now and I look back with some good feelings because I see that times are getting better. Ironically, Nova Scotia is becoming a have-province in the sense that the arts are vital and that funding, at least for the moment, has not been cut. There are glimmers of excitement with the creation of a new Arts Council and a Premier who boldly states, "I will not tax books." And so there are signs of effervescence in the province, I think, especially as the arts scene in the rest of Canada is troubled.



*The Curious Crew prepare for adventure, in Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia's production of **Borrowed Black**, a Labrador Fantasy. (Photo by Nat Tileston)*

Thompson: *Is it not true that part of Mermaid Theatre's original mandate in the '70s was to increase awareness of puppetry in the Maritimes?*

Lewis: That mandate remains, although we haven't run the International Puppet Festival the way we did from 1974-1980 because the generous grant money we got from the Province is no longer available, and because Mermaid's schedule is so full. We do, however, offer workshops and master classes at all levels.

Thompson: *Are there any other puppet companies in the Maritimes?*

Lewis: There's the Maritime Marionettes in Truro, NS, and a new company in New Brunswick. It's very reassuring to know we have people working at Mermaid now who are second generation puppetry artists. Jim Morrow came to Mermaid as a student. Alice Green-Lund first learned of Mermaid when she saw performances of *Just So Stories* in her high school in Grand Falls. Now, as Production Manager, she is refitting the same production, which we are taking on the road for our twenty-fifth anniversary. Her son of three years knows the words to many of our scripts. We frequently have third generation youngsters and third generation Mermaid fans in our audiences now and that's very, very rewarding. We have had several students who came to Mermaid for puppet workshops as youngsters, participated in our Youth Theatre, studied theatre at Dalhousie or Acadia and have then have come back to work at Mermaid as apprentices in the

summer! Ultimately, some of them will become full-time professional performers.

Thompson: *We have talked about Mermaid's work in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada, but I know you've had a national and international profile as well.*

Lewis: We consider ourselves a local company, a regional, a national and an international company. Yet it remains as important to us to play to the children in Gaspereau or Windsor Forks Elementary as it is to play in Washington.

Thompson: *Do you tour across Canada?*

Yes we do, although the frequency depends on funding. Our presenters are not only schools and theatres. There are Fine Arts programs for families at universities as well. For example, York, Brock, and the University of Waterloo have in the past had fine arts series for families in which we participated, although many of these programs have now been reduced. So every time there is a cut either to the arts or education, whether it's in Toronto or Halifax County, it affects us. We're certainly beginning to feel the effects in that our touring schedule is much diminished this year.

We see ourselves as cultural ambassadors for the Annapolis Valley, for Nova Scotia, and for Canada, and as such have been able to provide a remarkable showcase for Atlantic region talent. We celebrate the talents of artists within the region, but also help promote their work outside. We rarely work with performers from "away" — often we repatriate them.

Thompson: *I know when Evelyn Garbary began to direct theatre with children, first at Acadia and then with Mermaid, she was very concerned about the children becoming aware of their own legends from their own region — rooting themselves in the region. For this reason she directed a number of Mi'kmaq tales. Would you comment on how that concern is reflected in your work now?*

Lewis: The reason we moved away from that direction was external rather than internal. We are moving back slowly after a period of producing plays drawn from universal material — stories such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Puss in Boots*. We are limited in our ability, for example, to do Mi'kmaq material because we are not First Nations people and the Canada Council, our major funding agency, has a policy concerning cultural appropriation. Yet during our first decade we introduced thousands of young people on several continents to this rich folklore. I am amused that the Canada Council is quite content that last year we produced Munro Leaf's story of *Wee Gillis* and we used Celtic folklore and Celtic music — also cultural appropriation but acceptable! In all of Nova Scotia an amazingly very small percentage of Nova Scotians actually have Celtic blood. I certainly don't — I'm Jewish. I'm determined in the near future that we'll do some Acadian stories.

I'm prepared to fight for this, if necessary, because I would like Mermaid to perform such material again. We are more interested than ever in renewing Evelyn's vision. We have made some inroads recently by producing a play from Labrador [Ellen Bryan Obed's *Borrowed Black*]. It does have some Inuit throat music in it, the images are very much of the north. It's done in black light, to project a feeling of snow and cold. In summary, the forces were external which moved us away from our earlier direction. Perhaps sensitivities have changed somewhat —

I hope they have — which will allow us to explore again our own rich body of regional literature.

Thompson: *Did you ever get hold of Murdena Marshall's story that she mentioned at the Raddall Symposium?*

Lewis: No, but that would be interesting.

Thompson: *Then you would be working with a Mi'kmaq writer who understands the use of stories to teach Mi'kmaq cultural beliefs.*

Lewis: We would like to do that. We are increasingly interested in celebrating our region and our roots, and in moving away from international material. The question of Canadian content is an interesting one. The criteria for Canada Council support have varied from discipline to discipline. For the purposes of Canadian content in broadcasting, the CBC considers that Symphony Nova Scotia's recording of Beethoven is legitimate. If Mermaid adapts the work of Munro Leaf, an American writer, using a Nova Scotian composer, a Nova Scotian director, Nova Scotian designers and artists with substantial royalties remaining in Nova Scotia, our projects may still be considered by the funding agencies as an American play. We disagree, of course. What makes something Nova Scotian? Is it the participants, is it the adapters, is it the sensibility, is it the approach? *I think it's all of those things.*

Let's turn to an example where we don't use an existing story, but invite leading children's writer Sheree Fitch to create a contemporary legend for us (Rummabubba, Lidmaker of the Snufflewogs). Then we have a made-up story, by a local author which has the elements of a universal fairytale. Will it qualify as Nova Scotian? We think so!

My feeling now is that we should just go forward and do the very best, most imaginative and most visionary work we can. The subject matter will vary — some plays will be drawn from legends, others from traditional or even contemporary material. The scope is considerable.

Thompson: *To come back to that other group you mentioned, the Summer New Play Collective. Will their work be considered by Mermaid?*

Lewis: We feel there is an immediacy born out of young people talking to young people. It is the non-professional wing of our company, but if the work is good enough, touring is an option. During 1995 Chris undertook an interesting international project, in which members of Theatre Workshop Edinburgh came to Nova Scotia and worked with our group in Windsor, NS. Together they created a play about misconceptions of one another's country. Then they all travelled to Edinburgh, where it played at the Fringe Festival and was relatively successful. They had an excellent time, of course, and got to know a lot about each other's country and about the potential power of theatre. Each summer we hire two or three young people as part of the Summer New Play Collective, people who come and shape the writings that have been submitted by Youtheatre members with a view to taking the finished product into the high schools. It's very exciting to watch their talent evolve.

Thompson: *So you feel that in the professional wing of Mermaid Theatre puppets are as important an ingredient as ever in your performances?*



*Captain Cabbage and his crew prepare to rescue the moon in Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia's production of **Borrowed Black**, a Labrador Fantasy. (Photo by Nat Tileston)*

Lewis: Yes, very much. The professional wing of the company is strongly committed to puppetry in some form. We use varied multi-media techniques. For example, in our recent production of *Borrowed Black*, there are strong elements of dance, and mime, original music and both black light and incandescent light. Although many of our shows feature live music, in this case, we have a stunning recorded soundscape. So the production elements go beyond puppetry. Although it's performed in black light, the puppeteers are often visible — we break rules. We are expanding horizons, I think. The use of masks and puppets has enabled us to portray both natural and supernatural worlds.

Thompson: *I always think that Mermaid Theatre blends human form and puppetry in an innovative way.*

Lewis: Certainly our blend of puppets and performers is the thing that makes us different. There are other companies across Canada, and certainly in the United States, who do conventional stage material and contemporary scripts very, very well. Our approach makes us somewhat unique. It's a challenge because our presenters and our audiences wonder what the next production's puppets will be like. They are never the same.

We enjoy collaboration with other companies: for example, *The Nut Cracker*, which had its sixth run in 1996, is a joint project with Halifax Dance and

Symphony Nova Scotia. Halifax Dance, which is a company of young performers, wanted to do *The Nut Cracker*, but they had no male dancers in their troupe. Accordingly, we introduced puppet characters into the ballet to fill those gaps. For example, the Cossack dancer is a puppet. The Spirit of Winter is an amazing twenty-two foot tall character.

One other thing I should mention about our mandate (to raise awareness of puppetry in the province) is that we work to ensure excellent standards of puppetry, both for adults and children.

We boast that Jim Morrow provides cradle-to-career training in puppetry. He teaches youngsters and their parents as well as professional artists. In addition to community workshops, he offers master classes at a number of university drama departments as well as at the National Theatre School in Montreal. It's very good for students who are studying theatre to broaden their horizons and understand the role that puppetry can play. It allows us to assess the potential of the students. As a result, over the last few years, we have hired many of Dalhousie University's theatre graduates as apprentices. Lately we have begun to offer residencies and workshops in conjunction with our touring productions, an interesting new development for us. As conventional funding for the arts dries up in the United States, some of our enterprising presenters have found money through educational sources for programs which combine performances and workshops. So our artists will be teaching as well.

Thompson: *Teaching teachers?*

Lewis: Teachers, students, professional performers — all in conjunction with our stay in an area. In March of 1997 we'll spend a week in Tacoma, Washington. In addition to the company's performances, Jim will give master classes and the company members will offer workshops. Some of them will be demonstration classes which provide an introduction to puppetry; others will be more serious and intensive sessions. The people attending will see the show, perceive what the medium can offer, and then take workshops to develop their own skills. We hope to present this program in British Columbia in 1997, as well, which will probably be a first for Canada. It's all in the interest of promoting puppetry, expanding our horizons, and acknowledging that we have very good teachers, and something special to share.

Thompson: *Apart from these changes, how would you say your audience has changed in the last twenty-five years?*

Lewis: We had a wonderful year of touring during 1995-96. Our budget was about three-quarters of a million dollars and we played in sixteen states, plus Washington, DC, and five provinces as well as all over Nova Scotia. This year, because of funding cutbacks both in Canada and United States, our presenters have less money and as a result we are not touring outside the region nearly as much. But the exciting thing is we are touring more in Nova Scotia, in New Brunswick, in Prince Edward Island, and in Newfoundland. So we're more visible closer to home, which is very rewarding spiritually, if not financially. It's not as lucrative as when we tour in the United States, where the venues are closer together and the fees are higher and in American dollars. Last season we were able to earn 75% of our revenues in the USA. Except for some gas and tolls, we bring

all that money back into the province, enabling us to underwrite our new work.

There are a variety of presenters. Some are school districts; for example, we play in Suffolk County, Long Island, at least twice a year. Sometimes there are theatres which have outreach programs; for example, Detroit's Youtheatre sponsors performances both in its theatre and in the Detroit area. In the Pittsburgh region a consortium of performing arts sponsors plans jointly for tours of two to three weeks. The mix varies. We have found that US presenters, especially those interested in children's theatre, are adept in finding corporate sponsors who appreciate theatre for the young. In Canada we have less and less federal subsidization, but the gap has not been filled with corporate donors, at least not in children's theatre.

Thompson: *Do you think that would change if we had really good children's theatre venues where corporations could see the performances?*

Lewis: I would say the Young People's Theatre in Toronto, which is the major site in Canada for children's theatre, faces the same problems as any adult theatre. They have the challenge of producing good work, which they certainly do, but also the added problem of keeping the physical plant running. All of us are competing with social services, and medical charities, and adult performing arts organizations. The numbers have increased a hundredfold and it's very difficult to say "No, no, no, don't support Cystic Fibrosis, support our theatre company," when obviously both are needed.

The only thing we can say to government, particularly in our region, is that they should not view subsidies to us as an outright grant, but rather as business incentive funding. The province gave us \$77,800 last year; on the strength of that we brought into Nova Scotia almost \$600,000 in either revenues or federal grants. So the return is much higher than most business start-up projects. Further, a large portion is spent on local goods and services. We're a sound investment.

Thompson: *What about the reaction of the children to your plays? Do they find them as fresh and as interesting as ever?*

Lewis: I frequently attend a school performance to gauge reaction. I am always full of trepidation because I look at these kids who in their hearts are full of wonderment, as children have always been, but I also know that they are sadly sophisticated and many of them are even sexually active. And here we are trying to amuse them, entertain them, stimulate them with fairy tale stories. Yet their response is very rewarding. They want to be children, they need to be children. We touch something in them even though their knowledge about the world is ten times that of children ten years ago. They need to be kids more than ever, so I come away reassured.

It's also important that the images we present are fresh and are not drawn from television. There are some wonderful things on television, and one hopes that with the introduction of more and more children's and youth channels that we'll have access to more interesting films and other possibilities. I'm not saying that these should not exist.

But children need to develop a vocabulary to discuss what they are seeing, and to appreciate the immediacy of live presentation. When Evelyn

Garbary first approached me about starting a company such as Mermaid, one of her motivations was the fact that many of her students had never seen professional theatre; others had never seen live theatre at all, except for Sunday School pageants. For some, the first plays they had ever seen were those presented in Evelyn's classes. Now that's changed a lot because many touring companies visit schools, not only with theatre, but with music and dance as well. Also important are the programs for writers and visual artists.

The other thing that's happened, especially in the Fall of 1996, is that we got an immediate response to our offering. Our Nova Scotia school tour is longer than usual despite the stringent economic situation in the schools. Somehow these schools are finding money. We have a wonderful network of supporters — classroom teachers, art teachers, music teachers, parents. As arts and drama and music programs are cut back, they seem to realize how very important it is that the gaps are filled. We're filling those gaps, more than ever.

This Fall, because of restructuring of school boards, and downsizing, there have been many staff changes. There are — or seem to be — more female administrators, more women principals, and I've noticed there's a greater sensitivity to the arts. It may be that they are not yet jaded about ways to find money; maybe it's because they are fresh in their new roles — but they are welcoming the possibility of our visit. That's been a surprising turn of events. And I think this is the same experience enjoyed by the other companies going into the schools. In addition to Nova Scotia's Young Neptune, which spends a brief period each year in the schools, companies come in from outside the region and play in Nova Scotia as well. Because we spend so much time in other provinces, I'm comfortable with the knowledge that our province is open to these groups and when asked we offer our help and expertise. It broadens the experience for all the kids.

Thompson: *What do you see yourself doing in the future?*

Lewis: I'd like to keep working with Mermaid in some capacity, if they'll have me. The work I most enjoy now is long-term planning with writers, composers and designers. I like sitting down with Sheree Fitch and Jim Morrow and saying "let's do a project together!" Sometimes it takes at least two to three years to develop something but the process is energizing. I eventually would like to give up some of my management duties. But I'd like to remain involved for as long as I can.

Thompson: *Do you feel comfortable about the future of Mermaid Theatre and children's theatre in particular in the Maritimes?*

Lewis: Yes I do. I believe in the future of Mermaid because there's continuity. I think the thing that works for us is that after twenty-five years there are still quite a number of us who were involved in the beginning in one way or another. For instance, Tom Miller, our co-founder, remains in close touch, and I'm delighted that he'll be receiving royalties when we do the *Just So Stories* again in the Spring of 1997. In the same way we've been in touch with Graham Whitehead and Steven Naylor who originally did the music. Robert More will be coming back to direct, as he did for the 1992 version which toured Great Britain. What I like most is the creative mix — some new people and some veterans and that goes for all aspects of a company's work.

Thompson: *So really there's a talented group of people from the region who can be put together here, or, as you say, repatriated ...*

Lewis: That's right. Even though they live in Vancouver or Toronto, they remain in touch. And, of course, we hear frequently from the veteran performers, and we hope that during our twenty-fifth birthday celebrations some of them will join us.

Thompson: *When is that?*

Lewis: Well, officially it begins in May. Mermaid received its first grant in March 1972 and our first performances were in Aldershot school in the spring of that year. We plan a masquerade gala in March with Bill Carr as our Master of Ceremonies. He's a good example of a Mermaid "old boy" who has certainly gone on to other things. And upon the company's return from the USA, we'll offer the final performance of *Just So Stories* at the Dunn Theatre in Halifax on May 11th. We'll also have a major retrospective of our masks and puppets at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

We often remember Evelyn, Tom Miller and Graham and their considerable contributions. I am very grateful for the support of my current colleagues. I want them to shape Mermaid Theatre in their own way. Some of our productions — for example, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Stuart Little* — were based on my own kids' favourite books. We performed Munro Leaf because Jim Morrow loved his work and read it to his children and for the same reasons we want to work with Sheree Fitch. I'll be monitoring future choices with great interest. It is like watching your family grow.

*Hilary Thompson has taught children's literature and children's theatre at Acadia University since 1976. She has published on fantasy in children's literature, as well as on image and text (see "Enclosure and Childhood in the illustrations of John and Thomas Bewick," in *Children's Literature* (1996). Her work with Dorothy Heathcote, a leading drama educator, informs her latest paper on education through drama published in *Canadian Tertiary Drama Educators: Perspectives on Practice* (U of Victoria P, 1995). She is editor of *Children's Voices in Atlantic Literature and Culture* (Guelph: Canadian Children's Press, 1995).*