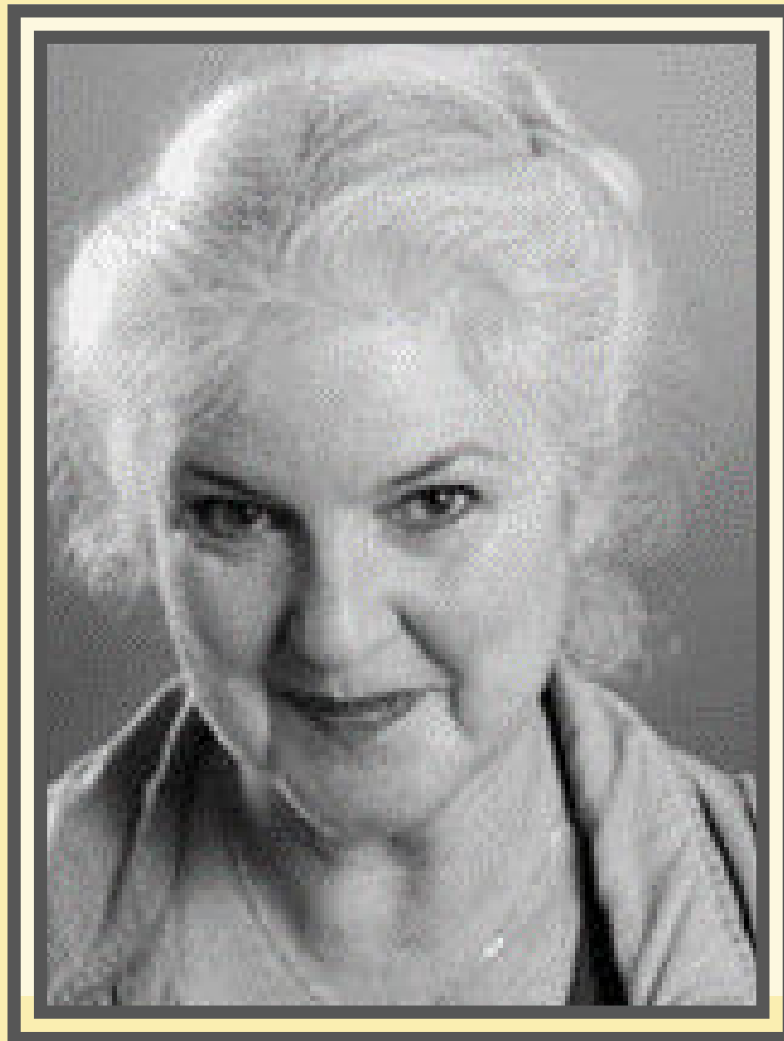


PGC  
WOMEN'S  
CAUCUS  
NEWSLETTER

Reflection Piece:  
“Early Years”

By Anna Fuerstenberg



## "Early Years"

Toronto was not my first choice, but after the Parti Quebecois won the election in 1977, I had few alternatives. An agent from Toronto attended a reading of one of my plays in Montreal and he said he would represent me if I moved to Toronto. He neglected to mention what a 'boy's club' theatre in Toronto was, but I made the leap. I quickly discovered that, unlike Colorado, Chicago, Berkeley, and even Montreal, there was little chance that I would be directing any time soon. The doors of the theatres were shut tight against women.

I decided to start a theatre school, and with the help of Ken Gass at the Factory Theatre, THE THEATRE PLANT was born. I strongly believed that acting was learned on a stage, and although I was rigorous about teaching technique, students of theatre had to tread the boards!!! I hired a composer and business manager, and we mounted *Prince Razzmatazz and the Assis Dragon*. It was a hit, and soon there were more students than I could handle, and I had to hire friends and colleagues to teach as well.

We were in the middle of a recession, and The Theatre Plant was expanding exponentially. I hired a four-piece rock band and wrote *Great Scenes for Lousy Lovers*. It was also very successful and got more press than the adult plays in town. Where else could an audience witness sixteen young girls sing, "How's Your Love Life?" Again, we sold out, and that was when The Playwrights Union of Canada asked me to join.

I went to [PGC] meetings and at the AGMs met many playwrights from across Canada. I remember one particular day when about ten of us were stuffing envelopes in preparation for an annual general meeting. We were in negotiation with PACT and the Canada Council. At the table were many playwrights from Toronto, who actually did think they were forging a new Canadian theatre. I asked in a kind of dreamy voice: "If a bomb fell on this building and irradiated us, would the rest of the country actually notice?" No one else thought it was funny, but I did.

One day in the early 1980s, the Ontario Labour Congress asked me to organize a series of readings with women playwrights for March 8th [which is International Women's Day]. Margaret Hollingsworth, Erika Ritter, Carol Bolt, and I had a meeting at Carol's home. Carol asked why we couldn't read plays BY men ABOUT women? I had to bite my tongue, and eventually we performed our pieces, all written by women, at city hall.

Soon after this came Rina Fraticelli's report on "THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE CANADIAN THEATRE." It blew the lid off and soon most of us realized we were the victims of systemic discrimination. Rina asked me to bring together a few professional women, theatre practitioners, to talk about the study. The Tarragon Theatre let us have the Maggie Basset Studio, but in ten minutes we knew we needed a whole lot more space and we moved to the main stage. This was the beginning of Women in Theatre, or WIT. Our mandate was to raise enough money to send Rina's study to every artistic director and granting agency in the country.

During that time, I asked the Playwrights Union to let us organize a Women's Caucus. I was fighting both men and women who kept asking, "Why?" They simply did not wish to acknowledge the statistics. I moved on and organized a Women's Caucus at ACTRA, which in those days included screenwriters. It seemed like I was fighting the same battle over and over again.

When we started the Women's Caucus [at PGC], it was allotted a tiny space and usually a very early hour meeting time at the annual AGMs. It took a lot of decades, but finally, it has the size and momentum to really affect the lives of women playwrights; just in time for me to start the war on ageism!!!



**Anna Fuerstenberg** was born in a refugee camp outside Stuttgart, Germany. She came to Montreal as a child and won a scholarship to The Montreal Repertory Theatre School. It changed her life. Her plays and film scripts have been produced in Canada and abroad, and she has directed theatre in several languages and on several continents. Her plays have been published by Playwrights Canada Press. She has also written short stories and poetry, which have appeared in *Parchment* and *Montreal Serai*. She has reviewed books for the *Montreal Gazette* and theatre for *The Senior Times*.

Ms. Fuerstenberg returned to the stage, performing at the Dark Horse Theatre in Nashville and the Tarragon Extra Space in Toronto, and in *Reading Hebron* in Montreal. Fuerstenberg directed three original one act plays at Concordia, one of which, *Midnight at the Metro*, a musical, she also wrote. She is the dramaturge of *Crossroads*, which opened at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal, and directed her version of *The Tale of Two Cities* in Denver, Colorado. Anna Fuerstenberg was the Director of the Theatre Plant and the Artistic Director of Teatro Sin Fronteras in Toronto. She is one of the founding members of the Playwrights Guild of Canada and the English Language Arts Network (ELAN) of Quebec. She has directed Michel Tremblay in Spanish in Ecuador, and her own play *Guerrilla Caregiver* in French. She has just completed her first novel.

