Theatre and Auto Biography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice. Sherrill Grace & Jerry Wasserman, eds. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006. 152-66.

Auto/Biography and Re/Vision: Betty Lambert's *Under the Skin*

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> Playwriting is a sort of quest in itself.... You move through your own subject.
>
> —Timberlake Wertenbaker

I assume the presence of autobiographical input in every created product. Maybe it is merely a trace, "the fingerprint of the source," as playwright Sharon Pollock once said.[1] Or maybe the created product has significant links to the autobiographical that are close-to-home at every point. Between these two lies a huge range of possibilities, for the playwright-artist will use as material whatever comes to mind, whatever is at hand that serves her purpose. There is recyclable material everywhere that can stimulate and inspire: people, incidents, scenes, anecdotes, conversations. Such stimulants to the imagination are not necessarily rooted in her life; maybe they touch it only tangentially. Moreover, the creative process engages not only what can be known but also what can only be imagined. The imagination is not limited by time, place, or direct experience. Nor is it necessarily confined by rational processes. In fact, some artists deliberately court the irrational, the free flight of fancy, in pursuit of that elusive goal, the artistic imaginary.

Nonetheless, whether the art created is "pure" fiction or one of those wonderful hybrids like biography or autobiography (which even more overtly exists at a shifting boundary between the real and the imagined), the artist is in her art. Although the art will have an independent life, she is the author: beginning with an impulse, an idea, a creative spark, she labours creatively, selecting, shaping, editing, and developing until it is ready, this offspring, to be sent out into the world. What emerges is the result of her vision, her judgment and perspicacity, her emphasis, her sense of structure, and her skills as the dramatist able to bring to life what was hitherto only imagined. In this process the writer reveals her own "literary" personality, a personality connected to her biography but not bound by it, not identical to it. As Henry James reminds us, "[T]he deepest quality of a work of art will always be the mind of the producer" (quoted in Drew 224). That mind and that artistic sensibility will weave together particles from numerous sources, both real and

imagined. As playwright Sharman Macdonald said, when interviewed about her play *A Winter Guest*: "It sounds as if everything I write is autobiographical and indeed it is, but it also leaps with the imagination. I've never met those two old women [in the play] ... and they were such a gift" (quoted in Stephenson 68). Michael Frayn has said a similar thing about the creation of *Copenhagen*: "The great challenge facing the storyteller and the historian alike is to get inside people's heads, to stand where they stood and see the world as they saw it.... Even when all the external evidence has been mastered, the only way into the protagonists' heads is through the imagination" (4).

The subject of my chapter, Betty Lambert, creates a fictional relationship with her characters in *Under the Skin*. How else could she imagine their thoughts and invent dialogue? To do that requires emotional empathy, even identification with the subject. However, while Lambert begins with an actual historical event, she is not creating conventional autobiography, biography, or docudrama. Instead, with a firm base in the records of the real event, she borrows and bends material to suit her ends. She includes some biographical details connected to the original participants (which I will explore below) but, more importantly, she weaves into the narrative and into the women characters aspects of herself, echoes which have profound connections to her own autobiography. Her characters contain the particular kind of tension Nadine Gordimer says marks the skilled writer: "The tension between standing apart and being fully involved" (4). Ultimately, *Under the Skin* dramatizes a dilemma of urgent importance to Lambert herself. Lambert wrote this play knowing her time might be limited; she had been diagnosed with a fatal illness.

Autobiographics is a discipline interested in the links between the writer and her work, between the creator and the created. It is interested in those correspondences which can illuminate the text. In her book *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Leigh Gilmore states that autobiographics asks questions like "Where is the autobiographical? What constitutes its representation?" These are questions which can also be applied to texts not ordinarily seen as autobiographies. To be more precise, Gilmore uses the term "autobiographics" to "describe those elements ... that ... mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge" (42). The privileging of the work as creative fiction remains. Gilmore calls autobiographics a "feminist interpretive strategy" (5), in part because gender is a central part of the analysis. Biographical information is studied, the material circumstances surrounding and perhaps affecting a project are tracked to discover how these influences enter the work, or how they are altered or even omitted entirely. Where are factual connections and where is invention, rearrangement, or realignment? This is done not to unearth mundane details of everyday life, but rather to come upon something more essential: what is she after? What personal issues or prevailing concerns might inhabit this particular creative work? In his biography of Harold Pinter, Michael Billington points

out that Pinter experienced a betrayal similar to the one depicted in his well-known play by that name (257–58). What difference does that make to the play? To his craft and to the impact of his work?

In my attempt to address such questions regarding Lambert, my methodology has been influenced not only by Gilmore but also by Porter Abbott. In *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph*, Abbott talks about a "continual revelation of authorial consciousness at the moment of writing" (3). He says that autobiographical writing is not merely "a mode of recovery or reconstruction or even fictionalizing of the past but a mode of action taken in the moment of writing" (x). One need not look only to the past, to biographical facts or to history. Each work can be seen as part of a "continuous autobiographical project" (22), as an autobiographical investment now, in the moment of writing. To describe this field, which goes beyond traditional autobiography and the story of one's life, he coins the term "autography." When the study of thematics is exhausted, what will remain is "the signature," the "voice" which carries over from one work to another. In Abbott's phrase, one is "reading for the signature" (175). Authors are not only what can be known from their lives but what can be "inferred from their texts" (120), even though we have long been cautioned against this.[2] And with a deeply reflective subject, like Beckett, and I would say like Lambert, the writer's self will inevitably be woven into the work. This, then, is also part of "the autographical character of art" (179). Lambert's *Under the Skin* offers a particularly striking example of this process at work. Her signature is on all of her work, but is especially powerful in this play, the last she wrote.

Betty Lambert was a playwright and English professor at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, a suburb of Vancouver. She published ten plays (two for children) and had many more produced. She moved into writing adult stage plays in the mid-seventies. Her first, *Sqrieux-de-Dieu* (1975), written for the New Play Centre, was a commercial hit by Vancouver standards in those days. She was already well known for her many plays for CBC radio and television. Of the radio scripts, only five have been published, three of them in an edition by Malcolm Page. She also wrote short stories and one novel, *Crossings*, which was published in 1979 by Pulp Press and later by the American publisher Viking under a new title, *Bring Down the Sun*. Lambert was a prolific writer who created approximately seventy plays for stage, radio, and television (Messenger 163). Even as a young girl she was writing poems and short stories and winning contests. She continued writing until her very last minutes in November 1983. She died when she was fifty years old.

Lambert remains largely unknown, in good measure because so little of her work made it into print. One of the plays she is known for is the chilling drama *Under the Skin*. This play was first produced after her death by Vancouver's New Play Centre at the

Waterfront Theatre in November 1985. Pam Hawthorn, the director, says that the play was initiated by discussions they had had over the telephone, because Lambert was already not well. By the time the first draft arrived, Lambert had been diagnosed with lung cancer.[3] The intended summer workshop never happened; Lambert was too sick. The rapid rewrites, which Lambert was well known for, could not happen either. In fact, after Lambert's death and before production, Hawthorn had consulted with Lambert's daughter and her sister, Dorothy Beavington. Hawthorn expressed concern about the dark tone throughout the play and its unresolved ending.[4] However, the final result, as Hawthorn writes, is that they "played the script as written, with only a few minor cuts taken during rehearsal" (9).

A realistic play set in a recognizable middle-class kitchen, *Under the Skin* takes place in the present. The plot centres on the kidnapping of a young girl, Emma, and the harrowing effects of this on her mother and her mother's friend and neighbour, Renee. The victim remains offstage but her abductor, Renee's husband John, is also an important character. Charismatic with a strong male presence, he has a powerful hold on both of these initially unsuspecting women.

Under the Skin is based on an actual kidnapping which occurred in Port Moody, B.C. The Vancouver papers covered it extensively. It lasted from the 10th of March to its miraculous conclusion on 5 September, 1976, when thirteen-year-old Abby Drover was rescued, after 181 days of hell. Lambert followed the news reports and knew all the details: that the abductor, Donald Hay, was a neighbour who lived only about half a block away; that he had befriended Abby and her two sisters who were new to the area; that the Drover children were good friends with Hay's three stepchildren; and that Hay had even gone with search parties to look for Abby. Behind his house on Barnet Highway, Hay had built a large workshop where he made camper units for pickup trucks. Seven feet below the garage floor, he had built a small concrete room which he later claimed was intended as a bomb shelter. He had equipped it with a bed, sink, stove top, radio, and some provisions. It was there that he kept the little girl. The room was well sound-proofed and camouflaged. Its entrance lay inside an inconspicuous cupboard covered by a piece of plywood with paint tins glued to it. The police came by because Hay was an early suspect, but they found nothing.

Lambert would also have read about how Abby was discovered: Hay's common-law wife, Hilda, called the police saying she believed he had gone out to the garage to commit suicide. When the police came, they found the garage door locked; they broke down the door and still found nothing. They left. But Hilda and her daughter Wendy held back because the door to the cupboard was open and things had been moved aside. When Hilda looked down the shaft she saw Hay's feet, she said, and Wendy called for the police to return. As they re-entered the garage, they saw Hay climbing up the shaft and then they heard a small voice—it was Abby.

Other details came out in the newspapers during the trial (Hay was sentenced in 1977). Hilda knew that Hay had been convicted of attempted rape eighteen years earlier, that he had spent time in prison, and that there had been a more recent assault charge, which was dismissed. But she knew nothing of other elements of his criminal record, and still more allegations arose after all the publicity surrounding the trial.[5] Hilda had attributed his past behaviour to his alcohol abuse. At one point he had spent time in a detoxification centre. In 1974 she had threatened to leave him after an extended drinking binge; that time he had held her and her three children at gunpoint until the police came. He was still on probation as a result of that incident. Hilda and her children also knew about the room under the garage. The little boy thought it had been filled in; Hilda believed Hay used it for better access to the underside of the trucks.

It was also reported that Hay would be away from the site for days at a time, on a binge, that he had been hospitalized for a week after a suicide attempt, and that the family took a holiday in August. This means that for extended periods of time Abby was left without food. Maybe he wanted her to die there. But Abby Drover proved to be a resourceful little girl. The psychologist at the trial believed her religious convictions helped her (she was a Seventh-Day Adventist), and perhaps the combination of her compliance and resistance kept him from taking her life. The details of the investigation, her terrifying ordeal, and the court proceedings were published in 1999 in a book titled *Resurrection* by John Griffiths, a staff reporter for the *Vancouver Province* who was assigned to the story after her rescue.

Barnet Highway is not far from where Lambert was living with her twelve-year-old daughter, Ruth Anne. They would drive there, through the trees, when they went to the beach. What Ruth Drover experienced is every parent's nightmare. Like Drover, Lambert was a single parent. Ruth Anne was her only child. Many of the single-parent concerns the character Maggie expresses were hers: for example, Maggie says Emma misses her dad, and in the play it is Maggie who insisted on the separation (188). Lambert also worried about Ruth Anne's not having a father figure in her life.[6] Moreover, Maggie feels guilty about Emma's being such a trusting child. The day after Abby was found, Lambert wrote in her journal some details of the case and a number of associations: "I am putting this all down because somewhere in this is some clue to myself" (8 September 1976). She was to be haunted by this event for a long time. While writing the play, her empathic connection with the character Maggie's circumstances surely would have been dramatically heightened by her own fears about her inoperable cancer and the unknown dangers facing both herself and her daughter, by that time a teenager. In the play Maggie says, "Sometimes I think her god wants me to curse him and die. But I won't" (190).[7]

What Lambert includes of this horrible story, what she amends and what she imagines provide a wonderful illustration of the creative process at work. Lambert kept the basics of the event, including the 181-day countdown. She begins the play in the spring in order

to conclude in the fall, on Halloween. The kidnapped child is offstage throughout, as are all the other children—but we are constantly aware of their absence. Emma and her mother live right next door, instead of half a block away. And the entire play, with the exception of one critical scene in the workshop, takes place in the kitchen of the abductor's wife. In Lambert's play, Renee, the abductor's wife, and Maggie, the mother of the kidnapped girl, are good friends. This is an item of pure invention. Their complex relationship is the focus of the play.

The marked changes from the facts of the case lie in the transformation of the central players. Lambert reveals some of the conflicts she intends to exploit in the character descriptions. Ruth Drover was a bookkeeper, a religious woman, who raised her three daughters alone. In contrast, the fictional Maggie has clear connections to Lambert herself. Maggie, who casually corrects her friend's grammatical errors and makes offhand literary references, is an assistant professor of English at a nearby university. A single mother of one daughter, like Lambert, Maggie is trying to manage on her own, without men.[8] Her name, Maggie Benton, is taken from the name of the student union building, the Maggie Benston Centre, at Simon Fraser University where Lambert was teaching.[9] Lambert's involvement in a serious plagiarism case in the early eighties is alluded to in an argument in scene 4 between Renee and Maggie.[10] However, unlike Drover, Maggie is comfortable financially and, as Lambert writes, "*[c]omes from secure class.*" The character Renee Gifford, described as "*too consciously feminine*" and "*[w]racked with self-doubt*" (114), has already lost one husband to a younger woman. Like the real abductor's wife Hilda, according to the newspaper accounts, Renee is in a relatively new common-law marriage. Money is a major concern in the Gifford household and this disparity generates envy. A full-time homemaker and mother of two children from her former marriage, Renee is jealous of Maggie's professional status, her economic security, and her obvious independence.

Donald Hay goes through a complete transformation in his fictional recreation as John. While Hay was considered a good father and husband when he was not drinking (he was a heavy drinker), he was actually a pathetic pedophile afraid of losing his wife. When he was sober, all the neighbours said he was a likeable guy. John Gifford, the villain in *Under the Skin*, has no drinking problem, no impotence issue, and no affable exterior. From the start he is a dark force that comes between the women, openly abusive of his wife and both seductive and challenging with Maggie.[11] He has no feeling for Renee's children, as he tells Maggie, "I never bargained for her brats. She pulled a fast one on me there" (139). In *Under the Skin* it is Renee who is terrified of losing him (134). That is why she puts up with the abuse, graphically presented in the play. However, during the 181 days of the kidnapping, her situation with John worsens and Renee looks more and more haggard until, finally, she finds the courage and the strategy to do him in. This is a clear performance of female empowerment as Renee moves from a "cringing whelp" (148) to

person with an enhanced sense of self. The problem is that the price is enormous—specially for her friend, Maggie.

According to the records, the choice of Abby as victim was accidental; Hay had riginally intended to kidnap his stepdaughter, Wendy. In contrast, Lambert gives John xplicit motivation that is both banal and grave. John has two specific scores to settle, oth directed at Maggie. First, Maggie humiliated him by being right in an argument bout mortgage payments. As Renee tells her,

> You started in about how you had this open mortgage and John didn't know what you were talking about. And he said he'd paid off more than half of the house and you said how long had he owned it and he said 10 years and you said if he didn't have an open mortgage that would probably be impossible.... And he went down to check it out and you were right, and he couldn't even get an open mortgage, there weren't any and he said you must have done something fast, no, pulled a fast one to get an open mortgage, and then you came over and he said, Show me, and you did, you showed him.—God he hated you for that. (187)[12]

Second, Emma's religious faith and her naïve trust in the goodness of people infuriate John. As he explains to Renee, "Maggie taught her to trust people, that was her trouble. In a way, the person who teaches her that lesson is a saviour, an educator, yes, an educator, she could be grateful the rest of her life" (179).[13] He is arguing that it is not in the child's best interests that she be allowed to continue to believe that the world is good. To Renee he defends his actions without telling her what he has done. At one point he tells her, "Even Moses said you should rape the young girls. In Numbers. You didn't know that, did you? Oh yes, when they were going against some tribe, he said kill off all the older women, the ones who are dirty already.... But then take the pure girls for yourself" (179) (see Numbers 31:17). At another point he says, "Dostoyevsky once said that only if you could rape a 10-year-old girl could you say you were truly free. Free of all morality" (176). For John this is the archetypal defiance as he aligns himself with the moral educators—Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers. "[I]f God exists ... it is our duty to deny him," he says. "It's conventional morality that holds us back, Renee" (176). So it is a warped, self-serving, and highly selective set of authoritative lines that John summons as he parades his intellectual superiority. He is well-read, though he turns the texts to his own dark purposes. Disturbingly, Lambert gives John access to biblical authority and provides him with intellectual justification for his abhorrent act.[14] She renders him formidable.

The core of the play for Lambert can be seen in Maggie's response to Renee when Renee says, "You live in a dream world. Things like that happen." Maggie answers, "Not to people like us" (119). But *it did happen* and Lambert constructs her own plausible scenario, a work which screams "women beware of women." In the process she shatters

another of Maggie's optimistic feminist notions: "No woman would do that to a child. To another woman" (191).

Reading the newspaper reports after the rescue, Lambert saw that Hilda knew something of Hay's past. Hilda also knew about the room but for some reason had not mentioned it to the police during the search for Abby. Had she forgotten? Repressed it, and then suddenly recalled the secret bunker? Moreover, when the police first went into the garage they saw no opening to the shaft.[15] If he were down there, wouldn't the cupboard door be open and the cover off? Something seems wrong. Lambert might well have thought, "[Hilda] must have known!!" Just before the end of the play, Renee says to Maggie, although Maggie does not pick up the significance at the time, "The thing was, I always knew about the shop, it was in the house description when we got the place, so I always knew" (187). The play circles around this suspicion: Has Renee always known or, more precisely, at what point did she start suspecting it? And most importantly, after Renee had been to the workshop and her suspicions were confirmed (because she saw the false covering), why did she wait two weeks to call the police? We never know Renee's reasons for either delay, but we can surmise. However, lest we think she was motivated by some humane impulse or sudden compassion for Emma or Maggie, in the script Renee prepares herself with an alibi and goes to check out the workshop because Maggie has told her she saw John take a television in there (161). Apparently that is too much for Renee. She and the children have been without a television for weeks. It is at that point, when checking for the television, that she discovers the wooden plywood slab and the jugs glued to it (174). Renee's call to the police two weeks later and what she says closely follow the newspaper accounts.

In Lambert's play Renee's call to the police happens on Halloween. This too resonates with the play's title. As she comes back into the kitchen after answering the front door, still unaware of how much has been hidden, Maggie says, "God, they're so cute. *Walpurgisnacht*. All Saints' Eve. How we make the horrible ordinary. How we transform it, make it comic and cuddly" (185). It is the "[n]ormalization of our deepest terrors" (186).[16] "[*Under the Skin*] is much more than a thriller," Lambert said in an interview; "it shows how we try to ignore what is happening beneath the surface of our lives because it is much more comfortable to deny it."[17]

I have documented the changes to the original story, keeping the focus on the title, *Under the Skin*, which appears in the presence of the underground workshop, in the associations with Halloween, and in the disguise and dissembling among the characters. All of these belie the apparent openness of the relationships. "I decided to do everything from the top of the skin, so to speak," Lambert wrote to her director.[18] Consistent with this intention, her description of the opening set calls for a sunny kitchen on a spring morning and a central set of large sliding glass doors: "*We open on a stage that is only*

partly revealed. It is the kitchen of the Gifford family.... We see it from the vantage point of the workshop, which is down the hill. We see a patio on stilts, sliding glass doors which lead into the kitchen. A door leads offstage to a hallway" (115). These sliding glass doors permit the easy, quiet, and sudden entrances and exits of Maggie and, ominously, of John. Throughout the last scene of the play Renee will stare at them repeatedly, looking out "*toward us, through the sliding doors*" (193). It becomes a visual refrain. The patio is on stilts; the workshop, which is down below, is always there but is unseen until Renee visits it in the penultimate scene of the play.

The title is taken from Rudyard Kipling's 1896 poem "The Ladies": "For the Colonel's Lady an' Judy O'Grady / Are sisters under their skins!"[19] Through this title one realizes Lambert's complicated distillation of her theme. Kipling's poem is not about treachery or sisterhood. Rather, it argues the patriarchal notion that essentially all women are alike. This can be read as part of John's understanding of the proper hierarchical alignment between the sexes. Certainly, all three women pay dearly for his having received what, for him, was a castrating, narcissistic injury.[20] Or as he puts it when Renee's sudden appearance in the workshop has him temporarily on the defensive: "I am just like any man. Just like any man. I have my pride, Renee, you can't undermine a man's pride in his manhood, that's what you have done" (176). How Emma pays for this we never know, but we can imagine.[21] When John successfully avenges his injury on Maggie through the abduction of her daughter, Maggie is totally devastated. This portrait of Maggie's heartbreak, of her deep abiding grief, is wrenching to witness. The situation for Renee moves from the sexual "rough and tumble" (179), which she and John presumably have both enjoyed, to increasingly abusive behaviour, two examples of which are shown on stage. At one point, after he "*backhands her casually*" (171), she falls to her knees and cries, "Oh don't oh don't oh don't ... the kids'll hear *again*" (172, emphasis added). Obviously "it wasn't like it is now" (179). Renee will move to a position of strength but only through arduous struggle. As Lambert wrote to her sister, "How do you fight when the enemy has outposts in your own mind?"[22]

Joy Coghill, who knew Lambert and directed a number of her plays, told me in conversation that Lambert's works were all very personal and that Lambert wrote herself into both these women characters.[23] Lambert's title suggests this, too, for Renee and Maggie are "sisters under their skins." *Under the Skin* indicates that one critical thing they share is a strong sexual attraction to John, the macho male. Even though Maggie says to him directly, "I despise your [bully] type," and she hates the way he ridicules his wife, she also openly admits that he "turn[s] [her] on"(144). It is shattering to Maggie when she comes to full awareness that the charismatic male to whom she is drawn is a psychopath and that her friend has been, at least for some time, complicit in an unfathomable horror. These two women must grapple with the fact of their desire for a man who is dangerous to them (see figure 11). Maggie's shock is palpable; the depth of what Renee must deal with is almost unimaginable. Both the apparently independent

Figure 11. David Clarke as John, Maggie Huculak as Maggie, Tanya Jacobs as Renee in Betty Lambert's *Under the Skin* at Theatre Passe Muraille, Toronto, 1989. Courtesy of Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

career woman and the submissive housewife who continues in an abusive relationship have come to a stunning revelation. "[T]he rough and tumble," playful at first, covers an extraordinary cruelty which lies "under the skin." The women's journey to terrible knowledge can be interpreted as an example of autobiographical self-representation; Lambert herself "move[s] through her own subject" (Wertenbaker, quoted in Stephenson 140), and it is conceivable that Renee represents her own worst dream. It also fits Abbott's description of a "continual revelation of authorial consciousness at the moment of writing" (3), for the theme of a powerful sexual attraction for a violent man is one that appears in other Lambert writings.[24]

The two women share other more superficial traits. Each feels some genuine connection to the other, although this will be sacrificed, and both engage in competitive and rivalrous strategies. Maggie must deal with a horrible attack from the external world, although she is secure in her sense of self. Renee undergoes an internal journey towards independence in mind and action, borrowing phrases and behaviour from Maggie as she grows. But ultimately, they also share a sense of desperation. Maggie finally settles into an admirable stoicism: "It's not as though I had hope left," she says. "No, it's not as though I have hope left. Not now" (190). Renee, when she tries to defend a student that has enraged Maggie by plagiarizing, reveals that she too feels desperate: "[M]aybe she was desperate," Renee says. "Maybe she couldn't write her essay and got desperate ...

maybe she needs your compassion" (147). Their combined desperation fuels the intensity, the sense of terrible urgency, as the days and months keep passing, driving the play and making it almost intolerably compelling.

In *Under the Skin* Lambert uses the facts of a sensational kidnapping event to spin her own fantasy scenario. She brings unease and suspicion to the audience gradually, skillfully. The result, this forceful play, reveals her preoccupations, her prevailing concerns: women in relationship, their ruthlessness (as Renee acquires power at Maggie's expense), the evil that exists in the world (which may be banal but its consequences are not), and finally, the toughness of the human spirit: the courage we witness in Maggie, the courage that Renee acquires and, of course, the courage of that unseen little girl. Lambert would identify with this given her circumstances, most particularly with Maggie's strength of character.

In the brilliant closing, as Maggie runs out into the dark, her heart pounding, Renee is on the telephone talking to the police just as she is when the play opens. However, the focus has shifted: now Renee is at the centre of the drama. Grim-faced, alone, with a "*dim spot on [her face],*" she says, "Yes, I'll hold on" (194). Renee will be alone to face her future and her demons. It is a miracle that she finds the strength to call.

Lambert closes the play without letting the audience know if Emma is still alive. This ending, which offers the audience neither comfort nor closure, troubled Lambert's director, as I mentioned earlier. It may be that Renee has resolved her major conflicts, as shown in her new-found sense of power, but for Maggie and her daughter the future remains uncertain, harrowing. Clearly this ending was a conscious artistic decision by the playwright. Lambert knew, as does anyone who can recall the newspaper story, that the child was found alive. In fact, Abby Drover lived to marry and have children of her own. In contrast, Maggie Benton has escaped neither panic nor dread. Her night of terror is not over when the curtain closes. Lambert has refused us a morally satisfying conclusion. She has deliberately omitted the consolation that reality offered. She provides no escape from the conviction that terrible things do happen, even to "people like us" (119). We are left with the awareness of how precarious life is; how at any time, without warning, tragedy can break into it. To my mind, this is evidence of a consummate playwright's craft. Lambert brings down the curtain at the most theatrical moment.

I believe that the ending resonates with Lambert's own plight. She too is awaiting her destiny, which she fears is a death sentence. She too "holds on": will a miracle rescue her? Will her daughter be okay without her? As she said in an interview, "I start out from a problem that I'm having. Then I extrapolate that into the characters" (Worthington 59). The result is a play both intensely written and powerfully imagined. Many of the images that haunt *Under the Skin* are rooted in lived experience; that is one reason for their incredible potency. While she was writing this play, something was happening to Lambert too, and it was going on "under the skin."[25]

Notes

1. Keynote lecture, "Putting a Life on Stage" workshop, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., February 2004.

2. I am referring to New Criticism here—the work of Eliot, Richards, Leavis, and others, who argued that art "existed as a self-enclosed object, mysteriously intact in its own unique being" (Eagleton 47). Treating the work as a "self-sufficient object," as New Criticism does, means severing ties with the author (with his feelings or intentions or unconscious sources), with the reader/audience (and any subjectivity they might bring to the reception of a work of art), and with any social or historical content (48).

3. According to correspondence found in the Simon Fraser University archives, Lambert began writing *Under the Skin* in January 1983; she was diagnosed with cancer in February, submitted the manuscript in July, and died in November 1983.

4. Ruth Lambert, email to author, 10 November 2004.

5. As late as November 1999 Hay was to go on trial for three new charges of sex offences that allegedly occurred between 1970 and 1976 (Griffiths 284).

6. Elizabeth Minnie Lee wed Frank Lambert in 1952. They were divorced in 1962. Ruth Anne was born in 1964. In her journal Lambert notes that she had "denied" Ruth Anne a father (8 September 1976), which may or may not have been literally true.

7. On 9 July 1983, Lambert wrote Joy Coghill to say that she had finished the manuscript and that her mother was in hospital, dying. About her own illness she wrote, "People keep saying I'm a miracle, but what if I 'recur'? Well, I'm a miracle right *now* anyway." The cancer did recur. Betty's mother, Bessie Smyth, died of cancer one week after the death of her daughter.

8. At the time of the Port Moody kidnapping, Lambert was working on a play entitled *Visiting Hour* about three women in a maternity ward who are waiting to give birth. In her journal (8 September 1976), Lambert wrote that the character Brooke "[m]ust be me. Struggling to be, without men." The same could be said of Maggie Benton.

9. Maggie Benston had been a vital and politically active faculty member of Simon Fraser University. She died of cancer in 1991, at the age of fifty-two. Hired by the Department of Chemistry in 1966, she moved into women's studies and computer science. According to the chair of the committee, the student services centre was so named to honour a woman who had played an important role at the university and who "epitomize[d] the interdisciplinary approach to academic inquiry" (*Simon Fraser News*, 19 September 1996). Lambert would certainly have known and admired Benston's forceful independent personality, as a feminist and as a political activist.

10. Personal correspondence with Lambert's former colleague, Malcolm Page (15 November 2004).

11. John is a divisive force both in what he says and how he is depicted (136, 142, 148, 155).

12. John uses the phrase "pulled a fast one" earlier, when he is speaking of how Renee tricked him (139). This is another illustration of how minor grievances can enrage him.

13. This connects to the play's argument about *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Emma's personal bible. John contends that she has misread the last lines of the published text on the subject of Anne's

faith in human goodness (141, 177). Maggie refers several times to Emma's belief, taken from Anne Frank, that everyone has some human good in them. But John insists, and he is correct, that the final lines read, "[I] keep on trying to find a way of becoming what I would so like to be, and what I could be, if ... there weren't any other people living in the world. Yours, Anne" (Frank 283).

14. The biblical reference is to the Old Testament. Balaam, a non-Jewish leader, was plotting to lead Israel into sin. His people, the Midianites, try to undermine Israel's sexual morality (25:1) and so "the people began to play the harlot." The punishment was to wipe out the Midianites. "The young girls" in the King James version is translated as the "female children" in other translations. Those who are to be kept are "children," that is, younger than marriageable age. A gloss by one commentator is that "for yourselves" means "for your use as domestic servants." The word choice in the actual biblical passage is "female children," neither "pure" nor "virgin," and without the sexual reference or the suggestion of sexual pleasure. John interprets the word "take" sexually and even asserts that Moses said "you should rape." Of course, in the classical epics the women and children of the vanquished were treated as booty or war trophies.

15. In *Resurrection*, Hilda is reported as saying that after the police had been to the garage without success, "her daughters had reminded her about the existence in the garage of an underground pit.... 'The girls mentioned the hole,' said Hilda. Noticing that several bottles of gasoline and glue appeared to have been moved aside from one of the cabinets, she had opened the cupboard doors and knelt beside the floor of the cabinet. 'I lifted the board and could see his feet. I thought he was dead, and Wendy called the police again. I left the board off the hole and we waited by the door. That's when you came in and saw him crawling out.' It was all so clear now: the missing potato chips; the bag of apples that Wendy had found in the garage; the hours on end that her husband had been spending out there alone" (Griffiths 143). There does seem to be some important information missing: that is, was Hay able to remove and replace the cover of the shaft from below?

16. Renee will repeatedly call John her "gruffy bear" or "grumpy bear" (130, 137, 140, 148) in an attempt to mollify his anger. Since this usually occurs in Maggie's presence, Renee may also be trying to minimize the significance and seriousness of his moodiness to her friend.

17. "Betty's Story: A Polished Diamond," *Simon Fraser Week*, 21 July 1983, 2.

18. Covering letter to Pam Hawthorn which accompanied the draft submission, 9 July 1983. Playwrights Theatre Centre Archives.

19. Lambert indicated the source for her title in a letter to Pam Hawthorn (3 January 1983): "I have begun the play, called *Under the Skin* (the Colonel's lady and Rosie O'Grady are sisters)...." Playwrights Theatre Centre Archives.

20. In her article, "The Culture of Abuse," Ann Wilson uses this play, as well as two others, to illustrate "the victimization of women." She argues that "the sexual abuse of children is not an isolated evil but the horrifyingly logical effect of ideologies which shape our understanding of gender and sexuality" (161).

21. The actual victim, Abby Drover, was sexually abused repeatedly by her captor.

22. Lambert quoted by Dorothy Beavington, "Betty Lambert, 1933–1983." 8 August 1985. Special Collections, Simon Fraser University.

23. Joy Coghill, personal interview with author, 2 August 2004. Rosalind Kerr's article on Lambert's *Jennie's Story* mentions how that play began from a personal experience, a story about the tragedy of a young wife on a neighbouring farm that Lambert's mother frightened her with when she was young.

24. A volatile and perhaps sadistic sexual relationship is also central to Lambert's novel *Crossings*, her radio play *Grasshopper Hill*, and her early short story "The Pony."

25. I would like to thank my research assistant, Carolyn Henry, who tracked down a lot of this source material. I would also like to thank Ruth Lambert and Dorothy Beavington for their open dialogue with me, and the archivists at Special Collections, WAC Bennett Library, Simon Fraser University, who proved so helpful.

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A Ship of Fools in the Feminine: Six Characters in Search of Self

Louise Forsyth

> What is it with the persistent use of I in this text?
>
> —Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter*

> Qui suis-je moi qui n'ai jamais été? (Who am I, I who have never been?)
>
> —Denise Boucher, *Les fées ont soif*

La nef des sorcières was published and first staged in 1976 at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde during the week of International Women's Day. It was also performed in translation as *A Clash of Symbols* at the Firehall Theatre in Toronto in 1978.[1] This was a heady time for a rebellious and passionately engaged generation of feminist writers, artists, actors, and activists in Québec, whose generation rejected, often violently, the cultural traditions and legal structures that had deprived women of educational opportunities, narrowly circumscribed their sexuality, and imposed insignificant supporting roles on the professional lives of most of them. The moment was propitious for women's confrontational voices to be heard and for new notions *au féminin*[2] of women's place in society, of their sexuality, theatricality, identity, agency, and language to be developed. In such an effervescent climate, *La nef des sorcières*—a ship of witches, hysterical fools, or madwomen—was received with both enthusiasm and controversy. Critical response from journalists and university scholars to *La nef* was, in the main, sneering and dismissive, despite packed houses and an extension of the run.[3] It seems that at the time the notion of ordinary women staging their own lives was widely viewed as nonsensical. The play has since been recognized generally, although not unproblematically, as marking a determining moment in Québec theatre and feminist history.

Although *La nef* did not present itself as autobiographical theatre and has not, as far as I know, been studied as such, I intend to show that its dramatic characteristics derive from foundational assumptions about autobiography, that is, assumptions regarding a