

In her own write . . .



"If you love it, get out there and do it. The arts are a 'make your own work' profession."

Sally Clark

She was going to be a painter. But, in 1973, Vancouver-born Sally Clark arrived in Toronto and enrolled in York's fine arts programme. Now, 15 years later, she's painting with words and has been widely touted as part of a new generation of Canadian playwrights. In 1989, she had three of her plays produced, including *Moo*, *The Trial of Judith K.* and, most recently, *Jehanne of the Witches*. Clark recently talked to Excalibur's Dina Lebo and shared her ideas about theatre and writing.

A PERSONAL VOYAGE

"It's weird how it all got started," said Clark. "I was determined to be a painter for the longest time. I got into galleries and got shows, but then the galleries would go bankrupt or fold up. Even when I had shows the people wouldn't respond to my paintings in the way that I thought they should." Luckily, one of Clark's favourite pastimes was writing.

She spent two years in theatre writing at the University of British Columbia and took Angus Braid's theatre writing course as an elective while at York. She also gained practical experience running the York Cabaret out of Vanier's pub with classmate Sky Gilbert, now artistic director of his own company, *Buddies in Bad Times*.

"I had such a good time writing sketches, scenes and dialogue for the Cabaret," she explained. "that I thought I would like to do it again. Even when I was painting, somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that I would write again if I could only find a good story." At that point, destiny stepped in.

A close friend of Clark's was murdered under bizarre circumstances that gave her the story she was looking for. "It was incongruous to everything I believed in," she said. "contradictory to everything I knew. I wanted to tell her story. I wanted to recreate the shock I felt."

At first, Clark tried to make the story a novel, but had difficulty with descriptions. The novel kept turning into talking characters and wound up being her first play. "I like action and dialogue," said Clark. "You just have to flow and follow your own bent, even though it may take some time to know exactly what it is."

Clark laughed and continued, "You see, it was always there. It was just a question of timing and finding my own voice."

ON PLAYWRITING

"As well as trying to recreate an emotion that I'm feeling about a subject, I also try to find a mystery or intrigue in my subject that is begging to be revealed or resolved," Clark explained. Taking her most recent work as an example, she described *Jehanne of the Witches*, a play based on the true story of Joan of Arc. A bookstore owner had once told her that Joan of Arc and Bluebeard were best friends. She found this fact "totally astonishing." While Bluebeard was burned at the stake for being a mass murderer, Joan of Arc died as a witch, later becoming a Saint. "Power destroyed him," she said, "but made her bigger than she was."

Clark wrote the play to unravel the mystery of their relationship for herself. "You just write from the heart," she said. "You can't really predict how people will react or if it will touch their emotions or intellect as it touches yours. But, if it does touch you, you've already got an audience of one, and where there's one there's probably a lot more."

ON DIALOGUE

Critics and reviewers have commented on Clark's gift for creating good dialogue, which is considered the basis of good playwriting. "No, I don't sit in restaurants listening to other people's conversations," she said, describing herself as a "Walter Mitty type. When I was younger, I never had the right words. Someone always got the better of me and I would go home and think about all the things I should have said. Then [I'd] recreate the conversation the way it should have gone. I guess that's where the ability came from."

She also described herself as a frustrated actress. When she performed in the York Cabaret productions she was always unhappy with the roles she received. "Now, when I write," she said, "I pretend that I am all the characters and writing allows me the freedom of playing all the roles I ever wanted to play."

ON GOOD THEATRE

Being a York student in the mid-'70s, Clark went downtown often to see plays at Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre Lab, Tarragon and Toronto Free Theatre. She explained she was influenced by the vibrance of Canadian theatre during "an exciting time to be in Toronto. The theatre was so daring and adventurous . . . jostling the imagination. It was so incredibly visual and emotions were running rampant. People were getting upset. Their values were being questioned and their beliefs were being confronted." Clark explained that ". . . people were feeling something. I loved to go to the theatre to be shaken." She thinks theatre in the '80s has lost its magic; "that film is taking all the action away from theatre. All the big crowd scenes, the sex scenes, the violence, the stuff that people get excited about all seems to be gone. I'm trying to put it back. Why should theatre be limited to one set, one time period and two talking heads?"

With films costing so much and taking such a long time to produce, Clark feels theatre is the only medium that allows an artist to experiment with ideas in a relatively short time frame, for a fairly low cost. "We have to learn from the French," she said. "I don't know why there is such a dichotomy between English and French theatre. French theatre is so visually imaginative and passionate while English theatre runs the risk of being much too heady."

ON FEMINISM

She has been called a feminist playwright by critics and reviewers but she doesn't know why. "I think it's basically because I'm a woman writing plays about women and their struggles against society," she explained. "I always wanted to write plays with strong female characters that would be a challenge for someone to play." While working on *Jehanne of the Witches*, she did a lot of research on goddess religions and wound up reading some feminist literature, such as Gould-Davis' *The First Sex* and Freidan's *Feminist Mystique*. She said the literature was "enlightening" and that it "helped [her] form the social context of the play which took place during a period of history where Christian religion, with its patriarchal attitude, was trying to take over what had once been a matriarchal and pagan society. There is, therefore, a certain antagonism in my characters against Christianity and the patriarchal society."

Clark proudly claims she is not a feminist or an anti-feminist but simply one of the new breed of humanists. "There are always interesting males in my plays as well. I guess the critics just don't see them . . ."

TO ASPIRING PLAYWRIGHTS

"I wrote my first play which had 23 characters and 32 scenes in the early '80s," said Clark, "a time when one man shows were in vogue. I talked to people about the script and everyone said 'Forget it, no one will produce that play.' Then Clark Rogers of Theatre Passe Muraille phoned and told me he was interested."

"If it's in your heart, write it," said Clark, "You'll find a way, or the person that will make it happen . . . if it's meant to be." Clark also encourages would-be playwrights to seize every opportunity to develop their craft. "Get ideas, speak to the people in charge, then go for it," she said. "To succeed in the arts you have to create your own work . . . The possibilities are only limited by your own imagination."

