

“ENTHRALLING.” *Publishers Weekly*

# FISTS UPON

A MEMOIR OF LOVE,  
THEATRE, AND ESCAPE  
FROM McCARTHYISM

# STAR

FLORENCE BEAN JAMES *with Jean Freeman*

*Fists Upon A Star*



# FISTS UPON A STAR

A MEMOIR OF LOVE, THEATRE,  
AND ESCAPE FROM McCARTHYISM

*Florence Bean James*

WITH JEAN FREEMAN



U OF R PRESS

© 2013 University of Regina Press.

The original draft manuscript of “Fists Upon a Star” is held in the Florence Bean James papers, Accession 2117, in the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections. © University of Washington Libraries Special Collections. Used with permission.

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical—without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping or placement in information storage and retrieval systems of any sort shall be directed in writing to Access Copyright.

Printed and bound in Canada at Friesens. The text of this book is printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper with earth-friendly vegetable-based inks.

COVER AND TEXT DESIGN: Duncan Campbell, University of Regina Press.

COPY EDITOR: Joan McGilvray.

PROOFREADER: Courtney Bates-Hardy

Cover photo: Florence Bean James, circa 1911 (detail). Cover photo and all photos except Photos 22, 23, and 24 are from the personal papers of Florence James, courtesy of Jean Freeman.

### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

James, Florence Bean, 1892-1988, author

Fists upon a star : a memoir of love, theatre, and escape from McCarthyism / Florence Bean James, with Jean Freeman.

(Canadian plains studies ; 62)

Includes index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-88977-260-1 (bound).—ISBN 978-0-88977-407-0 (paperback).

—ISBN 978-0-88977-261-8 (pdf).—ISBN 978-0-88977-319-6 (epub)

1. James, Florence Bean, 1892-1988.
  2. James, Florence Bean, 1892-1988—Exile—Saskatchewan.
  3. Theatrical producers and directors—United States—Biography.
  4. Theater—United States—History—20th century.
  5. Anti-communist movements—United States—History—20th century.
- I. Freeman, Jean, 1934-, author II. Title. III. Series: Canadian plains studies ; 62

PN2287.J34A3 2013 792.02'33092 C2013-905325-5 C2013-905326-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



U OF R PRESS

University of Regina Press, University of Regina

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, S4S 0A2

TEL: (306) 585-4758 FAX: (306) 585-4699

WEB: [www.uofrpress.ca](http://www.uofrpress.ca)

The University of Regina Press received a grant for research and development of this publication from the Creative Enterprise Entrepreneurship Fund of the Saskatchewan Arts Board. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada. / Nous reconnaissons l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada. This publication was made possible through Creative Saskatchewan's Creative Industries Production Grant Program.



Canada Council  
for the Arts



Conseil des Arts  
du Canada

Canada creative  
SASKATCHEWAN



Dedicated to Burton,  
who put my hand with his upon that star,  
to Marijo and Al and all the others  
who lived through so much of this with us,  
and to Jean, who finally gave me some joy  
in the preparation of this book.

*Florence Bean James*  
(OCTOBER 27, 1892—JANUARY 18, 1988)

*About the Contributors*

**JEAN FREEMAN** is a celebrated performer and author whose career has spanned radio, television, film, live performance, public relations, and a wide range of writing, including plays and children's books. Perhaps best known for her role on the hit TV series *Corner Gas*, her literary skills and love of drama led to a devoted friendship with Florence B. James.

**MARY BLACKSTONE** wrote the Introduction and is professor emerita in the Theatre Department at the University of Regina, as well as director and dramaturg for the Centre for the Study of Script Development, based in Regina, Saskatchewan.

**RITA SHELTON DEVERELL** wrote the Epilogue. She is a theatre artist, academic, journalist, co-founder of VisionTV, Regina resident 1971-89, and is in development for a feature film about Florence James based on her full-length play *McCarthy and the Old Woman*, first produced in 2010.

# CONTENTS

## PREFACE

*Jean Freeman*

ix

## INTRODUCTION

*Mary Blackstone*

xv

## FISTS UPON A STAR

1

## EPILOGUE

*Rita Shelton Deverell*

249

## APPENDIX 1

Seattle Repertory Playhouse productions,  
1928–29 to 1947–48

275

## APPENDIX 2

Telegram from James Cagney to Florence,  
October 26, 1976

283

## APPENDIX 3

Florence James' 1977 Christmas letter

284

## INDEX

287





## PREFACE

*Jean Freeman*

**L**ike many other people in Saskatchewan, I first heard of Florence James from my high school drama teacher, who was fresh from a class that Florence and her husband, Burton (better known as “Pop”), had conducted in 1951 for the Saskatchewan Arts Board’s Summer School.

Burton died on November 13, 1951, and in 1952 Florence returned to teach summer classes in Saskatchewan by herself. That summer, I signed up for her two-week session in the Qu’Appelle Valley. As a bright-eyed wannabe actor, I was mightily impressed by this forceful, knowledgeable woman. I returned to take her classes for several summers after that, even after I had graduated and moved on into community theatre.

Mrs. James (we always called her “Mrs. James” in those days) was a touch formidable—you didn’t fool around in her classes. But she knew her stuff. We respected her, and we learned from her.

Many years later, in her papers, I found the letter from Arts Board Secretary Norah McCullough inviting Florence to make her connection with the board a permanent one. The letter was dated September 11, 1952, and said that while Norah and Executive Director David Smith hadn’t yet been able to try out the idea on Dr. William Riddell, chairman of the board, “we are afraid you will escape us, so this is to

make you aware of the possibility so you won't vanish out of our ken without contacting us en route. We think we can find \$4000 in the budget plus traveling expenses, up to September of 1953 anyway, with some work at Regina College, but most of it out on the flat. Let us know if we should proceed. If you want to come, we want you!"

She did want to, she came, and stayed until 1968 ... mostly "out on the flat."

During that time, from her late sixties into her eighties, Florence began to write a book about her life—the girlhood years that shaped her, her experiences with Burton, their time in the theatre, building the Playhouse, their tribulations, and their successes. It was the book that Burton and Bob Johnson had planned to write. Because Florence felt she "wasn't really a writer," she took some writing classes from Saskatchewan author Ken Mitchell, who was teaching at the Summer School. She wrote and rewrote and wrote some more.

In 1962, I went to work for the Saskatchewan Arts Board as a communications officer, first part-time, then full-time. My cubby-hole was next to Florence's office in a drafty porch at Saskatchewan House in Regina, the former residence of the province's Lieutenant-Governor. As the board's drama consultant, however, she spent most of her time criss-crossing the province, in fair weather and foul, to stimulate theatre of the people, by the people, and for the people, in the province she loved so much.

Florence made no secret of the fact that she was amazed at being paid—she thought even lavishly paid compared to what she'd received during her many years at her Repertory Playhouse in Seattle—to do something she enjoyed.

On one of her stops back at home base, she told me about the book she was trying to write and asked if I could help organize some of the material. I did, and she asked if I would do some editing; then she suggested I might rewrite things here and there, and finally she asked me to write some portions of the book and pull it all together.

I was glad to help, honoured by her trust and confidence in my ability and by her growing closeness as a friend. We worked on the manuscript regularly over the following years. When Florence felt it contained what she wanted to say, and I felt that I had done all I could do to put it into finished form, the attempt to find a publisher began.

The theatre presses liked the chapters about her teaching methods and theatre experiences, but not the personal bits. The women's presses liked Florence's story, but felt there was too much emphasis on her husband. The regular publishers weren't interested because it wasn't mainstream. The University of Washington just wasn't interested. So the manuscript went into a box and gathered dust.

It was thirty years later that actress Rita Shelton Deverell, a vigorous friend of Mrs. James, and an ardent champion of her achievements and life story, tempted the Canadian Plains Research Center (now the University of Regina Press) to take a look.

As publication has become not just a dream but a reality, I am deeply indebted for the help of many friends, old and new, in checking and double-checking memories and details: sincere thanks to Rita Shelton Deverell, Joan McGilvray, Jim and Kathleen Kinzel and Debbie Scotton Kinzel, Kurt Armbruster, Anne Stewart, Terry Bleifuss, Donna Grant, Bruce Walsh, and the University of Regina Press.

For the last years of Florence's life, as her eyesight steadily deteriorated, I became a sort of personal secretary and amanuensis, writing letters, making phone calls, reading to her—mail, papers and hundreds of books, plays and poems—meeting through her the myriad wonderful people who were (and are to this day) the Friends of Florence James, and at the same time enriching my own life, and that of my family, through her example.

I spent so many hours in research, discussion and writing on the book, and in reading and re-reading it to Florence and others, that I find it difficult sometimes to realize that I didn't live through those days: I never walked home from school through the sagebrush in Pocatello, Idaho; I never marched for women's suffrage through the streets of New York City, or stood charged in a court of law for standing by my guns in opposing an unconstitutional investigation, convicted of the crime of being consistent; I never had the chance to sit in a darkened theatre and listen to Woody Guthrie play a fund-raiser for my Playhouse. But, through Florence, I did.

I hope that through her book, many others will also have the chance to follow Florence's steps, even if it's just in imagination.

The book's final form is a pastiche of memoir, biography, and autobiography. It follows a general chronology for the most part, but

Florence liked to drop in anecdotes or references when they occurred to her, or whenever they seemed appropriate. I did try on a few occasions to rearrange the text in order to straighten the flow ... but then I realized that this was the way Florence remembered the story, and told the story, so I just left it alone.

Most recently, while we've been preparing this memoir for publication, I realized that I really wanted to let you, the reader, know about some of the outcomes of Florence's story—things which didn't happen until after her passing in 1988, and therefore were not included in her own memories.

I wanted to tell you about the Playhouse, which in 1969/1970 was renovated and re-named for Glenn Hughes, who had died in 1964. In 1991/1992, his name was transferred to the University of Washington's Drama Department Penthouse Theatre, as a more appropriate location.

And what about the historic elm tree? During the 1980 renovation, much of the Playhouse's courtyard was closed in, and the elm tree ended up in what was described as a "glorified planter." Three decades later, arborists were brought in to check the elm in preparation for the 2009 renovation. They found that the tree was not healthy, and there was extensive root damage. So, the legendary elm succumbed at last. But I understand that wasn't the end of it! Urban Hardwood harvested the elm, and from its wood made benches and tables which today sit in the Playhouse lobby!

When failing eyesight put an end to Florence's work for the Arts Board, her protégé Ken Kramer provided a welcome haven for another decade as dramaturg for Regina's Globe Theatre, which she had been instrumental in founding in 1966.

Toward the end of her life, almost blind, unable to work, confined to a hospital bed, having lost her husband, only child, and many of her closest friends, Florence would rail and rage. "Why am I still here?" she'd say. "I think the good Lord is trying to teach me patience, but I'm not a very good student!"

I could never answer her question. I lamely said that there had to be some purpose, it just wasn't given us to see what it was.

Some of those who remember Florence and honour her life and achievements would say that hope is her legacy. For me, it probably *is* patience ... not patience in the sense of meek and quiet acceptance, but

PREFACE

patience in the sense of relentless persistence: “Don’t let the bastards wear you down. If we can’t outmaneuver them, we’ll outwit them and outlast them!”

Florence took her final curtain call on this stage on January 18, 1988, at the age of ninety-five, and promptly moved, I am sure, to Heaven’s Green Room, ready for the opening of the next act.

At Florence’s memorial service, I read something that I had never read to her, in all those thousands of hours together—but she would have loved it if I had, because it was jotted by the actress Ellen Terry on the flyleaf of a favourite book, and found after her death in 1928:

No funeral gloom, my dears, when I am gone—  
corpse-gazings, tears, black raiment, graveyard grimness.  
Think of me as withdrawn into the dimness;  
yours still, you mine. Remember all the best  
of our past moments, and forget the rest.  
And so to where I wait, come gently on.

—William Allingham.



## INTRODUCTION

*Mary Blackstone*

But who shall dare  
To measure loss and gain in this wise?  
Defeat may be victory in disguise;  
The lowest ebb is the turn of the tide.

—*from “Loss and Gain”*  
*by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

### *The Memoir and Its Importance*

**A**s reported by Jean Freeman in her preface, this book has had a long and difficult journey towards publication, from its beginnings as a theatrical memoir by Burton James, started just before his death in 1951, to multiple incomplete or unpublished attempts by others to write the history of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, to Florence James’ unsuccessful attempts to find a publisher (see Appendix 3). The publication of *Fists Upon a Star* suggests that telling a complex and painful story takes time—and getting others to receive it as meaningful and significant takes even more time and determination.

James focuses on recollections of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse as well as the theatrical partnership and extended community of artists and supporters that made the Playhouse such a success. Despite repeated admonitions “to put more of herself” into the memoir, James remained



something of an unwilling autobiographer. The memoir abounds with personal recollections and thoughtful articulations of her theatrical aesthetics and methodology as well as insights into the social and political issues of the day—particularly the contemporary pre-occupation with finding Communism in all things liberal and James’ persecution at the hands of the Joint Legislative Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in the State of Washington—but readers expecting the type of personal confessions and gossip associated with many memoirs and autobiographies will not find it here. Taking her title from the book Burton James had intended to write, Florence James clearly saw herself as righting a wrong. She was writing the story of their theatre and their formidable partnership that Burton had not lived to write. Florence and Burton worked so closely together for so long that it would have been impossible for her to recount the history of the theatre exclusively from her point of view and it is frequently impossible for us as readers to ascribe agency or point of view to one or the other of the Jameses. She did not see the project as an autobiography but rather a recollection of what she was able to do in collaboration with others.

As Helen Buss has observed, this is an important characteristic of memoirs—the tendency of narrators to “speak for others and to others” by moving from “witnessing to testifying”: not only speaking to “others as a witness and participant” but also speaking “for others’ who have not been able, or permitted, to speak for themselves.”<sup>1</sup> Although others in the same group of individuals persecuted by the state Un-American Activities Committee published recollections of those events,<sup>2</sup> *Fists Upon a Star* is the first to provide the perspectives of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse artists. Taking the first amendment in response to the infamous question, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party,” they insisted on their right to freedom of speech and freedom of association and refused to respond; the committee gave them no opportunity to tell their story or counter false accusations. It might have been predictable that Florence James would be the one to ultimately speak for the committee’s “unfriendly witnesses,” given the outburst against false accusations that led to her being physically ejected from the proceedings. It is also in keeping with her later gutsy statement to the judge about his complicity in thwarting the course of justice when her contempt case came to court. At the time, however,

the three witnesses from the Seattle Repertory Playhouse were effectively silenced, first by the committee, then by the courts, and finally by the university's appropriation of their theatre. This absolute failure of justice and the ideals of the Bill of Rights could very well have led James to be cautious in whatever account she gave of the theatre and of the beliefs or values that motivated her and others—despite the apparent safety afforded by being in Canada and distanced by time—but James was powerfully motivated to testify, to tell the story as she saw it and to have its truth appreciated in a way it might not have been at an earlier point. Coming after revelations that the committee may well have had little or no evidence of any threat posed by the individuals it subjected to humiliation, the community orientation of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and the careers of Florence and Burton James make the purported terrorist threat to the Seattle waterworks by this couple and other alleged communists seem preposterous. Given the hysteria following 9/11 and “Tea Party” extremism in the United States, James' story acquires an even broader application and a renewed urgency.

As with all life-writing, *Fists Upon a Star* lies somewhere between the non-fictional realm of history and the fictional world of constructed story but, particularly in its development of character and plot, it also owes much to the form of writing James knew best. James' life and the events she recounts here have been the subjects of more than one play<sup>3</sup> and, given her background in drama, it should not be surprising that a skilled theatre artist undertaking to tell an innately dramatic story would instinctively embrace some of the dramaturgical principles of good playwriting.<sup>4</sup> In that context it is understandable that she might eschew direct statements regarding the personal dimensions of her relationships, her individual accomplishments, and above all her emotional investment in the events she recounts, leaving us to judge from actions and subtext. Raw personal emotions do rise to the surface, but James very consciously focuses on commemorating collective and communal accomplishments rather than personal validation and catharsis. She is the kind of female subject Buss particularly associates with the genre of memoir rather than autobiography, one

whose autonomy is compellingly intertwined with relationships, and community, a human subject that does not seek

to disentangle herself from those compelling ties, but builds autonomy based on them. For such a subject, memoir is the much older and more appropriate form ... If autobiographical practices are to produce agency for human subjects to resist conformity while performing constructive and multiple connections to the world, memoir discourse ... continue[s] to be the lively art of balancing the self and the other. If women's memoirs can help show that such balancing acts are workable and performable, they will have truly repossessed a cultural world where we can be our fullest human selves.<sup>5</sup>

*Fists Upon a Star* is of interest in part as an example of women's life-writing that at times displays similarities with other examples of this genre and at other times pointedly diverges from the expectations scholars might bring to it. For instance, at times James leaves no question that she is writing out of anger and pain, something that Carolyn G. Heilbrun has identified as characteristic of autobiographical work by women starting from the 1970s. Also characteristic of more recent life-writing is the way in which she quite matter-of-factly deals with both her failures and accomplishments while at times preferring to focus on the collective success of the Playhouse company. However, Heilbrun suggests that another common characteristic of all women's life-writing is the difficulty such an author has coming to grips with the recognition that her "selfhood, the right to her own story, depends upon her 'ability to act in the public domain.'" Although she may have been selective about what she chose to include in this memoir, there is no evidence that Florence James had any qualms whatsoever about acting in the public domain whether in the theatre or in public life outside it.<sup>6</sup>

As moving and insightful as the memoir is, it does not tell the full story. James brought to her memoir a good dramaturgical sense of the natural climax and denouement of her story. The Canwell hearings provide the climax of her story, and the loss of the theatre and Burton James' death the denouement. However, while what she left out may not offer such dramatic material, it extends our understanding of James' accomplishments beyond loss to further illuminate the importance of her story. The demise of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and the death

of her husband constituted devastating losses to the Seattle cultural community and to Florence James personally, but Mrs. James continued to make important contributions in a new and more welcoming country. She went on to lead a full and productive life and her accomplishments led to major gains in theatre and the arts in her adopted province of Saskatchewan. And she was a remarkable role model for women who were fortunate enough to encounter her.<sup>7</sup> The preface, this introduction, and the epilogue frame James' life from multiple perspectives. In her preface, Jean Freeman, who has been instrumental in bringing this memoir to publication, approaches James as a personal friend and mentor. Rita Deverell's epilogue (and her one-woman play) illustrates the enormous impact James had on subsequent generations of artists, not only in Canada but also in the United States. This introduction places James' life and career historically, professionally, and socially.

### *Making a Life in the Modern Era*

It could be said that Florence James' life story is exemplary of a generation of North Americans who witnessed and effected enormous social, cultural, and political changes in their lifetime. Between growing up as the first non-aboriginal girl born in a rural frontier community in the nineteenth-century American West and ending her days in the Queen City in the middle of the Canadian prairie, James saw the introduction of the automobile, electric lights, central heating, telephones, radio, gramophones, the commercial film industry, and air and space travel. She was a product not only of the earliest of Europeans to emigrate to the United States but also the nineteenth-century influx of Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine. As well, she worked closely with more recent immigrant communities who swelled the slums of New York, the labour unions of the Northwest, and the ranks of ambitious young performers. She was born into a country still deeply divided by race twenty-seven years after the end of the Civil War, and she lived to not only see but also participate in the empowerment of Blacks through the elimination of segregation, improved educational and cultural opportunities, and the efforts of men like Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King. She travelled widely in North America, from Texas to Canada and coast to coast. She also travelled to Britain, Russia, and down the Ruhr through Poland, Germany, and France in 1934 at what

might have been the peak of Soviet social and cultural experiments and in the midst of Hitler's rise to power. She lived through two world wars, marched for women's suffrage, narrowly escaped the devastation of the Spanish Flu epidemic, planned the building of a theatre that was nixed by the recession of 1922, opened a professional theatre on the crest of the 1929 stock market crash, managed that theatre through the Depression, led one of the most successful Negro units in the Federal Theatre Project under Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, raised money for the Republican government in the Spanish Civil War, aligned herself closely with Seattle's strong labour unions, which had organized the first general strike in the United States, and supported the Washington Pension Union, which negotiated the first comprehensive U.S. health care program. She fought devastating persecution and personal loss in the McCarthy era, followed by emigration to Canada where she emerged as a powerful educator and advocate for the arts under the first socialist government in North America. From that vantage point she then participated in the development of national arts organizations and contributed to the growing appreciation and recognition of Canadian culture.

Florence James was recognized as a pioneer in her own day, but her personal history stands as one of thousands of stories that could have been told about the men and women who built the American West. Her life was moulded by three western frontier communities—Pocatello, Seattle and the State of Washington, and Saskatchewan. Her hunger as a young girl for the amenities of education, culture, and the arts, her leadership in Seattle and rural areas of the state in establishing quality theatre and arts education, and her tireless trips to all corners of rural Saskatchewan to ensure that even those in the smallest communities would be able to participate in the arts—these are all chapters in a much broader social and cultural history of the West. They are also chapters that reveal much about the local history of the Northwest and Saskatchewan. Particularly because of James' insistence that theatre must be rooted in its community and therefore inclusive of and responsive to the breadth of that community, the story of both the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and James' time in Saskatchewan encompasses the local cultural dynamics of ethnicity and race, the social dynamics involving unionized longshoremens and university professors, the

Farmers' Union Conference and politicians, and the political dynamics of republicans and democrats, communists, socialists and progressives. As a social document, the memoir also marks evolving changes, such as the drift to spectatorship versus participation in leisure activity, lack of attention to the needs of youth and the elderly, and the dislocation of "community" and neighbourhood that resulted from the influx of people who moved to Washington state during the war. Even the emerging challenges of urban sprawl and pollution make appearances as this story unfolds. Although it is not fully addressed in her memoir, James engaged in community affairs outside the bounds of the theatre by taking an interest in the affairs of unions and key political issues of her day to the point of running for office more than once.<sup>8</sup> Her vision of a life in the theatre was of a life fully engaged in the most important issues of her day and her memoir reflects that.

Unlike those thousands of pioneers who *could* have written personal histories about this era in the West, Florence James *did* so, creating a memoir in which the historical events are not simply a shorthand for marking time or a backdrop to the story but integral to a life and career profoundly engaged in and moulded by them. As Helen Buss has observed, "in historical narratives, only public events happen. In traditional fiction such public events act as a background for the personal story. In memoir, real lives happen in all their daily richness in parallel and in connection with public life. We are allowed into that richness so that we can better feel the effect when private lives are crushed by public policies."<sup>9</sup>

In one respect, then, the entire memoir can be read as a lead up to chapters 17 and 18, which describe how Florence and Burton James and their theatre were crushed by the steamroller of the Un-American Activities Committee chaired by Albert Canwell.<sup>10</sup> Their tireless work over more than twenty years to establish a meaningful, community-oriented theatre offering fully professional productions and educational opportunities to all people in the city—and to the state at large—is essential to understanding the relative merits and impact of the allegations they endured. More particularly, the Canwell hearings and the subsequent trials stand in stark contrast to the Jameses' contributions to the war effort (chapter 14) in the years immediately preceding the Un-American Activities episode. The wartime communiques<sup>11</sup> and

Christmas packages to members of the armed forces, along with comps for service men stationed in Seattle and more than eighty performances and special events done completely on a voluntary basis suggest patriotism rather than treason. This is particularly true if one considers the content of their spectacular show (with Bob Hope as MC) directed towards recruitment of aviation workers and the morale-boosting musical revues *Thumbs Up!* and *Here Comes Tomorrow*.

In the memoir, the effects of the Canwell Committee are all the more devastating because we approach them through the perspective of individuals who had persevered and realized their vision for a community theatre despite the obstacles presented by the Depression and war. This was a perspective that Canwell explicitly refused to consider or allow introduced into their hearings. Because they had taught at the university, worked with many liberal faculty in support of social causes and issues, and situated their playhouse in the university district, they and their colleague Al Ottenheimer were included in the persecution of University of Washington faculty in 1948. As well, because they had an especially high local profile they were particularly attractive initial targets for the promotion of fear and ostracism in the community.<sup>12</sup>

Numerous accounts of the effects of Un-American Activities hearings at the federal level have been written, including first-hand responses by New York and Hollywood stars whose careers languished after they were thrust into the role of “unfriendly witness.”<sup>13</sup> The extent to which the tentacles of this persecution of innocent people reached beyond the federal level and New York and Hollywood stars is perhaps not as widely understood. Although Joseph McCarthy’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in the U.S. Senate did not undertake its famous televised hearings until 1954, the U.S. House of Representatives’ Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been established and calling witnesses for ten years when Canwell launched similar proceedings in Washington State in what has been seen as an audition for election to the U.S. Senate. Like its federal counterpart, the state committee effected a reign of terror, using stories fabricated by paid witnesses not open to cross-examination, dismissing the legal and constitutional rights of the accused, branding by suggestion and innuendo, and relying largely on the resulting social and economic effects of guilt by association and blacklisting for punishment and control of witnesses

who refused to cooperate. Just as Hearst newspapers in the East fanned the flames of intolerance and exclusion ignited by the HUAC hearings, Washington's Hearst paper, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, led the way, not only through slanderous headlines screaming from its front pages but by its staffs' backroom participation in drawing up the committee's terms of reference.<sup>14</sup> The results in Washington state were no less devastating than those at the federal level. The stock market crash, the Depression, a world war, and recurrent debt had been unable to strike a killing blow to the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and the formidable husband-and-wife partnership that had fostered twenty-three years of innovative and successful programming, but it took the Canwell committee only a month to put an end to this creative partnership and render the theatre vulnerable to an opportunistic takeover by the university. The theatre was purchased out from under them, Burton James died, and Florence James remained on the FBI's watch list until emigration to Canada allowed her to escape their surveillance.

James' perspective on these black events in American history is important for several reasons. First, it provides an important lesson in the devastation and loss that result when the individual's rights of free speech, free association, and free thought are brushed aside in favour of jingoism, confrontational nationalism, and collective paranoia.<sup>15</sup> Similar loss has been documented for several periods in American history, from the early witch trials to the wartime incarceration of Japanese American families to the exodus of draft dodgers opposed to the Vietnam War to the post-9/11 interrogation of Muslims and present-day political extremism.<sup>16</sup> Second, with James' account of this period in her life she joins a very limited list of women in the arts who wrote directly about their experiences of McCarthyism. In *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era*, Milly Barranger observes that "with the exception of Hallie Flanagan's *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre*, Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time*, and Margaret Webster's chapter 'Of Witch Hunting' in her memoir *Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage*, the women published few accounts of their experiences.... The difference between the genders during McCarthyism can be found in the autobiographies written and interviews granted by congressional witnesses. For the most part, the women were *silenced* by the experience."<sup>17</sup> In light of the difficulties



James had getting her memoir published, it might well be asked how many other women of theatre and film who fell victim to McCarthyism also tried unsuccessfully to have their own recollections published.

With publication of her memoir, James joins a select number of women whose accounts corroborate the perceptions of men connected with Un-American Activities proceedings that women were “tough” witnesses and “more trouble than they were worth.” Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project, helped establish this reputation for women witnesses during HUAC’s first hearings with her deft and feisty responses to the committee’s questions.<sup>18</sup> Florence James, who had worked for Flanagan as a director for the Federal Theatre Project in Seattle, brought a similar attitude. Thanks to a stunning photo of her ejection from the proceedings after a spontaneous outburst against false accusations by a paid witness, Seattle newspapers featured the image of a smartly dressed middle-aged lady, her extended arm pointed accusingly and determinedly at the witness, being manhandled by armed guards. Despite the newspapers’ bias, they could recognize good copy when they saw it and Florence James managed to project a highly performative protest to the Seattle public. The similarity between this photo and one taken of Hallie Flanagan ten years earlier during her HUAC testimony is striking.

An example of the way in which strong women from this period could “buffalo” chauvinistic males in positions of authority came later in court when James delivered a prepared speech before the judge who was to sentence her for contempt of the Un-American Activities proceedings. After indictment, complete with fingerprinting and mug shots, suppression of witnesses favourable to her, refusal to uphold demands for supposed evidence against her or even to consider the copious evidence pointing to tampering with the selection of jury panels, James delivered her own point-by-point indictment of the judge for flagrant complicity in the miscarriage of justice. The fact that it took two trials to convict her because of a male holdout in the first hung jury and that, despite her accusations, the judge gave her only a fine and a suspended sentence seem to suggest that strong women like James posed a particular challenge at the state as well as federal level and that the chauvinism of the period could work in their favour. Her male counterparts before the court were sentenced to jail, although

due to the stroke Burton James suffered as a result of the whole affair he did not serve time in jail for fear it would kill him.

*Nonconformity on Matters of Gender, Ethnicity, and Race*

Mark Jenkins has observed that in the course of researching the proceedings of the Un-American Activities Committee in Washington state and writing his play *All Powers Necessary and Convenient*, his “main discovery” was “that all actions are, at first, *personal*,” and that “all actions no matter how personal ... are also *political*.”<sup>19</sup> Such a realization has been the foundation of feminism and gender studies since the 1970s, but James clearly understood the implications of this reality at a comparatively early age. Having chosen to perform a piece by Oscar Wilde for an assignment at Emerson College she was puzzled by the scandalized rejection of her choice. Even after being given a similarly mystifying explanation that she ultimately figured out, she still could not understand why Wilde’s sexual preferences should have any bearing on an otherwise brilliant piece of writing.

This cameo of James’ determined response to the interpretation of personal actions in a political context is indicative of her behaviour with respect to gender expectations throughout her life. She seemed to take very little notice of hegemonic expectations and threw herself into roles and causes appropriate to her non-conformist sentiments.<sup>20</sup> As a woman she was atypical of her generation but, given her roots in a frontier society that celebrated the independent and self-reliant spirit, relied heavily on the work of women and afforded them greater equality, this aspect of James’ remarkable career is not necessarily surprising. Breaking off an engagement to a wealthy, cultured, and highly eligible young man in Idaho, James was driven by a desire for further education and a hunger for broader cultural experiences. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century this might not sound unusual, but for an early twentieth-century girl from Idaho to transplant herself to Boston, particularly in search of a school for the arts rather than a more traditional degree-granting institution in education, for instance, was exceptional.

While James’ recollections of Mrs. Pankhurst, who motivated her involvement in the successful women’s suffrage campaign in New York, may be of interest with respect to early twentieth-century women’s history, the less flamboyant and personal choices that receive almost

matter-of-fact treatment in her story are of equal importance: her choice to work in the arts, particularly as a director, to marry someone who was similarly non-conformist in his career choice, to simultaneously and seamlessly manage a career and raise a child, and to take leadership positions in politics, education, and the arts. From these choices to James' admiration of the women she saw working side by side with men as labourers, soldiers, even crack sharpshooters in Soviet Russia, it is clear that, as on so many other issues, with respect to the roles for women, James was well beyond the American hegemony of her day.

Matters of race, ethnicity, and gender are closely intertwined in this memoir, and in the first two areas perhaps more than gender we see how James' personal actions, motivated as they were by the most fundamentally American values and beliefs, eventually led to her political persecution as "un-American." For instance, Burton and Florence James brought exceptional insight to their work with socially marginalized groups such as prostitutes, immigrants in the city's ghettos, and Blacks at Lenox Hill Settlement House and elsewhere in New York. They recognized poverty, education, and environmental factors as responsible for a vicious cycle. They made friends within these groups and promoted the arts and culture not as mechanisms for realizing the great American melting pot but as means to help immigrants preserve their culture and dignity in the new country. James' organization of Czechoslovakian women into a cottage industry for the sale of "peasant" embroidery created successful employment that helped them sustain their families while their husbands were away during World War I, and the Jameses' theatre activities provided positive alternatives for the many problem children in these slums by "opening doors and bridging chasms" as was the case for James Cagney, who was one of the Jameses' student actors in New York. (Cagney and the Jameses maintained their connection for many years—see Photo 4 and Appendices 2 and 3.) Their early relationships with and sympathy for the working poor and ethnic slum inhabitants in New York made the Jameses' association with ethnic groups, unions, and social and political activists in Seattle understandable but, because many of these groups were automatically equated with Communism by un-American witch hunters, such associations also left them open to harassment.

Perhaps one of Florence James' most horrifying and touching vignettes is of her three-week stay in the charity ward of Roosevelt

Hospital while five months pregnant and suffering from pneumonia. Her ordeal in this dirty, understaffed, and cockroach-infested institution was tempered only by the close personal relationship she developed with another patient, a Black, middle-aged woman who cared for her like a daughter. This relationship beautifully foreshadows the personal investment apparent in her successful working relationship with the Black community in Seattle, the admiration with which she regarded the early Black activist, Paul Robeson, and her positive contributions to the careers of Black artists in both the United States and Canada. At Florence James' birth, the country was less than thirty years removed from the end of the Civil War and slavery, and liaisons like these with the Black community were politically dangerous. Yet Florence and Burton James were uncompromising in matching their actions and beliefs. It should not be surprising that after the turmoil that befell them in 1948, Burton James defiantly chose a passage from Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* as the title for his book and that years later Florence James saw the same passage as an equally appropriate title for her memoir:

We give what pleases us and when we choose,  
 And, having given, we do not take back.  
 But once we shut our fists upon a star  
 It will take portents to unloose that grip  
 And even then the stuff will keep the print.  
 It is a habit of living.<sup>21</sup>

As demonstrated repeatedly in her memoir, for James this “habit of living” and the “habit of art” alluded to in the title of Alan Bennett's play were inseparable.<sup>22</sup>

### *A Pioneer on the Frontier of Modern American Theatre*

Having travelled east from her frontier community in Idaho in 1911, Florence James initially formed her approach to theatre and performance by studying elocution at Emerson College in Boston. Both here and later in New York she took full advantage of being at the perceived ‘eastern centre’ of American culture by seeing the work of some of the great artists of her time—for example, Sarah Bernhardt,<sup>23</sup> Isadora Duncan, Geraldine

Farrar, John McCormack, Charlie Chaplin, Max Reinhardt, the Moscow Art Theatre, and the Abbey Players. When after 11 years in the East she and her husband chose to take up work at the Cornish School on what was then perceived to be the edge of the American cultural frontier in Seattle, they did so consciously having turned their backs on the commercial theatre of New York and determined to devote themselves to a “theatre of the people, by the people and for the people.” (5) For the next 29 years, the James partnership set about transforming the so-called frontier into an innovative centre for theatre that drew many American stars of the day into its circle and nurtured the early careers of many future stars. At Cornish School she worked with the as yet unknown artist Mark Tobey and dancer Martha Graham. She worked with the Russian musician, composer, and conductor Myron Jacobson, as director of opera, and she taught Albert Ottenheimer, who would eventually join them at the Playhouse. After they left the school to start up the Repertory Playhouse and teach at the University, their students included Marc Platt (dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo as well as Broadway and film star); Frances Farmer (stage and screen actress); Howard Duff and Stacy Harris (both radio, television, and film actors). Pete Seeger, Earl Robinson, and Woody Guthrie all performed at various times at the Playhouse. Initially on radio and then in the musical *San Juan Story*, they had the opportunity to work with the young Martha Wright at the beginning of her career as singer and actor on Broadway, television, and radio, and they worked with Bob Hope in mounting a spectacular Seattle show to recruit workers into the aviation industry during World War II. When the Playhouse celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1947, the center of American culture metaphorically came to Seattle as Helen Hayes offered live magnified telephone greetings to the audience from her New York dressing room on behalf of the American National Theatre and Academy:

Many of us associate your city with the last frontier. And now we have other frontiers of a different kind. The Seattle Repertory Playhouse is pioneering among the social and cultural frontiers of the human spirit. You are held in high esteem—and greatly admired—throughout the theatrical world, commercial as well as non-commercial.... Our the-

atre is better, finer, fuller, because for twenty years, there in the farthest western reach of the United States, the Seattle Repertory Playhouse has been striving and struggling and pioneering and building. (215)

Florence James was constantly learning and searching out new ideas and approaches. Typical of this attitude was use of proscenium, arena, and environmental staging as well as a wide range of plays in various styles and periods. However, this pioneering attitude did not evolve in isolation. From her childhood she strove to discover and experience new developments in the arts. In 1927 she did a tour of “the nerve centres of the American theatre” (66): the Cleveland Play House, the Goodman Memorial Theatre in Chicago, the Eastman School of Music, the Civic Repertory Theatre in Boston, George Pierce Baker’s Yale School of Drama, and New York. On this trip she was disappointed by the “cultural desolation and apathy” she saw, but in 1934 she travelled to the Malvern and Stratford Festivals in England and to the Moscow Festival. While she was not impressed with British productions of Shakespeare, much of what she saw in Moscow related closely to the vision of theatre that she and her husband were trying to develop in Seattle. She recognized the propagandist direction of some of the drama, but she realized that they were also creating good theatre—and that it appealed to and was attended by a broad section of the population. She was impressed by the way the government was attempting to foster theatre even in rural communities, promote amateur theatre groups in collective farms and factories, and financially support professional training for amateurs. Although putting theatre under the purview of the Soviet Commissariat of Education was indicative of Russia’s view of the political role of theatre, it aligned with James’ conception of the broader role of theatre in education—and education in theatre. The production she saw at the Moscow Theatre for Children made a particular impression upon her and reinforced what she had learned from her work in Washington state and would take with her in helping to develop theatre for and with children in Saskatchewan. Theatre practitioners in Moscow understood children’s need to participate in performances, the greater success of theatre *with* versus *for* children, and the extent to which such theatre could foster an interest that would carry into adulthood.<sup>24</sup>

The enthusiastic articles she wrote for the *Pacific Weekly* and lectures she gave to service organizations, women's groups, and the Unemployed Citizens' League upon her return to Seattle ultimately cost her dearly during the Un-American Activities hearings, but given what she saw in Russia and her own philosophy of theatre the enthusiasm is understandable—just as a later trip within the United States to discover new directions and practices among community and university theatres in the West was understandably disappointing, particularly her realization that most theatres were unable to articulate a philosophy on which they based their work.

Growing up in turn-of-the-century Idaho, James clearly saw books and education as precious commodities, and she credited several books as contributing to her evolving philosophy on theatre, acting, and directing: a 1936 article in *Theatre Workshop* by J. Rapoport on acting exercises used at the Moscow Art Theatre, *Problems of the Actor* by Louis Calvert, "Concerning Practice: The Connection between Cognition and Practice" by Mao Tse Tung published in *Labour Monthly*, and *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* by John Howard Lawson.<sup>25</sup> Yet James notes that when she began her work in the theatre there were few books that were very helpful in a practical sense for actors or directors and that she had to learn by sweeping away much of the old school approaches to acting that she had learned at Emerson and simply learn by doing. This was especially necessary for her as director, her primary role throughout most of her career in the United States. Directing was a comparatively new role in the theatre, and it had not yet engendered even the limited theoretical and methodological discussions devoted to acting.

Given that women are still in the minority when it comes to directing, James' substantial and successful career as a director in the first half of the twentieth century makes her particularly interesting. In 1933 she was praised for her "keen intelligence, rare insight and understanding, and a tremendous capacity for hard work," and hailed "as one of the outstanding stage directors of the West."<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that the praise is not qualified by calling her a "woman stage director," but this may be indicative of the fairly straightforward evolution of her career and the degree of self-assurance she brought to directing. Rather than undertaking a long struggle to gain opportunities and recognition for

directing, James appears to have made an early and natural transition to the director's chair that she occupied for most of her career.<sup>27</sup> She attributes this ease to a combination of factors—first, a willingness and ability to take leadership responsibilities and, second, the perennial overabundance of women actors that made her contribution in that area expendable. Her first directing experience while at Emerson College would seem to support this view. They needed someone to work with the young Robert Frost in the dramatization of his new play, *The Death of the Hired Man*, with Thomas Watson (who had been at the other end of Alexander Graham Bell's famous call) in the lead, and James was willing to take on the task. Whether she was directing in the theatre, organizing immigrant women as a social worker, running for political office in Seattle, speaking to labour unions and service organizations, acting as an educator for children and adults, or chairing the Washington Citizens' Bill of Rights Committee organized to resist Washington's Un-American Activities Committee,<sup>28</sup> she comes across as an unconventional woman for her time, a woman thoroughly comfortable in the public limelight and in leadership roles. Unlike the memoirs of many women who avoid addressing their successes and accomplishments head on or do so only to shift credit to others (often men) for their accomplishments, James almost matter-of-factly identifies her strengths and weaknesses as a director and, without coy or self-effacing modesty, proudly recounts some of the many successes achieved at the Seattle Repertory Playhouse by the theatre community she led in so many productions.

While James itemizes an impossibly lengthy and contradictory list of virtues necessary for a good director, she possessed the three essential qualities of both a good leader and a good director: she had well-thought-out insights and values, she was not afraid to speak up and articulate them publicly, and she had the capacity to organize and motivate people to support her.<sup>29</sup> Given the virtually unanimous response of actors who worked with her and members of her audiences regarding the strength of the acting in her productions—even with novices—theatre professionals and students will be interested in the chapters on her approaches to acting and directing. They remain surprisingly insightful and current today. Working from a definition of theatre as “a unity at the core of which is the living community finding some vital part of itself reflected in the creations of the dramatist and actor,”



(146–147) she regarded it “an opportunity and an obligation” (148) to discover, train, and open up the talents of actors who worked with her. The sense-perception exercises she adapted from Moscow Art Theatre practices will not be new to most actors, but she cites creative and useful examples of how she used sense perception and other techniques as a director in rehearsals to help actors who were blocked from realizing key dramatic moments. Some of the points on which she places most emphasis remain key issues in theatre today, but unfortunately often as aspirations rather than actualities: the importance of ensemble acting, the encouragement and production of new plays, the role of both the playwright’s intentions *and* the audience in completing the meaning of a performance, and rehearsal periods sufficient to allow for the “subjective work” of full table analysis of the text and outside research by all members of the cast and design team (two weeks to ten days in the Playhouse). On rehearsal periods, she argues that only “when the actor, with script in hand, has a fairly clear idea of what he is doing, why he is doing it, and, most important, knows his relationship to other characters” could she move to objectifying the actions. To her, blocking then became a “simple matter” of actor and director working together to develop the character in relation to other characters on stage. (187)

### *A Model Community Theatre*

Perhaps because theatre is the most social of the art forms and requires live audiences, until comparatively recently its history has tended to revolve around large centres.<sup>30</sup> People starting out in the theatre at the same point as Florence and Burton James still make the trek to New York, London, Paris, Toronto, or Montreal in hopes of being “discovered,” becoming stars, and earning the kind of money that large and expensive commercial theatres can afford to pay. In Florence James’ day another performance centre was emerging on the west coast in Hollywood, with its even greater capacity to make the most successful performers wealthy. Yet she and her husband decided early that they had a different vision of performance and theatre to which they wanted to devote their careers.

Although the Folk Theatre they proposed at the Lenox Hill Settlement was not realized, they had already begun to conceive of “a theatre of the people, which shall reach out and appeal to the tastes

and pocketbooks of society,” with “a director and a staff of associates who will with sympathy, understanding, training and care follow the dramatic bent of our neighborhood.” (53) Their vision was of a community theatre that would reflect the cosmopolitan character of the slums in which it would be built in ways that have taken decades for theatre in most western countries to fully appreciate or achieve. They proposed “not to change the tongue or spirit of the neighbourhood’s drama” because “plays produced in a foreign tongue will perpetuate age-old standards of art ... The Folk Theatre must disseminate, not exploit, must stimulate, not force ... This group should set the standard of co-operative endeavour. The Folk Theatre has no room for competitive enterprises.” (53)

The couple’s move from New York to Seattle demonstrates how little attraction Broadway had for them, and their new community began to contribute to their evolving vision of a people’s theatre. Their time as teachers at the Cornish School and the University of Washington’s School of Drama as well as their well-paid work at an early Seattle radio station, Adolph Linden’s American Broadcasting Company (not related to the current ABC), all took them further towards the conception of what became the Seattle Repertory Playhouse. It gradually became clear that the Cornish School was not the place to realize their vision, but the increasingly professional and impressive productions they mounted there made a reputation for them in the community and helped develop community connections that would be important to the success of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse.

One important connection was Al Ottenheimer, a University of Washington student who had acted in their productions at the Cornish School. To Florence James’ skill as a director and educator and Burton James’ abilities as an actor, designer and technician Ottenheimer added his own acting and writing talents along with considerable skills in promotion. These three worked together to attract and organize a core of people who would form an ongoing company in 1928 and formally launch the theatre with their first production in 1929. Initially using rented space, they eventually moved to a new theatre in the University district in 1930. During more than 20 years they ran a theatre which served as a model of what a good theatre—regional or otherwise—should be.

With seven or more new shows a year plus a summer festival of reprised shows in repertory, the Seattle Repertory Playhouse mounted a wide variety of productions—from Seán O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* to Sem Benelli’s *The Jest*, from Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* to W. Kerr’s *Rip Van Winkle*, from G. B. Shaw’s *Major Barbara* to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, from Goethe’s *Faust* to G. L. Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. James classifies the bulk of the repertoire as “active romanticism” as defined by Maxim Gorky: plays that “strengthen man’s will to live, to rouse him to rebellion against reality with all its tyrannies.” (150) Sometimes this spirit of rebellion combined with a desire to include voices from all segments of the community led to plays which presented racially, economically, or politically marginalized voices. Albert Bein’s *Little Ol’ Boy* about the abuse of delinquents in a reformatory, Paul Peters and George Sklar’s *Stevedore* about labour relations and strike-breaking in the dockyards, Paul Green’s *In Abraham’s Bosom* about the lynching of a rebellious Black man in 1880s North Carolina, and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* about the tragic dehumanizing impact on labourers of working conditions and class-based prejudices—these were all controversial plays to varying degrees, but from James’ perspective they were all plays that “should be done” (149) regardless of controversy or box office receipts. She argues that “it is fatal to compromise your insights in order to acquiesce to the demands made on you,” and if you do so, “you will be producing plays written about nothing for nobody.” (158) She clearly lived up to that admonition even when it may not have been in her best personal interests to do so. Without question the most controversial play they produced was given only one performance and that for a private audience. However, Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* with its sympathetic treatment of strikers cost the theatre any future mention in the *Seattle Times* and situated Florence and Burton James in the middle of a storm of political controversy that would extend to the Un-American Activities hearings.

While the Playhouse was always challenged financially, James notes that the variety of plays chosen reflected their awareness that part of the attraction for theatre audiences is not just interesting plays and good acting but also spectacle. With a cast of sixty, members of the Seattle Symphony playing Grieg’s incidental music, and an “ultramodern” design using a revolve for the first time in the Northwest (82-83), the

Playhouse's initial production of *Peer Gynt* proved enormously popular and established a major reputation for the company in the region, even in Vancouver where they took the play on tour. Similarly spectacular productions like *Faust* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continued the visual appeal, as did their forays into opera. In 1939–1940 the Lyric Theatre unit of the Playhouse produced *The Barber of Seville* with a Japanese Rosina, a modern *Die Fledermaus* with a Florence James libretto, and *La Traviata* with Ludmilla Novatna and Richard Bonelli from the Met in the leads (190). Even in 1950, during the last days of the theatre, they again worked with members of the Seattle Symphony to produce Benjamin Britten's *Let's Make an Opera* (200). For an "unofficial" listing of the Playhouse repertoire over its twenty years, see Appendix 1.

Both the scope and appeal of the Playhouse productions was made possible in part because of the theatre's strong "community" orientation. It reached out to "every ethnic group in Seattle" (210), including the Scandinavian communities with *Peer Gynt*, the German community with *Faust*, the African Methodist Church for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *In Abraham's Bosom*, the Chinese community for their traditional staging of *Lady Precious Stream* for China Relief, the White Russian community for the chorus in *The Living Corpse* and the musical revue *Kolokala*, and the many unions and labour organizations through plays like *Stevedore*, *The Hairy Ape* and *Waiting for Lefty*. It extended its community through tours to places like Tacoma and Vancouver, and it was reported to be attracting regional audiences to the theatre from California, Oregon, British Columbia, and Montana (92). The Jameses cultivated a playing company that could encompass both a society matron who arrived at the theatre in a limousine and a newspaper seller. They wanted an equally broad cross-section of the community in the audience, and kept their ticket prices at a level that would assure that mix: 25 cents for children, \$1.25–\$1.50 for adults, and comps for people who could not afford those prices. Using a system that was eagerly emulated by regional theatres elsewhere, they cultivated group support of the theatre by not only selling subscriptions but also making large blocks of tickets and whole houses available to everyone from businesses and service groups to women's organizations and unions.

In order to assure this kind of community support and fulfill their responsibility to the community, however, the Jameses realized that

they had to go beyond offering the wide range of period and modern classics. They understood that the theatre also needed to nurture and develop local and regional playwrights and regularly produce their plays. They introduced a Sunday night series of readings of interesting plays that for whatever reason the company could not produce—as well as new plays by emerging playwrights. In conjunction with the Washington State Theatre experiment they fostered the development of playwriting programs in Seattle high schools and produced the first play to emerge from that initiative. Their first season featured *In His Image* by local playwright and English professor Garland Ethel. Ethel later figured prominently in the second hearing of Canwell's Un-American Activities Committee in July 1948 as the first of twelve University of Washington professors called to testify. He admitted to having been a communist at one point but set a strong example by quoting Polonius' "Unto thine own self be true" in refusing to name names.<sup>31</sup>

The Playhouse also produced several adaptations and plays by Albert Ottenheimer. He adapted Goethe's *Faust* for the company and wrote the books for two original musicals, *Calico Cargo* and *San Juan Story*, both of which addressed stories out of Washington's history. The latter musical was co-written with Walter Gyger, who had emerged out of a high-school writing program fostered by the theatre. Ottenheimer had two original plays produced, *L'Envoi* and *Funny Man*, a comedy about life in vaudeville which caught the attention of MGM for which he did some work as screenwriter. As well, James mounted three plays by the San Francisco-based playwright, Marianne King: *The Chaste Mistress*; *American Made*; and *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*. She and Florence became friends. She not only accompanied James on her European trip in 1934 but also returned to Russia again in 1936. Over the entire period of the Playhouse they produced nineteen new plays, and this kind of encouragement of playwrights and new plays drew national attention. James proudly reports that in a review of the company's premier of *Leading Man* (a satire of Hollywood) by William Kimball, *Billboard* acknowledged that they were helping to build the future of American Theatre. (80)

Although initially the Jameses had taught in the School of Drama at the university and the school's head had been a member of the Playhouse board, the Playhouse practice of renting the theatre for use

by student productions came to an end when they sensed the School of Drama was moving to mount a rival professional season in the Playhouse space. It is not uncommon for rivalry to develop between theatre schools and professional theatres, but in this case the rivalry had devastating consequences. The Playhouse perceived the school as moving to establish a potentially competitive professional, off-campus presence with unfair subsidies, and the school resented the capacity of a theatre on its doorstep to lure good students away and mount productions in facilities it could only dream about. After several skirmishes, sometimes resulting in student protests, the University of Washington bought the Playhouse from their landlord and forced the Jameses out of the theatre they had built. In doing so, they brought the curtain down on a model for community and regional theatres with such a varied mandate and visionary accomplishments that they would still be regarded as radical and unattainable for the majority of regional theatres in North America today. James' memoir of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse effectively constructs a checklist that most twenty-first-century regional theatres would find daunting. The fact that it also laid a foundation that made it possible to envision model state and federal theatres makes the Playhouse all the more impressive and important.<sup>32</sup>

### *A Model State Theatre*

James saw education as an essential theatrical endeavour. From 1930 both Florence and Burton taught in the Drama Division at the University of Washington until first Burton (1934) and then Florence (1938) were let go as a result of the ongoing antagonism between the Playhouse and the university. The resulting protests over Florence's dismissal testified to her effectiveness as a teacher.<sup>33</sup> Their backgrounds in education, first at the Cornish School and then at the university, clearly informed their approach at the Playhouse. This was not a company afraid of encouraging thinking during rehearsals. Play selections were intended to challenge both the company and their audiences. The company undertook substantial research about its productions. It offered regular issues of "The Playhouse News" with articles about upcoming plays,<sup>34</sup> as well as pre-show talks and lectures on plays like *Peer Gynt* and *Faust* in order to give its audiences the background to respond to the production knowledgeably. As well, James and

the company worked continually on their theatrical skills, and their School of Theatre offered an apprenticeship program as well as both a weekday school and weekend workshops for amateurs and students who wanted to acquire the skills necessary for a professional career. The weekend workshops had approximately one hundred students in 1940.<sup>35</sup> After the war, when GIs expressed an interest in more formal training in theatre practice, the theatre school received accreditation for that purpose.

From the beginning the Seattle Repertory Playhouse mounted shows for children, and once they moved into their new theatre in the university district they became even more committed to theatre for youth when they realized that the lack of university students in their audiences, despite their proximity, may have been the result of a lack of familiarity with the art form. Starting with *Romeo and Juliet* because it was in the curriculum, they offered matinees to an increasing number of high schools and junior high schools in Seattle and eventually to students bused in from other communities. In the depths of the Depression, they approached the State Board of Education with ideas to tour to a couple of high schools outside the city, and in 1935 they took *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the road with a cast of fifty, including an orchestra and ballet dancers. The enthusiasm generated by this experiment was such that they quickly proceeded to apply for a three-year Rockefeller Foundation grant that launched the Washington State Theatre.<sup>36</sup> The importance of this venture was recognized not only by the Jameses but by state educators. In their promotional booklet, the state superintendent of public instruction hailed it as “a history-making project . . . unique in the annals of education and the theatre in America.” He argued that “it is neither fantastic nor grandiloquent to conceive of it as ultimately achieving a powerful and beneficent influence throughout the nation for culture and education and all the great, good things of life for which we all strive.”

They prepared *The Comedy of Errors* for their first tour with an eye to performing for both high school students and adults—including inmates in state and federal penitentiaries on their route. The theatre undertook surveys to learn about the needs and interests of students, provided study guides to assist both students and teachers in getting the most out of the productions, and sent advance promotional people,

including Albert Ottenheimer, to address school assemblies. Eventually they teamed up with the State Librarian to foster promotional materials in libraries and radio programs, including a state-wide broadcast of a preview production of *She Stoops to Conquer* from the Playhouse.

Although they continued to produce Shakespeare, they experimented with modern dress productions, which were still strange to many audiences but were intended to make a more effective connection with the students' contemporary reality. Starting with their second tour they also began producing modern plays and looking for opportunities to engage the students more effectively—as in the case of *No More Frontier* by Talbot Jennings in which they incorporated opportunities for school musical groups to play during intervals. Yet they discovered that students still had difficulty relating to these and other plays they offered. The students really wanted plays relating to their own age group and circumstances. This led to the introduction of playwriting in the Seattle high school curriculum, and a Living Newspaper play, *Search*, which was the first product of these classes and was then produced by the Washington State Theatre as their first experiment with theatre “by youth, for youth.”

Children attending State Theatre shows paid 25 cents, and even with that modest amount there were concerns because not all children could afford it. Unfortunately, adult audiences did not support the productions sufficiently to offset the costs of the tour, most likely because they had little more experience with live theatre than did their children. To further complicate matters the political winds shifted, and the ongoing financial support which the State had promised in conjunction with the Rockefeller Grant was not forthcoming. After having taken theatre to 95,000 students since 1936, the Washington State Theatre folded in January 1939, leaving the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, rather than the state, to pay off its debt. Burton James would not see his vision of a state theatre become an ongoing reality, but Florence James would move to inspire a similar theatre with a very similar mandate in another country and a more progressive time.

While the touring ceased, the Playhouse continued to mount plays for young people, and service organizations helped to make these productions available to children from outside the city. One such produc-



tion was mounted in the year that the Washington State Theatre closed, and it was remembered in 1977 by a woman who had attended it:

I was bused to the theatre at the age of seven. There was a program sponsored by the Junior League, to bring children to live theatre. I lived in a small fishing village outside of Seattle; it was a long bus ride, but it changed my life. Professional actors, who had worked together for twenty years, under the direction of Mrs. Florence Bean James ... were playing *Rumpelstiltskin*. That was it. I fell in love.

As soon as I was allowed to go about on my own (fourteen), I went back to that theatre and hung around and begged to clean johns and sort nuts and bolts until they took me into the company.

Mrs. James and her actor husband, Burton, inspired me to write for the theatre. They always hoped a playwright would emerge from their theatre. When I joined, I was more interested in design. But watching her direct and teach acting, I got hooked on all aspects of theatre. I was fascinated by her sense-memory exercises and her classes in improvisation.<sup>37</sup>

This child, who was born Josephine Duffy and through her teenage years was known as Marguerite Duffy, eventually changed her name and became the internationally recognized playwright Megan Terry. Florence James became a powerful role model for her, and the actions of Canwell's Un-American Activities Committee informed her future political activism. She went on to participate in the theatre programs offered by the Jameses at the Banff School of Fine Arts, including an appearance as Hermia in their production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1950.<sup>38</sup> James makes no reference to Terry in her memoir, but she is just one extreme example of the way in which the Jameses' educational vision for their theatre was realized.

### *A Model Federal Theatre*

Maintaining a fledgling theatre in the depths of the Depression proved to be a major challenge, and the opportunity to gain some financial support for core theatre staff through the Federal Theatre Project of

the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was clearly a godsend.<sup>39</sup> The Negro Repertory Theatre proposed by Burton and Florence James has garnered more scholarly attention than any other aspect of their career. From the perspective of the twenty-first century—and even from James’ perspective when she resigned from the project in 1937 because of escalating red tape and WPA censorship<sup>40</sup>—the success of the Negro Repertory Theatre was marked by significant limitations: a limited number of Blacks in Seattle at the time (perhaps 5,000 at most), the short span of the project (1935–39), the racial prejudices and paternalism of the predominantly White audiences and administration, and the nature of some of the plays, which forced the actors into uncomfortable stereotypes.

Although James does not mention it, her original choice for opening the Negro Repertory Theatre, *Porgy*, met with protests by the Black actors, who did not fit the stereotypical expectations behind such a play.<sup>41</sup> As reported by a visiting Federal Theatre Project administrator, the actors were “mostly educated Negroes, and they are actually having to teach dialect to many of the players in their opening production of *Porgy*. This makes me wonder a little if our whole White approach to the Negro theatre question isn’t wrong.”<sup>42</sup> The play was eventually withdrawn when they could not get the rights, but this early experience had already caused important reflection, and better play choices emerged as the project continued. A play like *Noah* gave the actors less stereotypical roles, if not serious acting challenges, and *Stevedore*, with its roles for dockworkers, hit somewhat closer to the actors’ experiences than *In Abraham’s Bosom*, which still forced the Northwest actors into North Carolina dialects and circumstances that felt strangely stereotypical. James came to understand how poorly her Black actors were served by the existing repertory of plays, so she altered her approach. According to one of the members of the company, Sara Oliver, “Mrs. James tried not to affect us with White culture, but to let us bring out our Black culture. Now she may not have realized that she was doing it that way, but that was where she was coming from.”<sup>43</sup> She encouraged one of the strongest actors in the company, Theodore Browne, to start writing. Browne helped to put together the successful musical revue *Swing, Gates, Swing* and adapted *Lysistrata* to an Ethiopian context with allusions to the recent invasion of that country by Italy. Roosevelt was

attempting at the time to maintain a neutral position for the United States in the conflict<sup>44</sup> and that, plus the racier bits of the original play, apparently mobilized the WPA to close the show after only one performance. Although James does not mention it, both she and Browne must have known that a year earlier the Federal Theatre Project's first Living Newspaper production, which was entitled *Ethiopia* and featured Haile Selassie, had been shut down by the government. Quite possibly James and Browne may have seen the piece as a response to this kind of censorship. Fortunately, Browne had better success with his play *Natural Man*, which concerned the legendary railroad worker John Henry and played for nearly a month in 1937.<sup>45</sup> After the close of the Negro Repertory Theatre, Browne went on to become the first Black American winner of a Rockefeller/Dramatist's Guild Fellowship in Playwriting and, with Langston Hughes and Theodore Ward, a founding member of the Negro Playwrights Company in Harlem. He eventually joined the American Negro Theatre, also in Harlem, which produced his play again in 1941.<sup>46</sup> Browne went on to earn an AB and an MEd.<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting how many of the actors associated with the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and the Negro Theatre unit went on to earn university degrees. Constance Pitter majored in speech at the University of Washington and was allowed to take an education degree thanks to Florence James' sponsorship of her practice teaching. At the same time, Joseph Sylvester Jackson, who played the lead in the 1933 production of *In Abraham's Bosom*, was executive secretary of the Seattle Urban League. He already had a BA but went on to earn an MA in sociology in 1939.<sup>48</sup>

A different issue arose around the Negro Repertory Theatre production of Sinclair Lewis and John Moffitt's *It Can't Happen Here*, which was prepared for simultaneous production in as many as twenty-two different locations on October 27, 1936.<sup>49</sup> All of the productions done outside Seattle had White casts, but because the Negro Repertory Theatre was regarded as by far the strongest Federal Theatre unit in the city, they were chosen to perform this play, which deals with a hypothetical fascist takeover of the United States. This "hot potato" of a play created controversy inside and outside the Federal Theatre Project, and James complains about constant tampering with the script plus escalating administrative complications throughout rehearsal, but, intriguingly, it appears to have been an early example of colour-blind

casting on the basis of merit. Contrary to Barry Witham's critique of the play as consisting of parts poorly suited to Black actors,<sup>50</sup> it could be argued that this production gave the actors a high-profile opportunity to take on serious roles in a contemporary play that had not been written specifically for Black actors. James' attempts to localize the action in the Black neighbourhood of Seattle as well as some audience response which thought "the Negro cast unsuited to the play" suggest that people on both sides of the stage were struggling to adjust to Black actors in a "White man's play," but, like other dimensions of the Negro Repertory Theatre, it was the beginning of things that it would take decades to sort out—and of some that are still not sorted.<sup>51</sup>

Interestingly, the group of White actors working in Seattle under the Federal Theatre Project began to complain that the Black actors were getting better direction and training than they were, so James was requisitioned to work with the White actors as well.<sup>52</sup> The Living Newspaper production she directed with them, *Power*, was on a topic of considerable interest in Washington state at the time and was a spectacular show, including film, slide projections, a chorus, and an orchestra. While it proved to be an enormously successful show, "a bombshell" as Barry Witham characterizes it,<sup>53</sup> *Power's* real importance, identified by James herself, was more in what happened backstage. The scale of the production required a chorus, experienced stage managers, and technicians. The White company lacked resources in these areas, but the training the Black company had received enabled them to step into the breach and thereby create an integrated production, which, according to James, sparked no backstage controversy. Ultimately, however, this integration initiative created controversy in the context of the Un-American Activities committee.<sup>54</sup>

In her book *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935–1939*, Rena Fraden notes that "surprisingly," the Negro Repertory Theatre in Seattle "put on some of the most experimental of productions of any Negro unit, partly due to its directors, Florence and Burton James." She argues that Black playwrights, actors, and musicians were allowed "to exercise direction and some autonomy." In an interview with Rita Deverell, Florence James remembered that at a later date one of the Black actors who was still involved in theatre in Seattle told her "she never felt like a person until she came to the Playhouse. She said there

nobody questioned my appearance, my looks, my colour. All I was supposed to do was what I wanted to do, and I got all kinds of help and credit for it ... I just emerged.”<sup>55</sup> By twenty-first-century standards this may seem like a small accomplishment, but Fraden observes that with respect to colour-blind casting and integrated casts and audiences we still have quite a ways to go today:

Although non-traditional casting and color-blind casting have been tried by various companies, not a great deal of headway has been made, partly because our society is anything but color-blind, willing or able to see beyond a very narrow sense of what constitutes realism.... That color-blind casting seems problematic to producers reflects the ongoing color coding and color bias that seems perfectly natural in our society.... Operating in such a firmly entrenched color-coded environment, theatres producing ethnic work employ all those actors still locked out from the majority of productions in the United States and showcase the work of authors committed to telling their separate ethnic story. In any case, to think in terms of either erasing all distinctions or foregrounding them continues to set the narrow terms of what constitutes a proper or appropriate dramatic representation of “authenticity,” “realism,” or the “natural.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Building New Companies*

Florence James ruefully cites Norris Houghton’s prediction relating to the Playhouse team at the time of the Washington State Theatre “that if the artists in the Repertory Playhouse can keep their number intact, they may have grown into a company with a forceful and incisive theatrical style.” Events set in motion by the Canwell committee limited the ensemble’s tenure at the Playhouse, but in some respects they also contributed to its influence and to eventual awareness of the importance of this theatrical experiment in company and community. Although its membership was specifically determined when they formally set themselves up as a union in 1936, the Playhouse company that Megan Terry so admired for having worked together for twenty years proved to be a widely extended community when the full force of Canwell’s commit-

tee came down upon them. The memoir documents how people who had only worked briefly at the theatre, students of the school and their parents, audience members whom they had touched, and individuals then far removed from Seattle sent money and supportive notes.

It is in the context of this extended Playhouse community that the diaspora of the Playhouse company must be read. The building and the theatre were lost, but the artists who had gained a knowledge of theatre practice under its roof created a network of actors, writers, performers, directors, technicians, and educators who extended the influence of that company to other communities in the United States and Canada. Initially James travelled to San Francisco, where the playwright Marianne King was based. She tried working off-Broadway in New York, where Al Ottenheimer had relocated, but eventually, at the age of sixty, James headed to Canada, where she would foster the development of not one but several theatre companies and establish an enduring interest in theatre in large and small communities across the province. She was joined by her daughter, Marijo, Marijo's husband, Jack Kinzel, and their children.<sup>58</sup> Although Kinzel had at one time been involved with the Playhouse and in Burton James' arts initiatives for the state, he had been blacklisted for his connections with unions and their sponsorship of a concert by Paul Robeson in Seattle.<sup>59</sup> Like James, Kinzel came to Saskatchewan because he was offered government-related work.

Burton and Florence James began coming to Canada in 1938 to teach in the University of British Columbia summer school and from there went on to teach in the summer program at the Banff Centre for the Arts, beginning in 1945. Donald Cameron, who was head of the program, thought highly of Burton. He made a point of protecting him from investigation by the FBI while in Banff, and encouraged him to move to Alberta when the Canwell proceedings were over.<sup>60</sup> Apparently, however, he was not such a fan of strong women. In an interview of Esther Nelson, who was also from the Playhouse and used to teach in the Banff program, she notes that Cameron found Florence a threat because she would not "take any kind of nonsense." But Burton was hired to teach acting and directing, and direct a show, despite the fact he "was not a director." So Florence came "the last two weeks" to "sort of pull the thing together. Because he was fine at getting the

thing started ... but she had a lot more experience as a director. He was primarily from an acting point of view.” It was not until 1951 that Florence formally became a member of the staff.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, Florence made a powerful impression on faculty and students later interviewed by the Banff Centre. Leona Patterson, who taught with the Jameses, remembers her as a “very outspoken” woman who “added a great deal to the School ... She was a fine, well-trained, well-organized person—he was a dreamer. She was a rod of iron.”<sup>62</sup> Bruno Gerussi went to Banff as a student and then was offered a scholarship to the Seattle Repertory Playhouse school where he stayed for two years.<sup>63</sup> Like Megan Terry, he saw the Jameses, and Florence in particular, as hugely influential in his career:

She was an incredible woman. She was one of the most dynamic, extraordinary women I’ve ever met in my life. There they worked as a team, the two Jameses. I mean he’s the one who was on faculty but everybody talks about her. They both were phenomenal people. She was an extraordinary teacher, and just a dynamic, extraordinary person. They both were, and they were a dynamic team. They without a doubt were the first real powerful influence in my life in the way of the theatre, and probably the most important. I’ve worked since then with Guthrie and that’s a mountain of a man, he was, and great, and Douglas Campbell and all those people, but it all started with Florence and Burton James that I met at the Banff School of Fine Arts. <sup>64</sup>

Before the loss of the Playhouse and Burton’s death, bridges had been forged between the Playhouse and individuals from all across Canada who would contribute to new Canadian and U.S. companies, both professional and amateur. Banff Centre programs from the period attest to staff and students from the Playhouse following the Jameses to Banff, and interviews reveal that students there in turn followed the Jameses back to Seattle. Many of the Jameses’ students, like George Ryga and Shirley Douglas, went on to theatre-related careers, while others, like Mary Ellen Burgess and Lyn Goldman, went back to their communities to contribute to drama in the schools and amateur drama

groups.<sup>65</sup> Given the Jameses' impact on their students and the strong participation of people from Saskatchewan at Banff, it may not have been happenstance that Norah McCullough, executive secretary of the Saskatchewan Arts Board (1947–58), met the Jameses at a conference in Banff and invited them to move from Banff to Saskatchewan to lead drama workshops for her newly established arts agency.<sup>66</sup>

As Rita Deverell observes in the epilogue, after Florence James' success in the workshops, the invitation to join the Arts Board full time in 1953 was indicative of the stark contrast between the climate in Washington and that in Saskatchewan. She arrived in Saskatchewan at a turning point in the province's political, social, and cultural development. As her son-in-law observed, "in that period Saskatchewan seemed to be a sort of island of sanity in North America."<sup>67</sup> Tommy Douglas had set up the first socialist government in North America and its provincial health care and arts funding programs were later regarded as such important innovations that they were emulated by other provincial and national governments in programs such as the Canada Council for the Arts.<sup>68</sup> While Washington invested in the destructive enterprise of searching out communists, Saskatchewan invested in the socialist dream of making creative outlets available to everyone in the province. James was offered \$3,600 (raised to \$4,200 in 1957),<sup>69</sup> and she remarked with amazement that this was the first time she had received a salary for her theatre work. Thanks to Washington and the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan gained an experienced and impassioned artist, arts educator, arts administrator, and advocate, who would be perfectly positioned to have an immeasurable impact on the development of theatre within the province and beyond.<sup>70</sup>

It must have been very difficult for James to make the transition from a professional playhouse at its peak—where "everybody was used to their fullest. And you knew it. You just stretched to fill the need"—to small rural drama groups composed largely of people who had never been on a stage before, many of whom had not even seen professional theatre. It must also have been difficult to make the transition from the lush and semi-tropical Northwest to the cold and semi-arid flats of Saskatchewan.<sup>71</sup> However, once she had made the transition from a model theatre to a model arts agency, James tackled the demands of



bringing theatre to the little towns and villages of the province with the same vision, energy, and determination that she had brought to the Playhouse. Her position, initially funded for only two years, was to assist with theatrical preparations for the province's Golden Jubilee in 1955. James travelled to large and small communities to help drama groups with choices of plays and pageants, casting, directing, and training workshops to aid in preparations for the celebrations.<sup>72</sup> At the same time she spoke about her theatre work and helped with issue-oriented skits for the Farmers' Union Conference in North Battleford, Wilkie, St. Walburg, Saskatoon, and Regina. Although this organization was not devoted to dramatic undertakings or long-term theatre training, in her report to the Arts Board she made a point of underscoring the importance of this connection for building audience understanding and community support for serious drama: "[this kind of work] broadens attitudes to drama and its use as something of more value than a slight play solely for entertainment."<sup>73</sup> At the other end of the dramatic spectrum, she directed the musical *Saskatchewan Ho!*, which was commissioned by the Arts Board and played in several communities in the province during the Jubilee year. She continued and expanded the summer drama workshops by bringing in Fred Youens, who had been part of the Seattle company in the areas of design and technical theatre. He made it possible to provide training in those areas, as well as improved technical support for resulting productions. She also directed the Fort Qu'Appelle pageant, which brought together people from the summer drama workshop, a large number of members of the community of all ages, and several families from the File Hills reserve.<sup>74</sup> As well, a not inconsiderable part of her duties in these early years was devoted to helping organize the Dominion Drama Festival that took place in the province in its Jubilee year.<sup>75</sup>

Hosting this national festival showcased the developments that were taking place in Saskatchewan, and people took notice. Because of improved theatre training in the province, Ontario's Stratford Festival auditioned in Saskatchewan and hired Walter Mills of Moose Jaw for the 1955 summer season. Word spread about the dramatic dynamo in Saskatchewan, and James was invited to speak, adjudicate, and/or provide workshops in both Manitoba and Alberta.<sup>76</sup> Obviously, James' expertise was welcomed inside and outside the province, but Deverell

reports incidents involving Woodrow Lloyd, Saskatchewan's Minister of Education, that probably reflect the inevitable question mark left when individuals were slandered in the McCarthy era. Lloyd wanted to know if the Jameses were communists but, when given the full information about their visionary work in the arts for the state of Washington, realized that their vision was the same as the one Douglas and his government shared for the Arts Board. Florence James, Woodrow Lloyd, and David Smith, the creator of the Arts Board, all shared a belief in the inextricable link between the arts and education and the important role they had to play in a democratic society infused with socialist values. Perhaps James' remark in a report to the board regarding her observations of progress on theatre training at Balfour Technical School sums up that vision: "Work in drama can be wonderfully useful in the development of people."<sup>77</sup> Given the enormous interest generated in theatre during the Jubilee preparations and James' potential to carry the Arts Board's vision for theatre even further, the permanence of her position never seemed in serious question.

After the Jubilee, James' activity did not diminish but if anything increased. She continued to expand training opportunities, even developing speech courses for distance delivery over radio. In her 1957 report to the board for the winter period of December to February, she noted having worked in Regina, Wynyard, Fort Qu'Appelle, Unity, and Beechy and lists requests for further visits as coming from Weyburn, Ketchen, Unity, Venn, Sturgis, Mitchellton, Swift Current, Moose Jaw, and Beechy.<sup>78</sup> As demands for her time increased, there were tensions at board level over requests from groups in the larger centres of Regina and Saskatoon, which were regarded as having more access to expertise, versus those from groups in the rural centres, whose needs had been the primary motivation for her hiring.<sup>79</sup> Somehow she managed to maintain a vigorous presence in rural communities while also taking an active role in the Regina theatre community.<sup>80</sup> In 1956, for instance, she directed a well-reviewed production of the Canadian play *Ghost Writers* by Ted Allen for the Regina Little Theatre with Marijo in the cast.<sup>81</sup> In 1958 she directed a production of the *Diary of Anne Frank* for the Regina Section of the National Council of Jewish Women. Reviewers of these productions always note that, although

many of the actors had never been on stage before, the acting was of a “remarkably high caliber and always compelling.”<sup>82</sup>

James’ support for bringing the children’s theatre expert Brian Way to Regina while on his 1959 Canadian tour had both an immediate and a long-term impact. Way’s talk in May and his use of arena staging was followed up in one of the two Summer Workshop productions that year. As explained in the Annual Report, it was staged “‘in the round.’ This is a rarely used approach to theatre in Saskatchewan and one which can be ideally suitable for groups with inadequate stage facilities and equipment, a problem faced in many small communities.”<sup>83</sup> In the long term, Way’s visit, combined with the now-extended network of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse company, generated Saskatchewan’s first professional theatre company since 1927 and one of Canada’s earliest companies dedicated to theatre for young audiences. Ken Kramer, a student of Bette Anderson, who had left Seattle at the demise of the Playhouse to head up the City of Edmonton’s theatre programs, had trained with Way in London, and when he returned to Canada with his new bride, Sue Richmond, James managed to convince the Arts Board to give them space and a loan to start up a touring company for young people. Kramer and Richmond put together a clear philosophy and an ensemble and started touring with arena-style staging to communities of all sizes in all weather. The Washington State Theatre Company had been reborn and this time funding from the Arts Board, the Department of Education, and Canada Council gave it longevity and room to grow a phenomenal touring record stretching from 1966 until well into the 1990s. At its height it played 290 performances in 149 towns for over thirty-two weeks annually and reached an audience of nearly 90,000, 9 percent of the provincial population and one-third of its school-aged children.<sup>84</sup>

When James retired from the Saskatchewan Arts Board in 1968, she moved to Ottawa with her daughter’s family, but soon returned to Saskatchewan, where she found the cultural environment richer and livelier. She was then appointed as the first dramaturg for the Globe Theatre, where she continued to have an influence on young artists like Rita Deverell. Sitting in on rehearsals of the Globe touring ensemble must have given her the satisfaction of knowing that, although the Jameses’ vision of theatre had been cut short in Washington, a more

favourable political and financial climate had allowed that vision to be realized and thrive in Saskatchewan. The Kramers' company had placed its "fists upon a star" and "the habit of art" that had become "a habit of living" for James would continue as that company introduced children like the young Joey Tremblay to the world of theatre and inspired their careers at the Globe and on today's international stages.

### *Honours and Recognition*

As noted by Deverell, in 1957 Florence James was asked to join the executive of the Canadian Theatre Centre, which represented professional and educational theatres in Canada. This was not only an acknowledgment of her background but also recognition of her tireless advocacy for Canadian arts and theatre. Her 1956 speech to the Saskatoon Branch of the Saskatchewan Registered Teachers Association grabbed local headlines with the prediction that "Canada Will Lead the Continent in the Arts."<sup>85</sup> She was a strong supporter of new Canadian plays and playwrights as well as the newly formed Canadian Players, a touring branch of the Stratford Festival ensemble, and helped to promote its first appearance in Saskatchewan. Speaking to the Regina University Women's Club, she hailed the Canadian Players as "a miracle ... that could happen in no other country" and called for more opportunities for Canadian artists to work at home: "Let us make an effort to provide scope for our actors and actresses on our own Canadian stage."<sup>86</sup> In an article on the Saskatchewan Arts Board for publication in *Commonwealth* in 1957, she cited an observation by the Governor General, Vincent Massey—"it is the differences amongst us, the variety, which gives Canadian culture its distinctive flavour." She went on to argue that "human resources take form when people sing together, paint pictures, tell stories, make beautiful things for everyday use, act in plays and of course, enjoy such activities. The stories, songs, customs, the latent talent in our young people, the intermingling of a dozen or more different language groups—the growth and fusion of such things are the concern of the Saskatchewan Arts Board."<sup>87</sup>

James received numerous national as well as provincial awards, including the Queen's Silver Medal on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Elizabeth II's coronation, the Canadian Drama Award from the Dominion Drama Festival, a life membership in the Canadian The-

atre Centre and the Canadian Child and Youth Drama Association, and, in 1978, the *Diplome d'honneur*, Canada's highest recognition for artistic achievement. As noted by Mavor Moore, at James' death in 1988,<sup>88</sup> the importance of her pioneering accomplishments extended well beyond Saskatchewan. It was because of this Saskatchewan pioneer and Canadian men and women like her that the central importance of the arts in all their diversity that took root on the prairies reached beyond provincial borders to inspire the recognition and encouragement of Canadian culture in the twentieth century.

However, if as Mavor Moore observed, James remained largely unknown outside Saskatchewan, it is reasonable to suggest that today she may be largely unknown even in Saskatchewan. As an American who chose to leave the United States during more external attacks on supposed communists in Vietnam, I never met her nor had I ever heard of her when I first came to Saskatchewan to take up work in the arts, theatre, and education. Even in the 1990s, when I was hired at the Globe Theatre in the position of dramaturg that she had once filled, I knew nothing of her. It took a student who had come to study at the University of Regina from one of the former Soviet Bloc countries to bring her to my attention. Following an assignment to use material in the Saskatchewan Archives in a paper on local theatre or people associated with it, she came to my office enthusiastically clutching piles of photocopies neatly assembled in binders. She thrust one of the binders in front of me, wanting to know if she could do her paper on it. I could see that it was a typescript entitled "Fists Upon a Star," so I sent her off to check if it had been published, while I promised to read it and respond to her. I started to read it that evening and didn't put it down until I came to the end; I was surprised to learn that it had not been published. After securing copies of the relevant Canwell Committee proceedings and other materials from James' papers, the student wrote a paper far in excess of the word limit comparing James' philosophy of theatre with that of young people in her own country and the experiences of her older artist friends under Soviet rule with those of James in the United States. When she returned to her home country, I feel certain that her friends came to know a great deal about this Saskatchewan pioneer, and I have come to the conclusion that this is precisely the kind of recognition that would matter most

to Florence James. At her death, the compilation of the international mix of warm remembrances of her contributions to the arts and to individual lives constituted the strongest recognition of the enduring network of company and community that she forged in her lifetime.<sup>89</sup>

Rita Deverell remarks that Florence James seemed to have the effect on people of “an electric jolt that stayed with them.” That effect continues through this book and the broad community it constructs. It richly rewards both students and professionals in the theatre and any artists for whom the “habit of art” has become a “habit of living.” As well it has much to offer students and historians concerned with American and Canadian, local and cultural, women’s and Black history. It will engage arts educators and literary scholars interested in women’s studies and life-writing. Above all, it will appeal to anyone who admires individuals who pursue their ideals and vision with determination and challenge others to live up to that legacy.

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of my graduate student, Ian McWilliams, and my husband, Cameron Louis, both of whom made important research contributions towards this introduction through their work in the University of Washington archives and newspaper collections.

### NOTES

---

- 1 Helen Buss, *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 133.
- 2 See for instance, Melvin Rader, *False Witness* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979).
- 3 See, for instance, Mark F. Jenkins, *All Powers Necessary and Convenient: A Play of Fact and Speculation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Rita Deverell, *McCarthy and the Old Woman* (available from Playwrights Guild of Canada), produced in Seattle in 2010 by the University of Washington in the theatre that Florence and Burton James built.
- 4 It has in fact been argued that writing a memoir is a performative act, that autobiography has more in common with drama than other creative forms, and that frequently it conforms to the characteristics of tragedy described by Aristotle, particularly in the attraction of the “role model” through whom the reader experi-

- ences vicarious feelings of pity and fear. See p. 209 in Evelyn J. Hinz, "Mimesis: The Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography" in *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, Marlene Kadar, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 195–212; Buss, *Repossessing the World*, 186.
- 5 Buss, *Repossessing the World*, 187.
- 6 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 13, 16, 24.
- 7 For evidence of her probable effect on the women she met in rural Saskatchewan and her ongoing vision of her role and that of other women in the community as pioneers, see one of many speeches (untitled) that she gave in that province during her tenure as drama consultant of the Saskatchewan Arts Board. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90–97, Box 1, file 3.
- 8 When Florence ran for state senate (as a Democrat) she listed her civic activities as including membership on the Permanent Facilities Committee of King County Commissioners' Juvenile Advisory Committee, honorary membership in the Building Service Employees Union, American Federation of Labor, and the Democratic Precinct Committee. She also ran for Seattle school director in March 1944 and after her conviction in 1950 was nominated by the Progressive Party for King County Clerk. See University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90–97, Box 2, File 10.
- 9 Buss, *Repossessing the World*, 128.
- 10 Full transcripts of these hearings were published by the Joint Legislative Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities. *Un-American Activities in Washington State: First and Second Reports to the 31st Washington Legislature*. Olympia, 1948–49; a thorough analysis of the proceedings of the committee as well as resulting court cases is undertaken by Vern Countryman, *Un-American Activities in the State of Washington: The Work of the Canwell Committee* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951).
- 11 University of Washington Archives, Seattle Repertory papers, 1556-3, Box 33, Folder 2.
- 12 For a further discussion of the various factors that led to James' being called before the Un-American Activities Committee, see Barry Witham, "The Playhouse and the Committee," in *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics*, Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt, eds., *Studies in Theatre History and Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 151–2.
- 13 For example, Dalton Trumbo, *The Time of the Toad: A Study of Inquisition in America* (1949; rpt London: Journeyman Press, 1982).
- 14 For instance: "Mrs. James Found Guilty after Fiery Trial Ending," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Friday June 24, 1949, front page; Jenkins, *All Powers Necessary and Convenient*, xxiv; for analysis of the role of the newspapers in the Canwell affair, see Countryman, *Un-American Activities*, 25–6, 394–6.
- 15 A report prepared by the Playhouse sales department in 1948 documents in great detail the devastating effect the Canwell hearings had on the theatre through public opinion and resulting cancellation of tickets. Comments from patrons wishing to have their names removed from the listings range from polite to rude.

## INTRODUCTION

- University of Washington Archives, Seattle Repertory Playhouse Collection, 1156-3, Box 76, Folder 5; Bette Anderson papers, 2811, Box 19, Folder 10.
- 16 For more information on the ongoing strands of related extremism in American society and politics see, for instance, Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Alice Jardine, “Flash Back, Flash Forward: The Fifties, the Nineties, and the Transformed Politics of Remote Control,” in *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America*, Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 107–23; Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001). Recent U.S. congressional hearings on the “extent of radicalization in the American Muslim community” have sparked groups like the American Civil Liberties Union to draw parallels with McCarthyism. “Groups Oppose U.S. Hearings,” *Regina Leader-Post*, Wednesday, March 9, 2011, C8.
- 17 Millie S. Barranger, *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), xv.
- 18 Flanagan’s testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee is included along with those of many others in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, Eric Bentley, ed., 2nd printing (New York: Viking, 1972), 6–47.
- 19 Jenkins, *All Powers Necessary and Convenient*, xxxviii.
- 20 Jill Ker Conway has argued that an autobiographer reveals much about what is perceived as typical or deviant within her social and cultural context through the “subtext” of “the life plot the writer assumes is to be expected.” In *Her Own Words: Women’s Memoirs from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), vii. Although James is very much aware of the deviance of her politics and philosophy of theatre, she appears to be comparatively oblivious to her deviance from hegemonic gender expectations.
- 21 <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebookso7/0700461.txt>.
- 22 Alan Bennett, *The Habit of Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), especially p. 87. In a memoir such as this it may be easy to forget the day-to-day life style implied by what is remembered but never really articulated. In an April 1951 letter by Burton James to David Stevens he remarks on the “compensations” that came with losing their theatre: “For 25 years we were constantly at the theatre, day and night. Now it’s pleasant to enjoy a leisurely dinner at home with Mrs. James, without having to rush away to meet a deadline of rehearsal or performance, or to dine out together with friends, a rare experience for us. Then there are grandchildren to sit with, much reading to be done, some writing, and the garden to care for. The fact that we can choose a sunny spring day to drive out into the country gives both of us a mild feeling of guilt. Nevertheless, we do go, realizing this is an interim period and that soon we must go back to work.” University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 8.



- 23 James actually saw Bernhardt as a girl by travelling to Utah and then saw her later in New York. Rita Deverell interview with Florence James, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 2, file 11, 12.
- 24 James was one among many Americans in this period who travelled to Moscow and returned enthusiastic about theatre there. Norris Houghton spent six months there in 1935 and published a book on his findings: *Moscow Rehearsals: An Account of Methods of Production in the Soviet Theatre* (1936; rpt New York: Octagon Books, 1975).
- 25 Another book—*Making the Little Theatre Pay* by Oliver Hinsdell (New York: Samuel French, 1925)—included in the University of Regina, Archer Library collection, contains a 1965 book plate naming Florence James as donor of the book. The focus of the book on the importance of a strong connection between a theatre and its community would also appear to be closely connected with James' theatre aesthetic.
- 26 Caption for Florence James' picture, *Town Crier*, 28:50 (December 1933), 15. This was an arts and literary magazine published in Seattle, 1912–1937.
- 27 The scholarly neglect of James' directing career is puzzling. While her slight treatment in major reference texts such as the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Don B. Wilmet, ed, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)—where she receives only brief notice under “Seattle”—is perhaps more acceptable given the broad scope of that work, her complete omission from attention in a text like *Women in American Theatre*, Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins, eds., revised and expanded 3rd ed. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006) is less understandable. Articles on her contemporaries Hallie Flanagan and Margo Jones are included, and Dorothy Magnus' article “Matriarchs of the Regional Theatre” (203–9) credits the opening of Jones' theatre in 1947 as the birth of modern American regional theatre. However, Florence and Burton James founded the Seattle Repertory Playhouse with very similar objectives several years before this, and it is perhaps timely that Magnus' assertions be reviewed.
- 28 *Seattle Intelligencer*, June 23, 1949.
- 29 Albert Ottenheimer, who worked so closely with the Jameses for so long, clearly understood these leadership qualities as shared by both Burton and Florence: “The Jameses are essentially pioneers, creative frontiersmen. They are so from an inner compulsion ... They see, I think, farther and more clearly than most people because from the vantage of a keen social viewpoint ... They have a faculty, these Jameses, of inspiring in those who work with them a stubborn loyalty. Not a personal loyalty, exactly, but an imbuelement of others with a steadfast belief in ideas and things that are important and right and true.” Albert M. Ottenheimer, “Great Work of the Jameses,” *Seattle Life*, June 1937, 24, 30.
- 30 See, for instance, Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), as a random example appropriate to the period of this memoir. Although purportedly about American drama, the book focuses on drama in New York and, as Florence James demonstrates in this memoir, there were other active centres of theatre in the U.S., even—or perhaps especially—during the Depression.

## INTRODUCTION

- 31 See, for instance, a virtual exhibit mounted by the Manuscripts and University Archives division of the University of Washington Libraries at [www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/allpowers/Exhibit/default.htm](http://www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/allpowers/Exhibit/default.htm).
- 32 The final issue of the *Seattle Repertory Playhouse News* issued February 1951, estimated that the theatre had played to an audience of over half a million people with 3,000 performances of 196 productions and 140 school alumni. University of Washington Archives, Florence James papers, 2117-1, Box 5, Folder 21. For papers dealing with the ongoing conflicts between the Jameses and the university see University of Washington Archives, W. U. President, 71-34, Box 119, Folder 3; W.U. Drama School, 70-2, Box 14, Folder 2. See also Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63–4.
- 33 *The Argus*, April 30, 1938, 3–4.
- 34 These newsletters appeared in tabloid format with six to eight pages, including photographs and lengthy articles. University of Washington Archives, Seattle Repertory Playhouse papers, 1556-3, Box 33, folders 1–4.
- 35 Richard C. Berner, *Seattle in the 20th Century. Volume 2. Seattle 1921-1940: From Boom to Bust* (Seattle: Charles Press, 1992), 259.
- 36 For a full discussion of this theatre see Gloria Ann Hewitt, “A History of the Washington State Theatre 1931 to 1941.” Master’s thesis. University of Washington, 1964.
- 37 Megan Terry, “Two Pages a Day,” *The Drama Review: TDR*, Playwrights and Playwriting Issue, 21, 4 (1977): 59–64 [60].
- 38 James Larson, *Notable Women in the American Theatre: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 864; David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 240, 242–3; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* program, August 17 and 18, 1950, Banff Centre Archives.
- 39 Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 68, 168 n18.
- 40 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 306–7.
- 41 Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 67.
- 42 Gilmor Brown to Hallie Flanagan, February 20, 1936, Regional Correspondence, RG69, U.S. National Archives.
- 43 Esther Hall Mumford, *Seven Stars and Orion* (Seattle: Anansi Press, 1980), 72–3.
- 44 See Franklin Roosevelt’s “Statement against Profiteering in the Italian-Ethiopian War,” October 30, 1935 at John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14971>.
- 45 Flanagan, *Arena*, 393.
- 46 Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 160, 169.
- 47 *Encyclopedia of North American Theater, Vol. 1: People* (Alexandria VA: Alexander Street Press, 2005). While most institutions have anglicized their degrees (for example, BA—Bachelor of Arts), Harvard has not, retaining the AB, an abbreviation of the Latin *Artium Baccalaureatus*.
- 48 Berner, *Seattle in the 20th Century*, 218–19; Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle’s Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

- 49 Florence James cites eighteen simultaneous productions, but in almost every one of the numerous citations relating to this event different figures amounting to as many as twenty-two productions are given. For instance, the *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (1988) cites twenty-two, and the *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, ed. Don Wilmeth, (2007) cites twenty.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 74–5.
- 51 Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 74–5; *Seattle Commonwealth News*, Oct 31, 1936. See also the review in the *Seattle Argus*, Oct 31, 1936: “Played by a Negro cast, the local production had a couple of strikes on it at once. They played it with no compromise to color yet it was necessary to keep reminding yourself that the scene was really the United States and not some remote village in Africa.” Excerpts from interviews with Norah McCullough, executive secretary of the Saskatchewan Arts Board, and Florence James herself as cited by Rita Deverell in the epilogue suggest that James’ attitude towards “colour,” “physical appearance,” and “accents” continued to evolve well beyond the point of most directors today.
- 52 Although James does not make it clear in her memoir, she was apparently at the centre of a fierce negotiation following the production of *Power* for control of the entire Federal Theatre Project in Seattle. She was championed as the new FTP director by the younger group of artists wanting more collective and local control, while the WPA administrators wanted a more conservative administrator. In the end Hallie Flanagan went with the more conservative administrator as acting director and flew in one of her close but inexperienced colleagues to assist. Florence resigned and the Negro unit did not again achieve the same success it had enjoyed under her. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 88–90.
- 53 Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 89.
- 54 See the transcripts of the hearings in Countryman, *Un-American Activities in the State of Washington*.
- 55 Rita Deverell interview with Florence James. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 2, file 11.
- 56 Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 177, 203. Barry Witham also notes that of all FTP projects across the country the Seattle Negro Repertory Theatre unit was the most “remarkable” and that under the Jameses the group “continued to excel” and create an “impressive record.” *The Federal Theatre Project*, 71.
- 57 For the full discussion of what Houghton saw at the Playhouse, see his *Advance from Broadway: 19,000 Miles of American Theatre* (Freeport, NY: np, 1969), 64–8.
- 58 Marijo had grown up at the Playhouse and in 1934 at the age of fifteen played Hilda to her father’s Solness in Ibsen’s *The Master Builder*. In 1939/40 she went to Hollywood and had small parts in two movies, but returned to Seattle where she married Adrian Lawrence, a business representative for the Longshoremen’s Union. That marriage was dissolved during the war. After coming to Canada she pursued a graduate degree in sociology and became the only woman permanently appointed to the Department of Sociology at the University of Regina. From Interviews with Jack Kinzel and Helen Taverniti, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 2, file 14; Box 3, file 26.

- 59 Jack Kinzel had started going to the Playhouse in 1930 when he was still in high school, but migrated into radio as an announcer and writer. He served in the navy during World War II and remained in the reserves after the war when he returned to work at the radio station KIRO and assist in the business of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. He was fired after fifteen years with the radio station and given a less than honourable discharge from the navy when he worked with People's Programs, agents for Seattle's Black community, to bring Paul Robeson to Seattle for a concert in 1952. During the war he had married and divorced a woman connected with the Playhouse, but in 1946 he married Marijo. See his personal discharge papers, clippings, etc, and Interview, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds 90-97, Box 1, file 3; Box 2, file 14.
- 60 This invitation may have had much to do with the transfer of flats, curtains, and costumes to Banff when the Playhouse closed.
- 61 Interview with Esther Nelson by Peggy Leighton, 1981. Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives at the Banff Centre, 1990-44-47.
- 62 Interview with Leona Patterson by Peggy Leighton, 1981. Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives at the Banff Centre, 1990-44-46.
- 63 Bruno Gerussi appeared in the 1945 production of *Calico Cargo*. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 2, File 9.
- 64 Interview with Bruno Gerussi by Peggy Leighton, 1981. Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives at the Banff Centre, 1990-44-37.
- 65 See, for instance, the program for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, produced in 1950, which involved a cast drawn from not only Alberta but also Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia, Saskatchewan (five participants) and five of the United States (two from Seattle). *Comedy of Errors*, produced in 1951, drew its cast from the same provinces plus Quebec and two of the United States (three from Seattle). Burgess studied with Florence when she taught in the University of British Columbia summer school as well as at Banff. Rita Deverell interview with Florence James. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 2, file 11.
- 66 The Banff meeting between the Jameses and Norah McCullough is described by Esther Nelson in her interview with Peggy Leighton, *ibid*.
- 67 Kinzel Interview. However, according to an interview with Helen Taverniti, the whole family did not have an easy time gaining their Canadian citizenship and required help from Tommy Douglas, who had apparently met the Jameses in Banff and become a friend. Interview with Helen Taverniti by Rita Deverell. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 3, file 26. It should be noted that Canada as a whole may not have legislated the kind of public witch hunts undertaken in the U.S., but the RCMP was making secret lists and the "red scare" was motivating extreme behaviour in some corners. As a Baptist minister, Tommy Douglas may well have been aware of William Guy Carr's book, *The Red Fog over America*. It was published in Ontario in 1955 under the sponsorship of the National Federation of Christian Laymen, who "are convinced that an international conspiracy is in operation for the purpose of destroying our national and religious institutions in America." Addressed to Christians in Britain, Canada, and the U.S., it attempts to counter perceived propaganda advocating "One World Government." p. iii.

- 68 James' thoughts about life in Tommy Douglas' Saskatchewan remain relevant today: "It's this ... Medicare—it was like heaven when I got into Saskatchewan from the States. It was so different—so viable—the climate. I don't mean the weather—I mean the climate for the arts. It was rich and that's what was marvellous, marvellous coming up from the States and being here and doing the thing I wanted to do. And felt that I was really doing the thing that was worth something—valuable for people and they liked it." Rita Deverell Interview with Florence James. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 2, file 11.
- 69 Drama Committee report to the Saskatchewan Arts Board, September 9, 1957. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 70 The process of establishing James' position with the Arts Board is laid out in W. A. Riddell, *Cornerstone for Culture: A History of the Saskatchewan Arts Board from 1948 to 1978* (Regina: Saskatchewan Arts Board, 1979), 11–12, 18.
- 71 See Rita Deverell's interview with Helen Taverniti, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 3, file 26.
- 72 In October and November of 1955 she worked in Regina, Moose Jaw, Marshall, Oxbow, North Battleford, Prince Albert, and Saskatoon. Drama consultant report to the Saskatchewan Arts Board for October and November 1955. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 73 Drama consultant report to the Saskatchewan Arts Board for Jan 1-March 1955 University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3
- 74 Riddell, *Cornerstone for Culture*, 18; Report of drama consultant to Saskatchewan Arts Board June 2–August 31, 1955, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 75 Riddell, *Cornerstone for Culture*, 18.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 77 Drama Consultant report to the Saskatchewan Arts Board March 3–May 26, 1956, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 78 Drama Committee Report to Saskatchewan Arts Board, for period Dec 10–Feb 22 1957/58, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 79 Transcript of a Saskatchewan Arts Board meeting March 3, 1956, Hotel Saskatchewan, Regina, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 80 It should be noted that in addition to the many duties and travels described in detail James was involved in numerous briefs and presentations. She served on the Radio Committee of the board and provided input on national consultations with respect to radio and television. She also co-wrote the board's substantial brief towards the process that led to Regina's Centre of the Arts. That document would still prove useful reading for anyone planning a performing arts facility today. University of Washington, Florence James papers, 2117-1, Box 5, Folder 4.
- 81 Ken Fraser, "Small Attendance but Play Is Good," Regina *Leader-Post*, Friday, Feb 3, 1956. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 82 "Jewish Play Scores Hit," Regina *Leader-Post*, Friday, Dec 12, 1955.
- 83 Drama section of Saskatchewan Arts Board Annual Report for 1959, 4. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.

## INTRODUCTION

- 84 For this and further information about The Globe Theatre see my article under that title in *The Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: A Living Legacy* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2005).
- 85 “Canadian Arts Progressing to Position of Prominence,” Regina Leader-Post, Saturday, Jan 28, 1956, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 86 “Drama Director Discusses Theatre,” Regina *Leader-Post*, Wednesday, Jan 9, 1957. See also the drama consultant report to the Saskatchewan Arts Board for March 3–May 26, 1956. University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 3.
- 87 Typescript of Florence James, “The Saskatchewan Arts Board,” *Commonwealth*, November 15, 1957, University of Regina Archives, Rita Deverell fonds, 90-97, Box 1, file 8.
- 88 Mavor Moore, *The Globe and Mail*, Feb. 13, 1988.
- 89 University of Washington, Florence Bean James Collection, 2117-4, VF 1625.



## *Fists Upon A Star*

We give what pleases us and when we choose,  
And, having given, we do not take back,  
But once we shut our fists upon a star  
It will take portents to unloose that grip  
And even then the stuff will keep the print.  
It is a habit of living.

—*from John Brown's Body (1928)*  
*by Stephen Vincent Benét*





## PROLOGUE

IN THE TEN YEARS since I started to write this book, at the tender age of seventy-three, I have learned a number of interesting things:

- that the gestation period of a literary work is somewhat longer than that of the Indian elephant, and the birth pangs at least as severe;
- that I am no writer, but when one has a story which must be told, one does the best one can and asks for help in a loud voice;
- that pain and joy in memory may be diminished, intensified, or altered by time, but they can never be destroyed. Each of the events and attendant emotions through which I sifted and sorted to build this story has remained like a beetle or butterfly caught in amber, like beads making up the rosary of my life;
- that friends are life's one irreplaceable treasure, that help and good advice come from many sources, and that readers and editors are patient, persistent, and long-suffering people;
- and that the hardest part of telling a story is deciding where it ought to begin. I am indebted to one of the many editors who have read my manuscript for telling me that "stories, like kittens, ought to be picked up in the middle." So, with appropriate caution, that is where I will pick up mine.

Florence James, circa 1975



## CHAPTER ONE

**O**n a crisp evening in October, 1930, the Seattle Repertory Playhouse opened the doors of its permanent home to the public—the beginning of a memorable period in the development of theatre in the regions beyond Broadway and in the state of Washington in particular. But for my husband, Burton James, and me, it was the culmination of years of planning and working toward the fulfillment of a dream—the creation of a theatre that would be more than a building, more than a star-studded roster of “hits” or “classics,” more than a diversion for the social set or a job for the critics.

Burton and I had been working all our adult lives, first in New York, then in Seattle, toward a theatre that would be of the people, by the people, and for the people. Our dream had finally become reality two years before, when we launched our repertory company, with its talented, dedicated nucleus of unpaid performers. We had worked in rented theatres, makeshift quarters, temporary facilities—but we had created a theatre. The next part of our dream was to have a proper home—and that, too, was about to come to fruition with the opening of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse on the corner of 41st and University Way, in the heart of Seattle’s university district.

I can’t remember what I was thinking as the clock moved inexorably toward 8:30, curtain time for George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, the production we had chosen to launch our third season and christen our new theatre. I might have thought back to the true beginning of

the Seattle Repertory Playhouse—a Sunday in May, 1928, when a group of friends gathered in our apartment a few days after Burton and I had left our teaching posts at the Cornish School. Actors, students from the Cornish Players, theatre workers, and other local artists interested in founding a community theatre had come to cast their lot with ours in developing an acting-producing ensemble similar to the Abbey Players or Eva Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory at the old Forty-ninth Street Theatre in New York. We had nothing but our vitality and our faith in people, but we were determined to create a theatre in which the artist’s integrity would stand above monetary considerations, a theatre that would truly belong to the community because it came from the community. In the two years since that Sunday, we felt that we had made a good beginning. We had an excellent nucleus of a company, constantly augmented by new people from the community who believed as we did and were willing to work to achieve it. We had produced fifteen plays, ranging from Seán O’Casey, Henrik Ibsen, and Luigi Pirandello to the works of three new home-grown playwrights, Garland Ethel, Albert Ottenheimer, and Marianne King.

We gave the public quality theatre and they responded with support, interest, and enthusiasm. However, in spite of our growing success with the public, our first two years were an accountant’s nightmare and we operated with a constant deficit—a steadily decreasing deficit, it’s true, but a deficit all the same. But we had hopes that in our own theatre, with a firm base of operation, we could eventually put the Playhouse in the black.

If I could have looked into the future that night, I would have seen no end to the red ink, which perhaps should not have come as a surprise, given the state of America’s, and more particularly the theatre’s, economy. But the eddies of financial disaster that rippled across the country from Wall Street’s crash in 1929 were slow to reach the western coast and we wanted to believe that, as the politicians and the press kept telling us, prosperity lay just around the corner. We signed a ninety-nine-year lease, beginning October 1, 1930, and terminating September 30, 2029.

If I had known what lay ahead, I might have slammed the theatre doors in the faces of our arriving audience and chosen a different path. But if we hadn’t gone ahead, so many good things would never have

been: excellent productions of fine plays that deserved to be done well for receptive audiences; achievements, as a group and as individuals, that would be a source of lasting pride and have far-reaching consequences; joy in the development of sensitivity and responsiveness in the thousands of people who were our audiences over the years; and, most important, proof that a theatre of the people, by the people, and for the people not only *could* live and flourish but did, in the perhaps improbable setting of Seattle, Washington.

I had no time that night to think of any of those things. My mind was full of the present, and it was chaotic enough to keep me fully occupied.

Eight-thirty was upon us, and we still couldn't raise the curtain. Some kind of feud was raging among the electricians, building code authorities, and the fire department and had been for months. What one approved, the others promptly disapproved. The bedlam that this infighting engendered was still raging backstage. Electricians were installing lighting equipment, and fire inspectors were haranguing over code books. At the height of the frenzy, with the lounge and foyer crowded with patrons, spilling through the arched French windows into the flagstone courtyard around our elm tree, an electrician accidentally set fire to the building with his blowtorch!

While Burton, in costume and full makeup, battled backstage to bring order out of chaos, I mingled with our guests, apologizing for the delay, accepting their admiring praise for the wonders that our architect had wrought from an abandoned warehouse. We were all proud of the way the new Playhouse looked. Arthur Loveless, working from Burton's original sketches on a restaurant napkin, had created a building shaped like a short-barred "U," with its arms embracing our outdoor courtyard. The brick walls, natural wood trim, and dark tile and concrete floors had a simple elegance and were functional at the same time. It was an excellent place in which to work, and audiences said that it was welcoming and friendly.

I was dressed, as I always was for opening nights in our theatre, in a new evening gown, this time of blue crêpe de chine. I remember that it was very smart—and very inexpensive. I've always felt that opening nights are occasions deserving of one's very best, so I always made sure that I had elegant dresses, but that they cost as little as possible. Our

budget wouldn't permit anything else. Opening nights in our theatre were always "dress up" occasions for our audiences too, especially in the early years.

The curtain finally rose, one hour late, and *Major Barbara* greeted the playgoers of Seattle. A deathly white glare illuminated the stage, for there had been no time to set lights or fix gels in the screens. We had no dimmer board. There were only two lighting levels that night: "on" and "off."

Somehow, in spite of everything, the show was a success. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* was out front, photographing the audience with flash bulbs, then a brand new invention, replacing the old flash powder and pan. The next day, a large picture of our patrons appeared on the front page of the morning paper, alongside a review that praised the actors and gave a short history of the group's development as well as glowing descriptions of the audience.

As we drove home that night, Burton and I were exhausted but elated. I can remember the great sense of relief that at last we were in our theatre, and that we had actually got it open. We had perhaps an inkling, but no real comprehension, of the bewildering challenges that lay ahead.

But we knew where we were going, with the brick-and-mortar fact of the building now a reality. And where we were going had been, in a very large measure, predicated by what we had come from.

## CHAPTER TWO

**F**or all of us, there are conscious and subconscious forces that prompt us to make decisions that develop into a pattern, a “habit of living.” In some lives, it is fairly easy to trace the inherited or environmental pressures that create such patterns. From my vantage point in time, it is easy to identify the pressures that shaped my husband, Burton Wakeley James, and me, Mary Florence Bean James, and led to our lives taking the course they did.

Perhaps the greatest influence when I was young was my mother’s attitude toward education. She craved it, revered it, and coveted it, although she never quite achieved it, and she passed her longing and loving along to me. My mother’s parents, Thomas and Mary Hayney Lynch, were Irish immigrants. They settled in Cleveland in 1869 when mother was five, and my grandfather worked on the iron ore docks as a day labourer. He was completely illiterate until after he married my grandmother, who had some education, having been put in an orphanage after her parents died within a few days of each other during the potato famine in the 1840s. She taught my grandfather to read, but he never succeeded in writing more than his own name.

The family moved to Nebraska around 1878, when mother was not quite fourteen. They homesteaded a few miles from Lincoln and my mother spent her girlhood in a sod house. There was no school in their district so her education came to an abrupt end, something she regretted all her life. But she didn’t give up. She was sure that there must



be a way to get the education she felt was the most important thing in life. In her late teens, she decided to strike out on her own. One day, she was in Lincoln with her father, who was selling corn. They had lunch at the hotel and she heard the manager, Mr. Criley, tell my grandfather that he'd like to staff his dining room with waitresses, if he could get them, to replace his Negro waiters. When her father left, my shy mother returned and said, "Mr. Criley, I'd like to be a waitress, if I could learn how to do it."

Mr. Criley countered with, "Mary, do you think you could get some other girls to come too?" If she could recruit enough of her friends to staff his dining room, he would pay them three dollars a week, plus board and room. Delighted with the idea of making so much money, which she could save to go to school, she went back to the farm, recruited a number of her friends, and returned to Mr. Criley with the girls.

Remembering my mother's unassertive nature and strict Irish Catholic upbringing, I have never ceased to wonder at her determination and audacity. In those days well-brought-up girls left the parental roof before marriage only in cases of dire necessity. But mother's desire for an education spurred her on.

I can remember my grandfather saying, with awe in his voice, "He's an educated man," or, "If you have an education, you can talk to kings." Education was not easy to come by, and for people like my parents, it was almost an impossibility. Knowing that she was saving for an education did not, however, lessen my grandfather's displeasure at his daughter's venture into the working world. But she did it anyway.

One spring day, Mr. Criley announced that he was going to manage a hotel at a summer resort in Soda Springs, Idaho. Would the girls from the dining room like to come with him, just for the summer? The girls were delighted.

I don't know how delighted they were when they arrived, for a grimmer summer resort could hardly be imagined. The Idanha Hotel was a big old wooden building with cupolas, painted white, appropriate hotel-fashion for those days, and stuck out in the middle of the sagebrush. It did, however, have a soda spring nearby, and provided a new vista for mother and her friends, who had never been more than a few miles from home before.