

Wendy Lill: Passionate Witness

By Dave Carley

From the June, 2006 CanPlay

Election night, June 2, 1997. Chrétien's Liberals are sweeping to a second majority but, in Nova Scotia, something unprecedented is happening. In a province that has traditionally shunned the New Democratic Party, the electoral map is lighting up bright orange; six Nova Scotian NDPers will be going to Ottawa. On stage in the ballroom of Halifax's raffish Lord Nelson Hotel, party leader Alexa McDonough – herself newly elected – has gathered her victorious colleagues. Standing amidst them, looking like a deer caught in electoral headlights, is a living Canadian playwright, Wendy Lill - the honorable, brand-new member for Dartmouth. Lill's terror is palpable. It's as if she has suddenly been cast in a new Canadian play, one that hasn't been workshopped or dramaturged or even written, but is nevertheless programmed to open in just a few minutes, at the biggest and rowdiest theatre in the country...

* * *

A playwright in Parliament seems counter-intuitive. Except when dragged kicking and screaming to the rehearsal hall, playwrights tend to be solitary. They contemplate and create far out of the limelight. Czechoslovakia once had a playwright-president, but that was Europe where that sort of thing happens periodically. In Canada, arts workers do their lobbying offstage, if they pursue any political involvement at all. And parliament is so very public. What was Lill thinking?

In fact, Lill was only adding a logical, if somewhat unexpected, new act to her own story arc. Her prologue was a placid, middle class childhood in London, Ontario, that most country club of Canadian cities. However, by the mid-60s, Lill was studying political science at York University and had joined the NDP's Waffle movement. And, in one of the seminal experiences of her generation, she lucked into an OFY (Opportunities for Youth) grant. Hard though it is to imagine now, once upon a time there were granting programs that required astonishingly little paperwork and doled out equally astonishing

amounts of money. All across the country OFY-funded students were founding theatres, small presses, and, in Lill's case, a drop-in centre for youth and mothers in the Jane-Finch area of Toronto.

Lill was beginning an eclectic pattern of activism that continued as a Community Development Worker for the YMCA, a few peripatetic years as a cocktail waitress/poet, and then, in 1977, a plunge into the unknown. Feeling it was time to really make a commitment, the 26 year-old moved to Kenora and became a Community Outreach worker with the Ontario Mental Health Association. She roamed Ontario's northwest, trying to determine how and where the OMHA should establish a branch in that region. "I got up close and personal there with Native/White relations. This was the first that thing that had ever engaged me in a piercing way."

She moved to Winnipeg, but returned to Kenora to cover the bitter Boise Cascade paper mill strike for CBC, keeping an audio journal as she walked the line with the picketers. She recorded documentaries for the CBC's "Our Native Land" and, in 1979, wrote her first play. *On The Line* chronicled the travails of immigrant garment workers in Winnipeg and Lill confesses it was more than a little didactic. But it also got her some of the best dramaturgical advice of her career - from her businessman father, who admonished her to make even her villains real. Lill took that advice to heart and ever since her characters – even the villains – have been intriguingly complex.

While in Winnipeg, Lill wrote *The Fighting Days*, *Memories of You* and, drawing on her experience in Kenora, the searing *The Occupation of Heather Rose*. She also married a CBC producer, Richard Starr, who was soon to hear the call of his home province. As a bemused Lill observes, "They all want to come home here" so, in 1987, they ended up in Dartmouth. Lill continued writing plays, including *Sisters*, *All Fall Down* and an adaptation of Sheldon Currie's story *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum*. She became well-known in Halifax NDP circles and periodically was asked to run as a sacrificial lamb, but always refused. She was a playwright, after all.

* * *

However, in 1997, another call came, from the party's persuasive new leader, Alexa McDonough. This time Lill was ready. She had just completed a deeply personal play about society's treatment of the disabled – *Corker* - and the process had exhausted her: “Have you ever felt you just can't do it again?” Also, her political anger was reaching a boiling point, sparked by visits to Toronto for Board meetings of the Playwrights Union. “I was very concerned about things like the cuts to culture, but also stunned at the changes in Harris's Toronto. The city had changed radically since I'd lived there fifteen years earlier. There were people living on the streets; I was shocked at how quickly things could go backwards and I didn't want that kind of world for my children.” Her sons were older now (ten and twelve) and, with the support of her husband and agent, Lill agreed to run for the NDP in Dartmouth. On election night she arrived home just after the polls closed only to be shocked by a call from her campaign manager - she was already leading. Lill says, “I felt I was about to go into labour – and there was nothing I could do.”

Lill quadrupled the NDP vote in Dartmouth, winning with a comfortable 2,000 margin. In a National Film Board documentary detailing her first year in politics (*Wendy Lill: Playwright in Parliament*) she calls it, “The best opening night she'd ever had.” But she still looked shocked, and she was going to remain that way for a while to come. The NBC documentary followed her about in her first days, as she questioned Parliamentary pomp (“Is this the best way for things to be done?”), explored with wonder her large office, learned to manage a staff when, previously, she'd only administered one husband and two sons, and searched hopefully for an empty chair at her first Parliamentary Committee meeting. Fittingly, McDonough had appointed Lill as the NDP critic for Heritage and Culture, as well as for Persons for Disabilities.

Lill soon made her voice heard in both portfolios. The fact that she arrived in Parliament as a working playwright (*Corker* premiered at Halifax's Eastern Front Theatre in the fall of her first term, directed by Mary Vingoe) carried with it a surprising amount of cachet. Lill laughs when she recalls that politicians in committees would often turn to her and say, ‘Let's hear what our playwright has to say on this subject.’ There was a lot to talk about. It was a time of major cuts to CBC's budget and, in particular, its regional programming. The arts were also being slashed. Foreign ownership, media concentration

and copyright issues were also on the radar. Lill quickly realized that instead of fighting the budget-hackers and corporate lawyers in their language, “I always had to go back to square one. What do I know. And what I knew was where the arts begin – at the grassroots. The ecosystem of independent booksellers and theatres and the CBC where creators get their start. I always knew I represented the creators.”

In her portfolio as Disabilities critic, Lill helped set up a “go to” place for people with disabilities, a sub-committee tasked with representing their interests, in order to bring clarity to a confused situation where over twenty ministries had a piece of the action. She worked to make the disability tax credit and Canada Pension Plan more responsive to the needs of persons with disabilities. She also bucked one of the most powerful members of her caucus over the Robert Latimer case, which was front page news in her first term. At the same time, Svend Robinson, a fellow caucus member, was championing a Private Member’s euthanasia bill, growing out of his involvement with Sue Rodriguez, who was dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease). The public and media were not making a distinction between the two situations and Lill was very clear in describing the Latimer case as murder. “I spoke out for no clemency for Robert Latimer; people living with disabilities have a right to know that someone will speak up for them.”

Lill was re-elected in the 2000, increasing her share of the popular vote, and returned to her critic portfolios. But that same year she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. The weekly commute to and from Halifax, along with what she terms the sheer cognitive overload that an MP faces, was becoming physically draining. She likened her Ottawa days to being a car being dragged through an automatic car wash and, now, “It was time to get off”. She did not seek a third term in 2004.

* * *

Although Lill had long maintained she would not write a play about her experiences in Ottawa, she has in fact been working on a drama set in that world. *Chimera* deals with cross-species research and how science is changing what it means to be human. Lill is asking what role government and society should be playing in this biogenetic fantasia. “I was initially nervous about writing this play because of my own physical fatigue. And the

scientific world – how do you crack it? But when I stopped worrying about having all the answers and began doing like Chekhov advises – asking the right questions – and that helped me relax. Scientists are looking after the science of cross-species development – we must look after the ethics.”

Lill is using her Ottawa experience in *Chimera*, calling that great second act of her life, “A huge eye-opener”. She stresses, “I am not any more cynical about politics now. I do believe it is important.” *Chimera* reverses her focus of the past eight years. Instead of taking the arts to Ottawa and bringing it to the attention of the nations’ lawmakers, she is now bringing “that place” to the attention of audiences. She wants to prove that Parliament does indeed have a central role to play in our lives, especially when contentious issues are involved.

* * *

Political plays to politics and back to plays about politics. The arc of the Wendy Lill drama has, at its core, a philosophical and moral consistency and, as usual, she expresses it best: “You do what you can to reflect the world you live in – and want to live in. I think I can make a difference by being a passionate witness about things I care about.”

- 30 -

Dave Carley is a Toronto-based playwright. His website is www.davecarley.com