JOAN MACLEOD

Joan MacLeod, 15 October 1993

INTERVIEW WITH JOAN MACLEOD

The interview took place on 15 October 1993, at the home of Penelope Connell, in North Vancouver. The participants were Joan MacLeod, Penelope Connell, Reid Gilbert, Dawn Moore and Bill Schermbrucker.

PC I've seen two of your plays, *The Hope Slide*, and *Jewel* because Dawn directed it at the College, and I was quite interested by the use of real fire, and various effects in the play. I found that part where the fire comes on quite stunning, and I wonder in what ways this production I saw was different from that special one in Toronto.

JM Actually it's very similar because the set's the same, because Glynis Leyshon who directed the original at Tarragon also directed the Belfry/Touchstone production, sort of, because the same actress did it in Victoria, so the set came with us from Toronto. Fortunately we had a much better fire effect in Vancouver. In Toronto it was like someone lit their barbecue sometimes — it didn't work a lot of the times. Here we had a co-op student lying underneath the stage, controlling the effect.

PC It seemed to me thematically quite appropriate.

JM Yeah. I wanted real fire — that was very important to me — and I guess it was like one of those things, dogs and children on stage: you can't take your eyes off it.

RG In *The Hope Slide* there's a series of monologues. Do you like them because they're essentially a literary, not a theatrical form?

JM Monologues? For me it's kind of a two-handed thing because two of my plays are monologues, but monologues are also a big

part of my own creative process, because I write monologues for characters, and eventually those become plays.

RG So is that for your own development of the characters or for the actors to work up?

JM It started at Tarragon where I was in residence, and I had written one scene of *Toronto, Mississippi* and read it in the Playwrights' Unit there, I was a junior member of it, and we all read the scene, and Urjo Kareda the Artistic Director said, "That's all very fine; now I want you to go away and write a monologue for the character Bill," because he felt that was the weakest character of the scene. I said, "Alright," and did it the next week. It was about ten minutes long, just to explore the character a bit, and so I had to present that for the group, and then answer questions from them, remaining in character, and this is quite difficult of course. Judith Thompson was a member of the Unit, and they all asked very tough questions.

BS Like what?

JM I'm just trying to think. Like, "Are you attracted to Jhana," this retarded girl — which is something I hadn't even thought about. And ... I thought the character of Bill was gay, and I wrote this monologue and realized he wasn't. But he had very strong sexual feelings, and everybody in the play did, and that's what really got him going for me.

RG Did that help you, as a woman writer then, getting inside a male character —

JM — yeah, it did —

RG — because I'm thinking if you thought he was originally gay it's partly because you were also sidestepping his sexuality for your female characters —

JM — that's right —

RG — but if you make him heterosexual, then you have to get inside a heterosexual man's mind and look at these women, which is a little harder to do.

JM Yes, and because I wanted to write a play about this new kind of family, I think this gayness was something I was imposing on the character that just didn't suit the character, didn't suit the voice that I was starting to create. At any rate, since then I write monologues whenever I'm bogged down. In *Toronto, Mississippi* I wrote two more. I never wrote one for the retarded character in the play because I didn't need to; I knew her inside out. And with *Amigo's Blue Guitar* I wrote monologues for every character in the play before I had even written a scene of the play, and got quite ... slick's the wrong word ... I would *really*, really work on the monologues, and some of them have been published and I go out and perform them, as I was explaining to Dawn's class this morning. I'll do an Amnesty cabaret, or readings like I did at Cap College this morning, I'll trot out those monologues and try them out. "Katie," that monologue, I've been doing for about a year. When I'm bogged down I write a monologue, and also as a writer I like writing them, and most writers like writing monologues, whether they're fiction writers (as we discovered this summer) or whatever. There's something manageable and fun about them, and since every writer I know, certainly including myself, is always trying to avoid writing, it's a good way of getting into it; it's a kind of non-threatening way to get in, and they're fun.

RG Because you're only inside one character?

JM I think that's *part* of it. It's an easy way to start out, taking a baby step.

BS How extensively do the monologues become incorporated in the plays?

JM It depends on the play. In the case of *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, the first monologue I wrote, which is "Glenda," the character was thrown out three weeks before I got into rehearsal. Throughout the monologue she told me what the play was all about. And there's all kinds of lines that are in the play.

RG That's fascinating in terms of the split personality sort of thing, where one of the *personae* of a split personality can be the dominant one who explains the other, explains the reality. It's an interesting thing about the writer's mind — you're opting into the one that's telling you what you're doing, while you also become the others.

JM Yes.

BS But are they wasted?

JM No. In that case it was very useful because you see the monologue, and it's like a little blueprint of the play. I even got the title of the play from there, because someone sings a song in it. So they're not wasted for me at all, because they create a world, and once that world is created, then I can start writing the play. In the case of *Little Sister*, a portion of the "Katie" monologue is still in the play, and it probably needs to go, I'm probably holding onto it, but that's how the play started, so it's very dear to me, but it probably doesn't need to be in there. You know there's bits of ones from *Toronto, Mississippi* that are still in there, so they get kind of scattered about. They're most useful as exploration rather than pieces of literature or pieces of the final play.

BS Is it a standard device in theatre school?

JM Not that I know of. But it's very close to a lot of stuff actors do.

PC I wondered if it was difficult to write monologues for so many of the characters, because you find yourself shifting perspective so

much that suddenly you're speaking ...

JM That part's easy for me because my work is so character-based. And voice is something I've never had a problem with. The hard part for me is structure. So creating those voices, and *hopefully* getting some sense of the structure out of it is a less scary way for me to work. I have no problem changing voices.

PC So you don't fear that the audience will have trouble associating itself with one character, from whose perspective to see others in the play, or that's just not a problem?

JM I don't think so. My plays, quite accidentally, are real ensemble pieces in that everyone usually has the same amount to do, and it's usually a ton of work — there's not stars and lesser characters. They're all like that.

RG Anyway, it seems a movement away from traditional (or pre-modernist, or modernist) narratology to ask for that simple thing. Your work and the work of people like Judith Thompson effectively prevent you from finding *a* character who will interpret or be the point of view. You don't want that.

JM Point of view doesn't exist in contemporary theatre really in the same way. You wouldn't have seen it out here, but in John Krizanc's play *The Half of It* he uses point of view specifically, and I found it very interesting —

RG — because it seems unusual now —

JM — it's *very* unusual now. I had never seen that on stage before, and I enjoyed it.

RG It certainly is one of the things that defines contemporary Canadian theatre, the reaction against point of view, the insistence on non-point of view, as for example in Thompson's work. She *really* prevents a central point of view, where she argues that you

set up these sets of provisional realities, and there is no transcendant reality that you can find — I think that's true in your work too, maybe less so in *Toronto, Mississippi,* but *certainly* in *Amigo's Blue Guitar.*

JM It's appropriate that you bring up Judith, because we were in residence at Tarragon together for seven seasons, and I learned a lot from her. I shared an office with her when I wrote *Toronto, Mississippi,* and then for four years we shared a wall — she had the office next to me. And she has three kids now, and she would come in and work two hours a day just solid — she's the most focused person in the world, and I would loiter, and hang out, and try and distract … she's quite wonderful.

BS I was wondering about the "Katie" monologue in particular, where in the second line she corrects herself, and that becomes part of her character. She says: "He comes to pick me up around eight. We're going to a restaurant, no, a bar downtown."

JM Yeah, inventing.

BS But does that become part of her character?

JM I guess a little bit. I hadn't thought of that.

BS So that the extempore nature of the monologue feeds —

JM — feeds into who she is. Yeah, of course it does.

BS And the repetition, the "hands around my waist," where does that come from?

JM The shape changes. It gets smaller and smaller and smaller, so that by the end of the monologue —

BS — she's a broomstick —

JM — yeah, I want to show it for the tape-recorder: she can do it with her two thumbs and middle fingers, she can make a circle, she's that tiny.

BS There's a kind of liturgy that she says. "He puts his hands around my waist, hands around my waist." It's almost a chant.

JM It's obsessive. She's obviously a very messed up little girl, and I guess that's part of it showing.

RG Isn't there the whole connection — I don't pretend to explain anorexia but isn't it a mixture of some kind of sexual desire and sexual repression? As she wants his hands around her waist she's careful to tell us she has the right kind of bouncy but not too bouncy breasts and so on, so she sees herself as a sexual object, and yet she diminishes that to a broomstick that has no sexuality.

JM Yeah. It's like a refusal to grow up at one level, anorexia, it's not wanting all those womanly curves. Partly she's going: "It's impossible to be a woman right now. I can't work that hard, and look that good." It's a refusal to grow up; to still be Daddy's girl and have a waist that's that small [demonstrates].

RG We must take a photograph of your hands — I think that would be wonderful and insert it in the text!

PC At the same time it's an exertion of power over herself, and other people's perceptions of her. She's quite rigid about creating exactly —

JM — oh it's incredible control, and real disdain —

PC — yeah, and anger —

JM — for people who do not *have* the kind of control that an anorexic will have. In *The Famine Within*, a documentary that I love, which is where the play started, someone talks about an anorexic

being just like a political prisoner, someone on a hunger strike, but not knowing how to articulate what it is they're protesting. And it *is* a great form of protest. An anorexic walks into the room: it's like a skeleton, like *death* walking into the room. And someone's screaming for help, and going: "Don't you dare touch me!" at the same time.

BS When we were talking earlier, Reid used the expression "pulling out issues." Is that what you do as a playwright?

JM I write about things that I care about. They don't feel like issues when I start out, but all of my work is issue-related without a doubt. You could reduce all of it down to, you know ... starting with some kind of social justice issue and then becoming a play about family. And I think part of the reason for the success of my plays is that they're a way of examining social issues through family. But I don't do that intentionally; that's what comes out. Even, the same thing, working with *Little Sister* now, which is about five kids, a lot of it is about family, yet again; that always seems to be —

RG Is that a perception of female artists then, because the collection of female dramatists in Canada at the moment, yourself among them, seem to keep centring the work in family? One hesitates to say it, because it seems such a cliché. Yet the vision, nonetheless, seems to centre in family, even of a newly-constructed family which you're working on, as opposed to the male playwrights who still seem to be playing around with those older male notions of the quest and so on, external to the family. Is that true, in your opinion?

JM Yeah, I think there probably *is* some truth in that. Sally Clark's an exception to that, but not with *Moo* at all. *Moo*'s all about family, and about *her* family. It does feel like such a female cliché, but, yeah, I do think there's some truth in that.

BS You've looked at some obvious social issues like handicapped

people moving into society, or the *Ocean Ranger* disaster —

PC — AIDS —

BS — AIDS, anorexia, widowhood ... what's coming next?

JM I don't know.

RG The anorexia's still happening.

JM Yeah, it should be done by now, but it's not. I don't know. I was saying in the class this morning, I put everything I know into what I'm writing about. Judith Thompson says that too, I think. I don't know what the next play is — I don't know if it's a play or a poem or a novel or what it is either, because I feel equally comfortable in all three of those genres.

PC Do you mean that you research your work or that you live it?

JM A combination of both, Penny. I'll start out usually with something that I know well, that I think other people will find exotic. In the case of mentally handicapped people, or refugees, those were things that were related to me, that I had a lot of experience with, that most people don't know about, and then I also did some research. Doukhobors — same kind of thing: I used a very personal angle on that, which is me being a kid in North Vancouver and thinking Doukhobors were sex objects. "Well that's sort of interesting, I wonder what happened to the Doukhobors?" And then I read all about them, and I got so interested in them I wrote a play about it. So, it starts at a personal place —

PC — seemed *highly* personal.

JM Yeah, we were talking about that, driving here. People always assume my plays are true, they think I'm an *Ocean Ranger* widow. They *always* assume there's a personal connection. It's a combi-

nation of things, I mean I've never met an *Ocean Ranger* widow. I've listened to them interviewed, I've read a lot about it, I have a dear friend who was widowed — her husband died coming home the night he rolled his truck, he wasn't on *The Ocean Ranger*, so you combine those things ...

RG But the controlling figure of *Hope Slide* must be familiar — this is the writer who tours around and reads her monologues here and there, so that's clearly autobiographical.

JM Right. And that's where the play started. I was on a reading tour in the Kootenays a few years ago, and realized I was looking for Doukhobors. I hadn't thought about them for thirty years, not since I went through there with my brother and my parents, and we were madly looking for naked people. So when I was on that tour I was asking around about the Doukhobors, and got curious about them, and then seeing the Hope slide again, I mean they're just such a great story.

RG I'm interested in your saying that you're equally comfortable in all the genres. I have to confess to knowing your dramatic work, I'd like to say *better* than the others, but —

JM [laughs] That's fine! I'm a failed novelist. I'm not saying I'm as good at the other two, but I feel as comfortable.

RG That's what I want to explore. It's interesting to be able to do both, because they seem quite different experiences. I don't know how you can write a novel, and also write a play, unless the play then becomes a novelistic play, but your work isn't; your plays are quite theatrical and visual.

JM But it's by fluke in a sense, because I think both *Jewel* and *Toronto, Mississippi* were sort of written in a closet even though I wrote —

RG — well, *Jewel* is more literary because it's more of a monologue —

JM — yeah, but *Toronto, Mississippi*, even though I was in The Playwrights' Unit, so I was kind of checking in with the theatre every few weeks, I had probably been to the theatre about six times in my life when I wrote that play. I had *no* idea about how it worked, and I think simply that my work is best out loud, and I didn't know that when I was a prose writer and a poet. But I was grooming myself for the theatre. I didn't realize that.

RG Did you write dialogue better than you write, say description, or ... ?

JM Yeah. But the language is strong in my plays, with images and that sort of thing, so it's not *just* dialogue. But when I wrote a novel, I had no problem with that, I didn't think about it, I just wrote it. So there's something about all of that that feels quite natural. Now I look like I'm contradicting myself! I feel in the most natural way that I'm a prose writer.

BS What's the novel about?

JM [laughs] Partly *Jewel* comes out of the novel, and it was about a woman living up north waiting for her husband to get home from the bush, and then in the play I killed off the husband and made it about something else. It's a real first novel; it was very slow-moving, very introspective. It was how I felt about everything at age 24 or 25 when I wrote it. There were some nice bits in it, but then all of a sudden I became a playwright, and I've had no time to write prose since then — I'd love to go back to it.

BS How did that happen? Given that you had only been to the theatre six times —

PC — shocking! —

BS — tell us, without closing off those other options of being a poet and so on, how have you ended up as a playwright?

JM A couple of things. I went to Banff to the School of Fine Arts in 1983, and I was there as a poet. This was when I worked with handicapped people and I had six weeks' holiday, and I would go and do the advanced writer studio that they have, and the Playwrights' Colony ran at the same time, and I met theatre people, almost like that Woody Allen movie where he's on the train, and they're having all this fun in the other car. [Laughter.] And I said "This is a much more pleasant life than prose writers or poets. They get to work with people, they're all really into it, they stay up and drink scotch and talk about life and art. And all the poets look like TB victims." I became very good friends with one guy in particular. It was just a group of playwrights, but there was this one man Alan Williams, who's still a dear friend of mine. He was the first playwright I ever met. He writes monologues and plays, he's an Englishman originally — he got me *curious* about the theatre. I saw him perform some of his stuff, so I went out and wrote a one-person show. And he introduced me to The Tarragon when I moved to Toronto a year later, so it was very haphazard — oh, and also, when I was a poet there, we were all supposed to do a reading, and I was too shy to read my work out loud, and an actor from the Playwrights' Colony did read my work, and it was a long narrative poem about my grandmother or some farm wife, and this actor did it, and she was *wonderful*, and I realized my work is *much* stronger out loud than on the page. So I got to Toronto, and I had written this early draft of *Jewel*, it was just half an hour long, and on the basis of that I got into the Playwrights' Unit at Tarragon, and I wrote *Toronto, Mississippi* there. A year later it went up — my success happened very *quickly*, and all of a sudden I was a playwright, and all that happened in about a year and a half, and then *Amigo's* two years later. I've only written four plays, and now a fifth one coming up.

BS But you've won quite important national awards for these plays.

JM Yeah. And that feels fortunate. Part of me —

BS — does it disturb you also, to win those awards?

JM No! Because I need the money. It doesn't disturb me at all. I'm very proud of my plays, and I think they're strong, and they might well be what I do best. But part of my soul feels like a prose writer. I met Tenessee Williams when he was in residence at UBC briefly, when I was a graduate student there, and he said he wanted to be remembered as a short story writer, not as a playwright, so maybe it's just something that playwrights have.

RG I think it has to do with privileging of the text over the visual.

JM Maybe.

RG Theatre is so ephemeral. I mean I always like that expression "it goes up" — you used that a few moments ago. Not only does it mean it "goes up," as in "the curtain goes up," but it also goes up in smoke! It's gone, when it's gone. I bet you a lot of playwrights would like to be remembered as short-storyists —

PC — or *remembered* —

RG — only because they would like there to be some concrete document left behind.

JM Yeah. Again — I mean I keep quoting Judith here — it became like a nasty thing with some playwrights even to be published. They don't want to be published. It all just takes place on the stage, and everything's production-oriented. I think that's part of the reason some of Canadian theatre's in rough shape. I don't think there's enough people with a strong literary background. Things get put up very quickly, and they're written by actors out of work, and again — I mean Judith's background is National Theatre School and as an actor, so that all gets proved wrong because she's so wonderful, but also, she says she wants her plays to be literature. She wants them studied as literature, and I feel that very strongly too. I like having a text of my work. I want plays to be both things.

RG I agree with you. They need to be both, I mean that's the whole point of the form. Ideally what you want is the text, and then a video of the play in performance. That's what works best. But it's extremely rare to be able to do that; something like *The Capilano Review* can't do that, although I once posited the idea of including a video in an issue.

JM Oh, did you!

RG I thought it would be quite fun to do a drama issue that did a series of dramatic texts and then had a video that came with it. But I see no other way of solving that problem.

DM Or you get a book like Guy Sprung's *Hot Ice* which documents the production.

RG Yeah, well we did one of those once, in issue #35.

PC Yeah we did, we had production photographs. We traced the whole rehearsal process, and there are sketches and pictures and so on, but still, we were creating a historical document — again it's literary.

RG And I *absolutely* agree with you that too much Canadian theatre is just up in a minute and improvised in expression. Do you use improvisation at all, or do you want it all to come out of the text?

JM No. I don't know how to work that way. I'm a real control freak. I had to do this nightmare cabaret a couple of months ago, where an audience gives you different elements and you have to write a play in an hour, and I was just *awful! Just* awful! What I came up with was just trash!

BS Why did you have to do it?

JM Because I said I'd do it. It was a benefit thing. It was all amateur actors. And then these actors have to perform it. And one of

the actors asked me if I'd ever written a play before. He thought what I'd done was so awful. I said, "Ah, you'll audition for me one day and I'll get back at you!" But it was a miserable experience. Yeah, I don't work well that way. It takes me two years to write a play; I'm a very slow, careful writer.

PC What's your longest work?

JM *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Amigo's* are both full length plays, over a hundred pages. *Little Sister* is a one-act, but it's a long one-act; it's going to be about seventy pages when it's finished.

DM When you say it isn't finished yet, what elements aren't finished? What's the end for you? Is it scenes, or refining —

JM — there are four drafts. The ending's right, I just haven't quite got there in the right way. There are things that need to be fleshed out. It's the oldest thing in the world that you tell creative writing students: show me, don't tell me. I still have to do that to myself. I'll read it, and I'll just panic that all the dramatic moments are referred to, and not *out* there. You just don't know sometimes. So, we'll see. I'm fooling around with it. I'm also having a hard time letting go, giving it away.

RG Is it in any kind of workshop? Raising again the idea that you need to *see* it before you can revise. Or is all happening in your mind?

JM I heard it when I wrote a first draft last January; I heard it out loud in Toronto; we workshopped it for the one day. We're auditioning for it in two weeks, and I'll go just so I can hear the actors fool around with the words. I'll do another draft before I go because it opens in January.

RG Here? Or Toronto?

JM It opens in Toronto, and then it's also here in March at Green

Thumb. So it's touring to high schools.

BS So can you make a living as a playwright in Canada?

JM Well I did. For five years I lived off royalties.

PC Wow! Five years!

JM Almost five years.

BS Exclusively off royalties?

JM Pretty well.

BS And performing fees or something?

JM Same thing. By royalties I mean theatre royalties. Not book royalties believe me! I sold TV rights for *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, so I include that — that was a good chunk. *Toronto, Mississippi* especially got picked up by some big regional theatres. In three weeks I made $28,000. I'd never made $20,000 in my *life* in a year before, and I lived off that, and was very careful with the money, and because of that, got to write whatever I wanted to for five years, which was a real *privilege*, you know, it was wonderful.

RG And also quite self-satisfying, I mean actually to be living off your own work. To know that you've made it for yourself.

JM It felt *great*. And that people get work out of it. I love thinking how many people *Toronto, Mississippi* has employed; that makes me feel great, actually. But that's unusual, and now, with my last play, *Hope Slide*, a one-person show, I make a tenth of what I do on the other ones. But I'm really glad I'm back to a one-person show. I wrote it just for the joy of writing it, and it's a poetic piece. I didn't want to try and repeat *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Amigo's*. Again, moving from Toronto back home to Vancouver, it's very much wanting to be a writer and not just a playwright. I

like the theatre, but the world's a big place, and the theatre can become a very tiny world.

BS What do you find most difficult as a playwright?

JM I guess letting go of the work. It is a collaborative venture, so handing it over to the actors and the director and everything — yeah, it takes me two years, and an actor might not *get* it the first two days, and they're — I'll need to change things — and that's very hard.

BS Does that lead to conflict?

JM Oh sometimes. With the exception of *Hope Slide*, which was a very easy rehearsal, I've never been in rehearsal where there weren't tears from everybody. Being in residence at Tarragon for so long, I'd be in my office and then you go into the bathroom, and there's some actor crying their eyes out. It's a very human venture, and a very vulnerable one, lots of conflict.

PC So you're let down on closing night?

JM Oh, it's terrible. I'll tell you the worst is when the run of the play is over and you go in there the next day and they're tearing — no, not the next day, that *night* they're striking the set, and it just feels *awful.* Especially with *Toronto, Mississippi*, my first one, because I didn't know if there'd ever be another production. Because it was a Canadian play, I just assumed there wouldn't be. And you just think Ahh! you've put so much into it —

BS — it's dead —

JM — and it's just so important to you, and it's gone. With *Amigo's* I knew before the play closed that we'd already lined up six productions or something, so I knew it had a life. But *Toronto, Mississippi* I didn't know, that first one might be the last.

RG With multiple productions, what is it like to see different directors' interpretations, different responses to the work?

JM That's also the hardest part of the theatre! It's hard. Most of the time actors make you look very good, it's quite wonderful; at other times it feels terrible.

BS So you can sympathize with Shaw for writing his elaborate prefaces?

JM Yeah right. It's hard because you feel responsible for everything at that moment when the curtain goes up, the show goes up! You have no control at all, but you feel kind of responsible for everything.

BS Have there been any performances you've wanted to disown?

JM Oh of course. That always happens. I've never seen a performance, however, where I didn't think the actors were really committed, and the director was really committed. I think if I saw a sloppy version, you know, if they were lax with the lines, that would be hard to take, but I've never seen that. I've seen interpretations I didn't agree with, but they did it with their whole heart, and probably did it for $360 a week. Most of the time it's just fine. Usually what happens after your play's been around for a while, you know, I'll go and see it in Winnipeg, you fly in for the opening and do some publicity, you watch the play, and you go to the bar with the actors afterwards, and they have one beer, and they go, "What d'you really think?" All that is very hard. I'm getting better at that. Always try to find ways to be supportive.

PC They don't really want to tell you what they really thought?

JM Oh yeah, you get some of that.

DM Are the actors ever right about a change?

JM Yeah.

DM Or is it just — you said a couple of times, they don't know, they haven't been around the play as long as you. Do you ever re-write —

JM — for actors? Sure I do. No, they're often right — and often wrong. It's a real push-and-pull kind of thing. I *like* that. I like it when an actor becomes very possessive of the part very quickly. It's a good sign, I think. Actors have played very significant roles in the writing of all my work. Also, working at Tarragon for so long, and premiering there, we have a week of previews, we have extended rehearsal, so that we can really work on the text; so the actors are very useful to you during all that process. It's designed so that we *can* rewrite. Again, I think that's a big problem with theatre in Vancouver, that you don't get a week of previews usually, and you get a three week rehearsal, and it's just death to new work, it really is. If my plays went up after three weeks, with no previews, they would be entirely different plays than I have now. I feel very *badly* for the writers here.

RG Joanna Glass is premiering a new play in the Playhouse, and they're working on that now.

DM Canadian Stage First.

RG Yeah. And she's getting a longer go than usual, I think, at working it over.

JM Good.

RG Another hassle of writing plays as opposed to writing fiction (where theoretically you just need a word processor or a pen) is how much do you think your writing is conditioned by the realities of budgets, and how many actors you can have, and what kind of set they're going to be able to give you, and so on? The cost of production.

JM I think *my* work will be small, intimate, no matter what. I think that's what I do best.

RG Because of your interest in monologues?

JM Yeah.

RG So anyway you tend towards the one-woman show, or two-hander?

JM Yeah, or four. I mean *Amigo's* has five, and I just think that's epic.

RG So you don't have a desire to do a big eighteen-character —

JM — no. I don't think my kind of writing style suits that. Well, you know people like Sally write big plays, and do that very well —

RG — but they're hard to get staged.

JM They're *very* hard to get staged, and you know I saw *Love of the Nightingale* at UBC a few nights ago, and I just loved it. I love Timberlake Wertenbaker. I was saying to the class this morning that was such a good choice for a university show because it's a big cast, and it's controversial, so that pretty well guarantees it'll not be seen in our big regional theatres, and *what a pity.* Playwrights in this country are writing for casts of under five because you know you don't have a hope — and I think that's a real pity, because when you see *Nightingale,* you just realize how *good* it can be, and what people could do.

BS How big's that cast?

JM Fifteen or something.

DM Yeah. Five in each chorus, and then some.

RG But then you get the flip side of that, you see the academic theatre can do that and *does* regularly — we did a Timberlake Wertenbaker play last year — how many in that cast, big cast?

DM [laughs] I've mercifully forgotten!

RG But in the academic theatre then you get student actors, so you get the down side of that.

JM And also you can't make a living. Playwrights, we live off the box office, and amateur rights and professional rights are a whole different ball of wax, and you *want* your work to premiere professionally. You want to get the reviews. And you want the country to know about it. So that's the hard part. In other places isn't there the tradition of some universities commissioning playwrights well enough to write for them? That doesn't happen here, that I know of.

BS It happened at Cap College.

DM Uh-huh.

RG We commissioned the piece, but not at the level you're talking about of a professional performance.

JM I mean, you're not going to commission me to live for a year to write a play for you. People live a month on two or three thousand. You have to be realistic about that stuff. Yeah, I heard about Peter Elliot Weiss's *Journal* project — well, you were telling me, Dawn.

PC It was good.

DM Yeah, "Hollow Years." A student wrote about his sister being anorexic.

BS Well, what haven't we covered?

JM I want to talk about postmodernism and deconstruction …

[at this point the interview disintegrated into a joke, scuttlebutt, and baffling conundrums of mistaken identity]

excerpts from *THE HOPE SLIDE*