Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

16 | 2018

L'expérimental dans la littérature et les arts
contemporains

"The Relevance of Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors* in the 21st Century"

Interview with Glaspell scholar Cheryl Black

Milbre Burch

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/11717>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.11717

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Milbre Burch, "The Relevance of Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors* in the 21st Century", *Miranda* [Online], 16 | 2018, Online since 05 June 2018, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/11717> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.11717>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

“The Relevance of Susan Glaspell’s *Inheritors* in the 21st Century”

Interview with Glaspell scholar Cheryl Black

Milbre Burch

[Fig. 1]

Credits : Rebecca Vernon

Biography of the Interviewee

- 1 Cheryl Black is a Professor of Acting, Theatre History, Dramaturgy and Dramatic Literature in the Department of Theatre at the University of Missouri. She is the author of *The Women of Provincetown 1915-1922* (Tuscaloosa : University of Alabama Press, 2002) among other theatre history books and articles. Dr. Black has directed several of Susan Glaspell's plays and conducted readings of her adaptations of Glaspell's work at conferences and venues across the US and in Europe.

Introductory Essay : Glaspell, Inheritors, and Starlighters II Theatre

The unstoppable energy of community theatre : Starlighters II Theatre in Anamosa, Iowa

- 2 In May of 2017, Jennifer Beall of the Starlighters II Theatre in Jones County, Iowa reached out to the International Susan Glaspell Society. Beall was a first-time director who had grown up performing at Starlighters II in her hometown of Anamosa. "Nestled near the Wapsipinicon River in Jones County"¹, the town's current population is 5,533. It is 26 miles east of Cedar Rapids, 36 miles north of Iowa City, and 75 miles northwest of Glaspell's birthplace in Davenport, Iowa.
- 3 Beall wondered if a Glaspell Society member might be available to attend her fall production of the playwright's 1921 play *Inheritors*. She noted that the theater would be using the Iris Smith Fischer adaptation of the play available on the Society's website, and hoped that a member of the Society would not only see the show but also lead a post-show talkback with the cast, production crew and audience.
- 4 Glaspell scholar Dr. Cheryl Black along with the author of this article (a playwright inspired by Glaspell's works) agreed to make the five-hour trip from the University of Missouri in Columbia to Anamosa in late September, 2017. We spent two days there, hosted by Beall and her directing mentor, Jan Cratsenberg, who was also the show's publicist. Both were longtime members of the Starlighters II Theatre, as well as newly minted Glaspell fans, who'd only recently realized that the Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright was also an Iowa native with a tie to their town.
- 5 In 1915 Susan Glaspell, her husband George Cram "Jig" Cook and their confederates harnessed their considerable energy and talent to found the Provincetown Players, located on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. The mission of the Players was to showcase new plays by American playwrights. Glaspell and Eugen O'Neill were the two most famous and prolific playwrights in the group.
- 6 Some sixty years later, Starlighters II was born (and reborn) out of the unstoppable energy of a handful of intentional theatre-makers in the mid-West. A 2014 article in the Jones County Journal-Eureka describes the origins of the Starlighters II Theatre : "[In 1974 or 75, it] began with the dream of Ron Ketelsen, a Monticello [Iowa] High School student, who loved theater and wanted more opportunities to act. He shared his dream with then-student teacher Bob Furino, and the two of them sought the help of teacher Emil Prull." The article continues : "Prull brought advanced acting skills, having received acting training in California. He offered financial prudence to the group,

having been a part of the Monticello Starlighters – a well-respected theater group existing from 1951-57".²

- 7 Starlighters II eventually grew out of a collaboration between the group in Monticello and another community theater founded about the same time in nearby Anamosa. Moving between their two towns, the groups' joint productions were mounted on High School or Middle School stages. In 1988 the now-merged board of directors bought a building on Main Street in Anamosa, giving the theater its first permanent home. More recently it moved into another Main Street location where the town's Motorcycle Museum had once been housed. According to its website, the theater's mission is to "produce excellent live theater through ongoing education of actors and directors".³

Susan Glaspell's connection to Anamosa, Iowa via the Margaret Hossack murder trial

- 8 A welcome sign outside the town reads : "Anamosa – Grant Wood Country," since it is the hometown of the iconic American artist who painted "American Gothic." But Anamosa is also (indirectly) Susan Glaspell Country.
- 9 How is the area tied to Susan Glaspell ? The town's landscape is dominated by Anamosa State Penitentiary, a maximum and medium security institution which currently houses 950 offenders and employs 321 staff. Designed in the 1870's and built from local limestone by prison labor, the facility is fronted by a stately warden's residence. According to *Images of America - Anamosa Penitentiary* (San Francisco : Arcadia, 2010) by Richard Snavelly and Steve Wendl, the prison's elegant facade has earned it the appellation "the White Palace of the West."

[Fig. 2]

Anamosa State Penitentiary Warden's Residence
Credits : Milbre Burch.

[Fig. 3]

Anamosa State Penitentiary
Credits : Milbre Burch.

- 10 From April 1901 to April 1902, Margaret Hossack served in the Women's Ward (or "Female Department") of the prison after being convicted of murdering her abusive husband. At the end of that year, with her conviction overturned due to technicalities, Hossack was briefly freed before facing another trial with a change of venue. The second trial, beginning and ending in February 1903, resulted in a hung jury. The country prosecutor decided not to re-try the now sixty-year-old woman, whose health

was deteriorating, for a third time. She was freed and went to live with one of her adult children till her death in 1916.

[Fig. 4]

Anamosa State Penitentiary "Female Department"

Credits : Milbre Burch.

- 11 Susan Glaspell was a young reporter when she covered Hossack's first trial for the *Des Moines Daily News*, filing more than two dozen stories from its start to its finish. The stories she filed can be found online at a website showcasing a book-length study of the trial, *Midnight Assassin – A Murder in America's Heartland* (Iowa City : University of Iowa Press, 2005), by Patricia L. Bryan and Thomas Wolf.
- 12 Following Hossack's conviction in 1901, Glaspell quit journalism and turned her attention to fiction writing – short stories, novels and eventually plays. In 1916, she wrote her one-act masterwork, *Trifles*, loosely based on the Hossack case. It premiered two weeks after Hossack's death in August of 1916. The next year Glaspell published "A Jury of Her Peers," an adaptation of *Trifles* in short story form, cannily realizing that more people were likely to read a published short story than see the play.

An outing to Anamosa to see Glaspell's 1921 play *Inheritors* at Starlighters II

- 13 Fast forward nearly a hundred years. How did this contemporary playwright come to be part of the excursion to Anamosa last September ? Because of the ongoing relevance and influence of Glaspell's work in the 21st century.

- 14 In the Fall of 2009, as a midcareer solo performer and non-traditional graduate student in the Department of Theatre at the University of Missouri, I studied *Trifles* in a class on the Female Dramatic Tradition taught by Cheryl Black. In a Dramaturgy class with her the following semester, I produced an in-depth dramaturgical protocol (or background reference notebook) on *Trifles*. At Dr. Black's urging, I then used the dramaturgical details I had gathered to create a monodrama intended as a sequel to Glaspell's play. It is also an indictment of the ongoing failure of American culture to protect the battered women in our communities. Called *Sometimes I Sing*, the piece is written and performed in the voice of Minnie Foster Wright. By now it's been read or staged at conferences, colleges and festivals across the US and in Europe.
- 15 According to my premise, Wright is serving time at "the White Palace of the West," where she receives a visit from the young woman who had reported on her murder trial. *Sometimes I Sing* and a dramaturgical essay about its provenance are included in the book *On Susan Glaspell's Trifles and "A Jury of Her Peers" – Centennial Essays, Interviews and Adaptations* (Jefferson, NC : McFarland and Company, Inc., 2015), edited by Martha C. Carpentier and Emeline Jouve.
- 16 Last year, when Jennifer Beall's inquiry reached my former professor, Dr. Black, in turn, contacted me about the possibility of a joint road trip to see the show. Through early email exchanges and phone conversations with Beall, I learned that most of the members of the director's cast and production crew were largely unfamiliar with Glaspell's connection to Iowa, to Margaret Hossack's trial, and, thus, to the prison sitting in their midst. So, I suggested that Starlighters II consider staging a reading of *Trifles* paired with *Sometimes I Sing*, in the weeks before the opening of *Inheritors*.
- 17 The theater's board got behind the idea as a way to raise funds to cover our expenses in making the trip and to raise the awareness in their community about Iowa's own pioneering playwright and her connection to Anamosa. Starlighters II offered its "Trifles and Treats" event on August 20th, a month before the run of *Inheritors* opened. The readings of Glaspell's play and my monodrama were paired with an array of desserts and a talk given by a docent from the Anamosa Prison Museum. Community members also had an opportunity to attend a talk at the local library, commemorating the centennial of the end of WWI. Those who attended the talk better understood why immigrants protesting British rule of a colonized India would be met with a strong backlash – an important plot point in *Inheritors* – since Britain had been so closely allied with America in the war.

The themes of *Inheritors* and their resonance today

- 18 With its theme of enforced nationalism on a college campus amid anti-immigrant fervor, the run of *Inheritors* proved to be extremely timely in 2017. An article in *The Gazette*, a Cedar Rapids newspaper, summarizes the play's main conflict :

"Written in 1921, the story revolves around nationalism, immigration and the erosion of basic rights like freedom of speech. Among three generations of Americans is Silas Morton, a farmer who wanted to plant a college in a cornfield as a way to give back some of the land the government seized during the Blackhawk war of 1832, and in honor of his friend Felix Fejevary, a Hungarian revolutionary and immigrant.

"Fast-forward to 1920, where Fejevary's son is a trustee at the college. Seeking state funds for the school, he's squaring off against Morton's outspoken granddaughter,

Madeline, 21. She's speaking out for the students from India who are protesting British Imperial rule, as well as others Fejevary is trying to silence so as not to counter the nationalism mind-set following World War I. She risks going to jail for her stance on social justice.

- 19 The article continues : "Characters in the play tell her she shouldn't stand up for the Hindus, that it's foolish to champion their rights since 'they aren't actually American,' [director Jennifer] Beall noted. "That's something we've been talking about recently. We see a lot of coverage about those kinds of situations in the news today."⁴

***Inheritors* as an act of resistance by Glaspell**

- 20 *Inheritors* was, in part, Glaspell's act of resistance to the 1917 Espionage Act and the 1918 Sedition Act that expanded its purview. Put into place as World War I was ending, these two acts were meant to empower the Wilson administration "to deal with the insidious methods of internal hostile activities," as Geoffrey R. Stone puts it in a 2003 article for the Chicago Law School. He notes that the Espionage Act made it a crime "to promote the success of [the nation's] enemies," a crime punishable by 20 years in prison. It "also authorized the Postmaster General to exclude from the mails any writing or publication that is 'in violation of any provisions of this act.'"⁵
- 21 Living in Greenwich Village in New York City in the twenties, Glaspell and her husband were closely aligned to the collective of socialist writers and artists who published the revolutionary monthly, *The Masses*, from 1911-1917. It was the refusal of the Postmaster General to allow the continued mailing of *The Masses* due to its content that signaled the beginning of its end. Seven members of the collective went to trial twice – in the Spring and Summer of 1918 – for the "treasonous nature" of the journal. Both ended as mistrials but a heavy toll had been taken on the group's members, and *The Masses* was silenced for good.
- 22 In addition, Glaspell would certainly have been aware of the free speech struggles of writer Agnes Smedley because of Smedley's support for the movement to free India from British colonialism. A PBS webpage highlights Smedley's exploits after she left New York :
- In 1918, while she was a student at the University of California, Smedley was arrested in the company of Salindranath Ghose, a prominent Indian nationalist, and charged with aiding and abetting espionage. She was indicted for fraud on charges of having helped the Friends of Freedom for India establish themselves in the U.S. as a legitimate government-in-exile, but she was never tried.⁶
- 23 Witnessing these affronts to free speech within her circle and on its outer edges - gave Glaspell the raw material of *Inheritors*. Nearly a century later, her play remains troublingly timely in the Trumpian dystopia that is American governance today. And inventive casting at Starlighters II – a woman played Dr. Holden and an African American man played the Hungarian immigrant Felix Fejevary I – threw the play's theme of Otherness into sharp relief, making it even more powerful for a contemporary audience.
- 24 The edited interview below captures Dr. Black's perceptions about Glaspell, *Inheritors* and the community theater production at Starlighters II in Anamosa last fall. It took place at her office at the University of Missouri on February 6, 2018.

Edited Interview with Cheryl Black

Milbre Burch : Tell me about your introduction to the work of Susan Glaspell.

Cheryl Black : Years and years and decades ago, I must have read *Trifles*. It was quite a while till I read much of anything else, probably grad school. Whatever I'd read in addition *Trifles* – I had categorized her as an early feminist writer.

And I knew that she worked for and was heavily involved in Provincetown Players, who I had associated mostly with Eugene O'Neill. And I always thought, wow, what an anomaly she must have been and how odd it must have been for her, the author of *Trifles*, to be in this male- dominated, Eugene O'Neillist, masculinist kind of world.

My entry to Provincetown Players was through her. And then what I discovered was : it was a world of women. That, in fact, she was among a sisterhood of feminist women, activist/artists, that [the] company was largely run by women and that O'Neill was the anomaly.

Glaspell emerges when you're doing research on Provincetown. Unquestionably, she's the second most famous and most prolific playwright [among the Players] and – Christopher Bigsby said it [first]– she's the most representative of their goals and their ideals and most representative as an American author.

The more you know about Glaspell, the more interested you get. And so, since that time, I've been quite a fan. I've directed several of her works. And published some more about her after the book [*The Women of Provincetown* (Tuscaloosa : University of Alabama Press, 2002)] and umpteen conference presentations on her and her work, or the work of her confederates.

M.B. : Tell me about your introduction to the town of Anamosa and to *Starlighters II* Theatre.

Cheryl Black : I knew about Anamosa as the location of the prison in which [Margaret Hossack] – whose story inspired *Trifles* – was housed. Never been there. Never heard of *Starlighters II*. They sent an email to Noelia Hernandez-Reall [at the] International Susan Glaspell Society [asking for a Glaspell scholar to come respond to the play in Iowa.] [Based in Columbia, Missouri,] I'm located in a reasonable position to go do it and [thought] Milbre might be willing to go with me. It turned out to be a happy excursion indeed.

M.B. : So, you were the right person to go to Anamosa and offer a scholarly response to the *Inheritors* production.

Cheryl Black : Probably but certainly not the only one. She has a small but passionate following [here and] in Europe.

M.B. : Why do you think that is ?

Cheryl Black : She's always had a following in Europe, even much earlier in her career, when she was living. She was very popular in England and even now – her international society is international for a reason – there're Chinese scholars, French scholars, German scholars, Spanish scholars, South American scholars. And yet she's quintessentially American. Maybe that's why : that she really illuminates American culture to other cultures in a very useful way.

She strikes a note with women and women's experiences that has a very wide audience and seems to transcend national boundaries.

M.B. : Focusing on the performance we saw, what was the impact of the *Starlighters II* director casting Professor Holden as a woman and Felix Fejevary I as an African American man – and the tweaks that caused in the script ?

Cheryl Black : The play is quite realistic and grounded in a very specific geography and chronology. And [it] is about race in a way or certainly about cultural Otherness or non-Whiteness for want of a better term. What we now call "color conscious casting" is how I look at [the director's decision.] Anybody seeing [the play] is aware that this is an African American actor and probably aware that [his character] is Hungarian and probably did not have African heritage – and that would have been notable in the era [of the play].

I thoroughly applaud that casting and certainly would do it myself in a heartbeat, if I were doing this show. Because on any number of levels and for any number of reasons, African American actors and ethnic minority actors need more opportunities. On that purely pragmatic sense, I'm always happy to see that [happen.] And then, on the color conscious side, I think the idea of seeing a black body in that role, or any other role that is not [written as a black body], just reminds us of the power inequities and the social justice inequities. It says [people of color] *are* present, and it is [their] history too. In that sense, American history belongs to all Americans. Anybody can embody any of these roles, [calling] attention [to] the absence of those voices and those bodies in our history.

Oh, and the cross-gender casting – I thought that was a very interesting choice. And I don't think it violated or confused the issues in the play, in that, the reason the professor does not live according to his or her conscience is economic. Economic necessity works just as well with a woman as a man. It was more believable and more realistic that because [Professor Holden] was a woman, her economic demands were because of a mother dependent on her. And that made more sense to me. And again, it was a way to give a woman a role. Women are underrepresented on stage.

So, I liked both of those choices. They worked on many levels.

M.B. : What can you say about the *Starlighters II* audience's reaction to the *Inheritors* production and talkback ?

Cheryl Black : I was absolutely thrilled and maybe a little surprised at how engaged the audience was and how much they loved [the play.] Because it's a long play and it's a talky play. This audience – they were so engaged ; they were so into it.

And the talkback was absolutely the best I've ever attended. And I attend many, many, many per year. But I've never had more fun at one. I've never felt like audiences asked better questions. It just underscored how relevant [*Inheritors*] is for today. They didn't look at it as a history lesson. [They] connected it to today's political situations in all their questions.

M.B. : And they stayed for an hour-long talkback after a two-and-a-half-hour play.

Cheryl Black : And it could have gone on longer. Honestly it makes me want to go back to Anamosa – because a terrific audience makes theatre what it ought to be. They were holding up their end. I always say to my students : If you want theatre to be better, be a better audience member. Because you are the dancing partner and you've

got to get up on your feet ; you've got to meet it. And that's what happened. It's wonderful that it was [Glaspell's] home state, and [Anamosa had] that connection with specific works of hers.

M.B. : What is your response to the idea of staging a production of *Inheritors* given the current political climate in the US ?

Cheryl Black : It's absolutely relevant now, and it almost always has been. Because to some extent, America's always had an issue with certain Others. American-ness has had a color and a nationality and a religion. And there's a continuum of assimilation, or a continuum of welcome – that not everybody's welcomed equally. And I think that's always been the case.

There's this wonderful book about how various ethnic groups became white and became American. See : *Working Toward Whiteness : How America's Immigrants Became White : The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* by David R. Roediger.

And [in the play] it's not just about the Hindu revolutionary students — the Hungarians were not entirely white at first. So, *Inheritors* is remarkable in how it touches on degrees of American-ness and White-ness, including Native Americans very significantly, and the [family of] pioneers [moving] from New England to the West [displacing the indigenous people.]

One of [my] biggest questions [about the play] is the absence of the Hindu students [on stage.] At the same time [it takes] a pro Hindu revolutionary stance, their bodies and voices are absent. And I am absolutely sure that Glaspell made that choice for purely logistical reasons. There was nobody in [the Provincetown Players] she would have been able to call on [to play them.] She would have had to go out of her way to find convincing, authentic "Hindu Indian revolutionary" actors. That's also true [of the indigenous characters referenced in the play] : the Native Americans are dead and buried. So, it's an interesting kind of paradox – the absence [of the Hindu students] and the Native Americans.

[But writing the absence of significant characters is something] Glaspell does. And my own feeling about that is there's a strength in that. Bernice is absent. Minnie Wright is absent. And she does not do it to minimize ; she does it to highlight. Our current thinking and theorizing about absence and presence and voice gives that a different kind of resonance.

So [the absence of these characters is] not a reason not to do the play. I highly recommend for people to teach and to produce [*Inheritors*.]

M.B. : On today's college campus, you can find Indian students and bring them [into the production]. You could have them rabble rousing in some portion of the auditorium and then being dragged away.

Cheryl Black : Or, create a prologue that gives them voice or offers the argument [about] what their absence means in the context of Glaspell's dramaturgy. From a purely artistic dramaturgical point of view, the play is so very expository : somebody comes on and talks about these terribly exciting things [offstage]. And, again, Glaspell couldn't stage those [things] at the Provincetown Playhouse. It was hard enough to stage what she did, having three different locations [in this script.] But as a theatre person, I want to see those encounters and I want to hear those speeches rather than have somebody else talk about them.

M.B.: Tell me what you'd say to other community, academic and professional theatre-makers about producing Glaspell's work in the 21st Century -- especially *Inheritors*.

Cheryl Black: There's virtually nothing she wrote that isn't still resonant and relevant today. I would encourage everybody, encourage her production – that is one of my missions in life (laughter) !

Also, she always plays better than she reads. And she reads well, but she plays better. I'm an old hand at [staging her work] – but I am always surprised by how theatrical she is, as well as the literary satisfaction [or her writing]. She has unique, innovative syntax, sentence structure. And yet it works when you say it out loud. I've discovered this acting her even more than directing her : when you say those things out loud, they work.

It's like : "Of course ! This is exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it." It's uncanny. As an actor, the brilliance of a good playwright is that I don't have to work at all. I've read almost all of her major female parts – Claire in *The Verge*, Mrs. Hale in *Trifles*, The Woman from Idaho [in *The People*] and now *The Fugitive's Return* woman that I just did last summer. And – it's like Greek tragedy where those women go. You just say those words and they take you there. Glaspell takes you to incredibly deep places. That's brilliant playwriting.

NOTES

1. "Welcome to Iowa, Last visited 29 March, 2018 <<http://www.anamosa-iowa.org>>
2. "Starlighters staged street theater for early publicity", *JournalEreka*, 19 fev 2014, Last visited 29 March, 2018 <http://www.journal-eureka.com/news/jones_county/article_05bc61e6-9a26-11e3-9f99-001a4bcf6878.html>
3. StarLighters II, "About", Last visited 29 March, 2018 <<https://www.starlighters.org/about>>
4. Diana Dollen, "Inheritors' opening Friday at Starlighters: 190s play parallels today", *The Gazette*, 21 Sept. 2017. Last visited 29 March, 2018 <<http://www.thegazette.com/subject/life/arts/theater/inheritors-opening-friday-at-starlighters-1920s-play-parallels-today-20170921>>
5. Geoffrey R. Stone, "Judge Learned Hand and the Espionage Act of 1917: A Mystery Unravel", *University of Chicago Law School/Chicago Unbound* 335 (2003), Last visited 29 March, 2018 <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2969&context=journal_articles>
6. PBS, Last visited 29 March, 2018, < http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/venona/dece_smedley.html>

ABSTRACTS

Essay and Interview with Susan Glaspell scholar Cheryl Black following the Fall 2017 production of Glaspell's play *Inheritors* by the Starlighters II Theatre located in Anamosa, Iowa. The interview was conducted in person on February 6, 2018.

Essai/entretien avec Cheryl Black, spécialiste des œuvres dramatiques de Susan Glaspell. L'entretien fut conduit suite aux représentations de la pièce *Inheritors* de Glaspell par la compagnie Starlighters II Theatre à Anamosa, Iowa (USA).

INDEX

Subjects: Theater

Mots-clés: Susan Glaspell, Anamosa, Community Theater, *Inheritors*, Anti-Immigrant, Nationalisme

Keywords: Susan Glaspell, Anamosa, Community Theater, *Inheritors*, Anti-Immigrant, Nationalism

AUTHOR

MILBRE BURCH

University of Missouri
Office of Graduate Studies
burchme@missouri.edu