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William W. French. *Maryat Lee's EcoTheater: A Theater for the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by David Miller. Lexington, Kentucky: Bacchante Books, 2019, 170 pp. [\$8.99] e-book. Also available in paperback [\$12.99]. [Originally published in paper by West Virginia University Press, Morgantown, 1998, 154 pp.]

Maryat Lee's EcoTheater: A Theater for the Twenty-First Century has been my faithful guide during my two research trips, in 2012 and 2015, to study the Maryat Lee Papers housed at West Virginia University in Morgantown. On my first visit I had hoped to meet Professor French, but he died unexpectedly in Feb. 2012. Reviewing his book is a way to share—and extend—the conversations I surely would have had with him about Maryat's life and work.

One might wonder why the book, originally published by West Virginia University Press in 1998, was being republished as an e-book at this particular moment. A quick Amazon search reveals that a first-edition paperback of the book, which is now out of print, costs in good condition between \$982.90 and \$1240.93. (Living in Brooklyn as I do, I could sell my tattered copy to cover my expenses for about a week.) David Miller, who as a young college graduate worked closely with Lee as an EcoTheater intern in the early 1980s, has taken it on himself to independently re-publish the book as an e-book (also available in paper) through Bacchante Books. Even though the original book contains factual errors and stylistic inconsistencies, Miller, due to prohibitive costs, did not make any changes to the 1998 edition. He wanted to honor his two friends—Maryat Lee, who died of heart failure in 1989, and Bill French, who had been his college mentor at West Virginia University. Miller's labor of love is a testament to the kind of dogged devotion people often express for Maryat Lee.

For those of you who may not be familiar with Lee, here's some background information to set the stage for French's book. Maryat Lee is best known in Flannery O'Connor circles for her friendship with O'Connor. They met over Christmas 1956 in Milledgeville when Maryat visited her brother, Robert E. "Buzz" Lee, the new young president of O'Connor's alma mater, now called Georgia College. Over the course of a seven-year correspondence, they delighted in battling out their differences concerning race and religion and consoled each other during crises of health and family. In Flannery, Maryat found a captive audience to her shape-shifting, as well as someone to keep her grounded. In Maryat, Flannery experienced a friendship with a person of wild mobility, her equal in wit and curiosity, who didn't mind overstepping rules. During Maryat's infrequent visits to Milledgeville, the two painted together, talked a lot, and laughed.

Lee, however, had a vibrant career in her own right, from the 1950s to the 1980s. She produced street theater in New York, starting with her 1951 anti-drug play *Dope!* staged over the course of five nights in vacant lots in East Harlem. Lee produced this

play with the support of fellow Union Theological seminarians, all white men, who founded the East Harlem Protestant Parish. Lee reflected on the process of writing and producing this play in her 1955 master's thesis, written under the direction of one of Union's star theologians, Paul Tillich, with whom she had an affair. Lee gifted O'Connor a copy of this play, and in an early letter written to Lee, dated 31 Jan. 1957, O'Connor refers to it with enthusiasm: "Well, I was fascinated by the little play—a real morality play if I ever saw one and altogether powerful in spite of it. I was able to fancy myself hanging from one of those fire-escapes and watching it with complete absorption" (*HB* 200-01).

In 1968, Maryat founded SALT, Soul and Latin Theater, and she put into practice what she learned from *Dope!* Distrusting commercial, mainstream theater which she saw as elitist, Maryat believed in an "indigenous" or grassroots theater in which everyday people would become actors, the streets would be the stage, and family and friends would be the audience. Preferring the rhythms of everyday speech to the affectations in the voices of professional actors, she turned to medieval mystery plays, as well as Shakespeare, as her models. Together with black and Puerto Rican high school students from Benjamin Franklin High School, she wrote four staple plays for the troupe, who performed them in vacant lots across the city, focusing on East Harlem. The stories emerged from the lives of the students and explored painful topics that weren't generally discussed publicly at that time: a gay high school student is berated by his father (*After the Fashion Show*) or a black teacher is challenged by her students for her toxic, internalized racism (*The Classroom*). Fran Belin, Maryat's partner of thirteen years, took exquisite black and white close-ups of the teenage actors, including the star player José Colon, Maryat's counterpart in charisma, and some of these photos appear in French's book. SALT was active for three summer seasons, from 1968 to 1970, with American society bursting in flames all around; in her journals Maryat writes about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as about Vietnam, Stonewall, women's marches, Fillmore East. Within her own troupe, discussions raged on topics of gender, sexuality, and race. When Maryat eventually claimed sole authorship of the SALT plays, the students revolted, and Maryat prepared to step out.

In 1971, joining a wave of idealistic people, mostly white, who believed in living off the land, Maryat and Fran moved to Hinton, in southern West Virginia. Maryat wanted to test her ideas about street theater in a rural setting. At first she was perceived as an outsider, a woman living with a woman on "The Women's Farm," with degrees from elite universities. "[S]he understood she had to work to be accepted," David Miller recalls, "and she intentionally made key friendships. And she wasn't sipping Chardonnay and laying back, she was hiring people to cut her hay and fix up the abandoned one-room schoolhouse she bought down the road from her farm" (e-mail from Miller to Harris, 15 Jan. 2020). In 1975, after biding her time in order to work past stereotypes and establish relationships in the community, she founded EcoTheater. She reached out to local people, in the beginning teenagers but later senior citizens, and listened to their stories. Through tape recordings and improvisations she transformed these stories into scenes to be developed and performed, the highlight of which was *John Henry*. French, who covers the entire spectrum of Lee's career, focuses on her West Virginia years. With heart he captures well Maryat's capacity to listen with empathy and the way it brought empowerment to people who didn't expect to find it.

French shies away from addressing conflicts that inevitably arose between the strong-willed, highly educated Maryat and her less privileged actors. However, theater scholar Anne Swedberg probes them head-on, using critical race theory and postmodern and feminist poststructural educational theory as tools of analysis. Her 2006 U of Wisconsin dissertation, entitled “Take it Outside: Community-Based Theater and Maryat Lee, 1949-1989,” makes a fascinating companion to French’s book.

French, an English Professor at West Virginia University, first met Maryat in the summer of 1981. At the time, EcoTheater hired local teenagers through the Governor’s Summer Youth Program. As part of the funding agreement with the Humanities Foundation of West Virginia, Maryat invited guest scholars to lead discussions after each play. The young David Miller, who had landed a summer job working as a music director and writer through the program, suggested French, his mentor. There was an immediate synergy between Bill and Maryat based on a similar sense of humor and a deep commitment to the humanities. At heart they were both teachers and lovers of people, and the two visited each other often, Bill driving to Hinton (and later Lewisburg) to work with Maryat on publishing the Appalachian plays, and Maryat to Bill and his wife Marty’s home in Morgantown. Bill became important to Maryat both personally and professionally. As a native West Virginian, he helped her feel a sense of belonging in her adopted West Virginia, which was crucial for her to gain the trust of her neighbors. As a respected scholar, French also published articles about EcoTheater, which helped give her work credence.

Maryat loved working with Bill, and he jumped in as Maryat’s editor and archivist. (He later served as her literary executor.) In 1982 she sent out a newsletter to her family and friends in which she announced that they would be working together on gathering, annotating, and publishing her Appalachian plays. Bill had received a summer grant from the Humanities Foundation of West Virginia to do so; two years later he received a similar grant to work on her SALT plays. Maryat, always an accomplished fundraiser, also announced in the newsletter that EcoTheater would be selling signed copies of *The Habit of Being*, Flannery O’Connor’s letters that had come out in 1979, to raise money for the theater at a time of severe budget cuts. Maryat had wanted to be the editor of this collection, but she lost out to Sally Fitzgerald. When Fitzgerald caught wind of this fundraising scheme—Maryat signed her own name to the copies—she snarkily referred to it, in a handwritten note I found at Emory, as just another one of Maryat’s pranks. Bill French was the antidote to all that condescension, embracing Maryat’s exuberance and passion for touching the hearts of all sorts of people, including those she most identified with, the underdogs.

French’s book is rich and informative. In the first half, he gives a careful overview of Maryat’s life and work. Chapter One includes a brief biography of Lee’s childhood, as well as descriptions of her years in New York theater. French then devotes four chapters to EcoTheater: its history, significance, process, and sample scenes. French draws on excerpts from the book Maryat was writing on EcoTheater at the time of her death, including guidelines for becoming a playwright-director of a seed group. The collaborative process Maryat outlines between writer and actor resonates with what we would call today “student-centered learning.” The material in Chapter Four, “The *EcoTheater* Process,” for example, would be useful to creative writing teachers or teachers of composition. David Miller writes, “The young people I worked with that summer certainly benefited from the sense of ownership over their own stories that her

process helped instill in them. I'm not a theater person but I've always wondered what current strain of theater teaching or learning in general most resembles hers, because it works" (e-mail 15 Jan. 2020).

Maryat believed that each person has stories to tell, some heroic but many ordinary, and that when a person lets down his or her guard to reveal a truth in a story, magic happens. The person speaks in an authentic voice. Masks fall away and the person feels a moment of self-discovery and empowerment. By extension, so does the community. By spending time with neighbors in a community, Maryat hoped to gain their trust. From there she would form small groups of potential actors and interview them for stories that might emerge. Maryat asked questions to draw out these stories, often tape-recording them. She'd then transcribe the stories, which troupe members would use as a provisional script to improvise and create scenes. Together Maryat and the actors would stitch together the scenes to create a whole play. She embraced cross-gender casting because she believed that roles assigned to us at birth can be oppressive. The lead in *John Henry*, for example, was often played by a female.

The second half of the book feels something like a family scrapbook, adding at once charm and frustration to the reading experience. French invited those closest to Maryat and EcoTheater to contribute selections: Fran Belin provides a sample guide to "indigenous" theater, and French chooses seven EcoTheater scenes from plays, including *John Henry* and *Four Men and a Monster*, written according to Maryat's collaborative method. Pasting together contributions from a variety of people close to EcoTheater gives the book an unfinished feel, but that sense is in keeping with Maryat's method of writing: plays constantly evolved with each new set of actors or each new setting. French had the goal of publishing the Appalachian plays, which never happened, in part because, as we see in Lee's archive, any given play has endless numbers of drafts.

French honors Maryat by pulling together some of her own writing on EcoTheater, as well as fragments from an unfinished autobiography. In terms of citation, he is often probably quoting from Maryat's published or unpublished writings, and at other times he seems to be simply remembering conversations he had with Maryat over the years. His approach to organizing the material is not always as clear as it could be, because Maryat's drafts were themselves chaotic, but the scrapbook approach gives concrete examples that would be very useful to anyone hoping to reproduce Maryat's method in the classroom. And the vibrancy of her own voice and method always shines through.

French's book might be confusing to a reader who doesn't know very much about Maryat Lee or the chronology of her life. He sometimes skips back and forth in time, introducing anecdotes with little context, especially in Chapter Three, "*EcoTheater's* Significance to the Twenty-First Century." There, for example, on page 62, French reports on Maryat's experience with piano teacher Sam Harwill. She learned a method from him about playing piano that she later used with her EcoTheater actors. Maryat probably knew Harwill in her New York years, but French doesn't clarify the timeline; nor does he acknowledge the source of his quotations. The lesson Maryat learns from music and then applies to acting is illuminating, and it shows the multifaceted nature of her gifts, something that drew people to her, like O'Connor. Maryat was gifted musically, like her mother, and her oil paintings and watercolors are worthy of an exhibit. (I dream of a joint show of Flannery's and Maryat's paintings.) French captures a lot with this anecdote, and the primary material he gathers and the insiders' stories he tells are worth it.

After more than twenty years, French's book is being republished. The question remains: why now? O'Connor Studies have been re-invigorated in recent years with all sorts of archival material made newly available, and O'Connor scholars are always fascinated to unearth connections between Flannery and those closest to her. Maryat casts a special spell because her friendship and correspondence with Flannery are so provocative and don't fit into neat categories. Elizabeth Coffman's recently released documentary *Flannery* features an interview with Mary Dean Lee, Maryat's niece, who serves as an ardent advocate for her aunt's legacy. Like David Miller, she understands the importance of Maryat Lee to O'Connor scholarship.

French refers to Flannery O'Connor only three times in his book, but as a reader I feel her sustained presence in Maryat's vision of drama. Even though French emphasizes Maryat's Appalachian roots, that vision, I would argue, emerged in part out of her struggles with the South. O'Connor and Lee, despite their many differences in personality and temperament, grew up in a similar southern culture and shared a similar critique of that culture. They each struggled with the southern code of manners and the roles it imposed on women. They each believed in a form of authenticity. Lee developed her method of storytelling and theater to help liberate her actors, herself included, from playing roles and living behind a mask. French quotes from "Legitimate Theater Is Illegitimate," Lee's 1981 article (*Toward the Second Decade: The Impact of the Women's Movement on American Institutions*, ed. Betty Justice and Renate Pore, Greenwood Press, 11-24) on her concept of drama:

As a southerner I grew up feeling that we were all hiding behind appearances and the roles assigned to us very early. Theater offered the chance to step out, under the protection of whatever character we played, to reveal vital, if hidden, aspects of ourselves. This sharing act of truth would help bridge divisions and create a cleansed and loving community. (Lee 12, qtd. in French 59)

The idealistic vision Maryat expresses here of theater's role—to "bridge divisions and create a cleansed and loving community"—resonates powerfully with the "beloved community" Martin Luther King, Jr., called for in the 1960s, and it also sounds poignantly relevant for our own age. 🍷