

The Playwrights' Studio Group: An Interview with Two Women Playwrights of the 1930s.

Patrick O'Neill
 Mount Saint Vincent University

Contemporary blindness too long led us to lament the almost barren field which was Canadian Drama before the 1951 Royal Commission on the Arts, but now we have opened our eyes to our prolific dramatic past. One of the most fertile oases in Canadian dramatic history is the activity of the Playwrights' Studio Group in Toronto between 1932 and 1940. The Playwrights' Studio Group was a small group of producing playwrights, who by accident, if not intent, were all women. Members of the Group included Leonora McNeilly, Rica McLean Farquharson, Win Pilcher, Marjorie Price, Virginia Coyne Knight, Dora Smith Conover and Lois Reynolds Kerr.

This interview with two of the surviving members of the Playwrights' Studio Group is presented in tribute to their determination to celebrate the theatrical spirit during the dark days of the Great Depression, and with the hope that a broader audience will inspire both a detailed study of the Group's activity, and revival productions of their plays.

Dora Smith Conover, now of Kettleby, Ontario, was born in 1896 and spent her early years as

a "missionary daughter" in China. In 1981 she returned to China for a three week tour which concluded on her 85th birthday. A graduate of Herman Voaden's playwriting course at Central Technical School in Toronto, Mrs. Conover was a free lance journalist and Charter Member of the Playwrights' Studio Group.

Lois Reynolds Kerr has lived in Vancouver since 1950. Her graduation from Victoria College of the University of Toronto in 1930 coincided with her first prize from the IODE Playwriting Contest for her play "Open Doors." Her play "Among Those Present" was included in the third evening of plays produced by the Playwrights' Studio Group. Mrs. Kerr's papers have recently been obtained by the University of Calgary.

Q. Canadian playwriting prior to mid-century is now receiving long-overdue attention. Since you were both members of the Playwrights' Studio Group, I hope you can enliven the academic description of the group which has already appeared in Terence Goldie's doctoral thesis, "Canadian Dramatic Literature in English, 1919-1939."¹ Dr. Goldie suggests that Edgar Stone, the

artistic director of Hart House Theatre between 1929 and 1935, "stimulated the formation of the Playwrights' Studio Group and offered it space at Hart House Theatre."

CONOVER: Oh, no! The emphasis is wrong. Edgar Stone was cajoled, bullied and practically forced by our sweet tenacious Leonora McNeilly into having her play, *The Alms Box of St. Anne's* given a "Studio Try-out" on the Hart House Stage. Rica McLean Farquharson's *Sure of a Fourth* and my *The Horizon the Goal* were added to form a full evening bill on 28 January 1933 and the group was launched. After our first success, Edgar continued to offer us two or three nights a year.²

KERR: And it's not as if the group's playwriting activity began with the Hart House experience. Dora's play *Return Home Again* was the winning entry in the Canadian Women's Press Club's 1929 contest. Virginia Coyne (Knight) won that contest the next year for *A Dollar and a Half an Hour*.

CONOVER: I first met Lois in that year, 1930, when her play about unemployment, *Open Doors*, won the IODE playwriting contest.

KERR: That meeting changed my life. Dora had invited me to tea at the Toronto Women's Press Club, and there I met Margaret McCrimmon, Women's Editor of *The Globe* who shortly offered me a job at the newspaper.

Q. Was *Open Doors* produced at Hart House?

KERR: No, Dickson Kenwin produced it with his Academy Players at the Little Playhouse, 142 Bloor Street West: the playhouse was in the living room of an old house and would only seat about 50 people. Rica McLean Farquharson's *Frawnie* and Florence Blaisdell's *One Chance in a Million* were produced at the same time. We ran for a week, opening on 2nd February 1931.

Q. So it wasn't impossible to get a Canadian play produced then?

CONOVER: No, not impossible. The Playwrights' Studio Group began when Leonora McNeilly badgered Edgar Stone to read and criticize her play. He protested that no one could tell about a play without seeing it played and finally offered a free stage for a studio production if she could get a couple of friends with plays to form a bill. She asked Rica and me and we were off. Edgar got us each amateur directors who had worked with him. Everything else was up to us.

Q. What was the Playwrights' Studio Group's rationale for existence?

CONOVER: Heaven knows. We just did it because we thought it would be fun to see our plays in action and here was the opportunity. After all, Hart House Theatre was supposed to be for original Canadian plays and, at that time, there was no one but us. It was the Dirty Thirties and we had few amusements, even if we could have afforded them. If we could have gone to plays, we would probably never have gone through the travail of producing them.

Q. Did you subscribe to any theory of playwriting?

CONOVER: No time for theorizing - we just rushed in as best we could - and loved it! Leonora, her beloved Nova Scotia; Rica and Lois, clever society satire, etc.; Virginia, romance, Marjorie, her Caesar; and me, I tackled "all sorts" but psychology was new then and "my thing."

KERR: We generally preferred writing comedy but each wrote about what she chose. I think we generally wrote out of our own experience. It is my comedies and farces that have been selected generally for comment by critics, I suppose because it was generally these which were selected

for production. However, you will note from my checklist of plays that more than half I have written actually were drama. I point this out because some critics of my work have expressed the opinion that had I not concentrated so much on farce and comedy I might have emerged as a major Canadian playwright. Perhaps someday these critics will read and judge my more serious plays, unpublished and for the most part unread. Eleven of my plays are full-length.

Q. Did the group have any particular hopes and aspirations for Canadian drama?

CONOVER: Nothing so high as to aspire actually. We just thought that a Canadian play was one by a Canadian and if we aspired it was to entertain and, if possible, to sometime produce that Great One.

KERR: Mostly we hoped that Canadian plays would be used by amateur and Little Theatre groups.

Q. Today plays are initially developed by small experimental companies and workshops (which is what your group was in the 1930s) and then picked up by professional theatres. Did your group regret the fact that there was no professional theatre in Canada in the 1930s to pick up your plays and to rework them? Would any of the group have liked to become professional playwrights?

CONOVER: We were furious that there was no theatre in Canada because the American Moving Pictures had bought out every theatre in the across-Canada chain and either murdered or converted them (to Cinema). Lois would still like to become professional and still very well may. If she can keep up her heart. Best luck to her.

KERR: Indeed we felt this vacuum in Canada. I sent many plays to agents in the USA and to many Little Theatre Groups in Canada.

Q. What was Stone like to work with at Hart House?

CONOVER: Edgar never loved us but he kept us on rather surprisingly, we thought, because we kept on being surprisingly successful.

KERR: Stone arranged for us to use Hart House and some of their best directors and actors. But Stone personally did none of our directing. By letting us use Hart House for our plays - without charge - he contributed a great deal to the fostering of Canadian drama. We charged a modest fee, rising from twenty-five cents to thirty-five cents, and after our expenses were paid, if there was any money left it went to the theatre.

CONOVER: We met in the Green Room to address the post-card "invitations" mailed out to our faithful "four hundred" - which was about the Hart House capacity. Also directors, actors (each had our own favourites) also tickets, house duties the night of the show - and any help with sets and such.

Q. What was your first play produced by the Playwrights' Studio Group, Mrs. Kerr?

KERR: It was *Among Those Present*, directed by H.E. Hitchman on Saturday 27 May 1933. That was the third evening of original plays offered by the group. A curtain-raiser, *In Reverse*, by Rica McLean Farquharson preceded my play on the bill.

Q. Did the play come out of your own experience?

KERR: Oh, yes. Written around a rather sentimental plot, and set in the society department of a large newspaper, *Among Those Present* satirized social climbing women who would go to unbelievable extremes to be mentioned in the social column. The play was based on actual experiences I had as society editor with *The Globe*.

Q. How was the artistic direction of the group decided?

CONOVER: By mutual consent - depending mostly on when and if we had enough plays for a bill. Each was responsible for her own. We did mostly one acts. We did do three full plays but one-acts served us best - especially for audience following.

KERR: Each writer usually selected her own director, for the most part from the Hart House group of directors and actors, although sometimes from other good amateur groups like the University Alumnae.

CONOVER: We were more practical than artistic. We had some great amateur directors and actors those days. Talent dying to burst out and no place for it. Later on our actors got picked up by Radio Drama which burgeoned about then.

Q. Who made costumes, sets, handled publicity?

CONOVER: Publicity was those cards of invitation, word of mouth and favour of the Press - which almost needed us for Drama. We could use whatever sets were back stage if suitable but mostly bare stage, curtains and we brought our own chesterfields. My play *Fear Fantasy*, - a Canadian ghost story, was staged at Hart House in 1937 with curtains, lighting and a couple of old packing boxes. (Much easier than chesterfields!)

KERR: I wrote my most popular comedies and other plays while employed full time on the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. I did not have time to build sets and didn't want to. Much later (after 1965) I did direct some of my own plays.

Q. Did the group select the bill, or was there one person in charge?

CONOVER: No one in charge - all in it together or fade out - as our male entrants did. They

didn't care for the work involved and the audience didn't much care for their plays.

Q. What's this about males? My impression was that the Playwrights' Studio Group consisted of women writers only.

CONOVER: We welcomed any interested writer with a play and, after we had begun to make waves, others did join us. Everyone had to take full responsibility for his or her own play. At one time a couple of men came along - presumably to have us produce their plays - which we kindly did, with no kind assistance from them. The plays proved feeble and blatantly crude and the men did not come along with any more.

Q. An academic I know claims that the reason so many Canadian plays were written by women was that women stayed home and had nothing better to do than write. They in fact knew nothing of set building, directing, *etcetera*.

CONOVER: A typical male chauvinist pig that one! He should take full care of a house, a husband, three sons and a regular writing job (as I did) and find out if he had nothing better to do than write. Awful tough on females to have such macho male types sounding off.

Our studio productions had to function with a bare minimum of staging. We were only looking to see if we had a play. We wrote plays for the Studio Group - frantically, mostly - because there always seemed to be another night coming up if we wanted it and we certainly didn't want to miss the opportunity.

Q. Do you wish to comment on whether or not women's literature is distinct and different from what men write?

CONOVER: Not really, but I do think that the most engaging and human novels of all time have been written by women - especially the British and quite a few American.

KERR: I can't generalize, but personally I prefer works written by women. I'm more interested in women writers' subjects and characters.

CONOVER: Many women understand more about life and living than do most men. Personally, I adore men (should do with so many great specimens in my life—father, husband, three sons, six grandsons, one great-great.)

Q. How did your scripts differ from scripts written in the 1930s by men?

KERR: My newspaper comedies could not have been written by a man because they were based on my experiences as a society editor.

Q. Why did you belong to a women's playgroup?

CONOVER: In our group, the only two men-written plays were scruffy and badly written. We didn't set up to be a women's group, it just happened. No men cared to work. We'd have welcomed men writers.

Q. In 1935, Marjorie Price's *God Caesar* was the outstanding Canadian play at the Dominion Drama Festival (DDF). Did her success make it easier for other members of the group to get their plays produced?

CONOVER: Not really. We each of us had the opportunity to make the DDF sometime and most of us did. Marjorie was a very ambitious little lady, extremely clever and with no house, husband or children as excuse for lack of time. We all liked her and were happy at her success.

Q. Nancy Pyper, who succeeded Edgar Stone as artistic director of Hart House Theatre, refused to enter one of the group's plays in the 1936 DDF. Did this deter the group?

CONOVER: This I know nothing about. I knew Nancy Pyper only as a rather snobbish Britisher who came along after we were too well estab-

lished to be affected.

KERR: When Pyper did not include any of our plays among the three she selected for the DDF in 1936, we paid our own free-lance professional director and submitted plays to him. Cameron Matthews chose my play *Nellie McNabb*, a comedy about a heart-throb columnist, which was first produced by the Playwrights' Studio Group at Hart House 20 October 1934. Matthews went over the script with me; speeches were cut and the humour sharpened. *Nellie McNabb* placed third in the Central Ontario DDF finals at Hart House, the only original Canadian play to place, and went on to the final playoffs in Ottawa. My play was placed above all three of Pyper's entries.

Q. Did you ever discuss the success of *Nellie McNabb* with Nancy Pyper?

KERR: No, but the temptation was strong to say, "Serves you right."

Q. How did the Toronto theatrical community react to the appointment of a woman, Nancy Pyper, to the position of artistic director of the most prestigious amateur theatre in Canada?

CONOVER: She made so little impact on us I can't remember. I believe that Edgar was the last Director that I dealt with at Hart House. After him we had a Manager, Willard Thompson who treated us as beloved "Auntie Mames" as did Business Manager Jimmie Hozak - both were our good friends.

KERR: We continued our productions in Pyper's regime, but personally, I felt that I'd lost a good friend in Edgar Stone. As a group I think we were critical of her for not taking our work as worthy of serious consideration. In retrospect, I think I could say she was tolerant but condescending.

CONOVER: Jimmie Hozack, devoted Business Manager of Hart House for many, many years, kept a complete scrap book of Theatre doing -pictures, programs, publicity, clippings - but the book of our doings was stolen and never recovered. A real blow because I at least was no good at all at keeping such.

Q. The Playwrights' Studio Group existed until the outbreak of the Second World War, but it seemed to disappear during the war. Why?

CONOVER: The War happened! We produced two Reviews³ (patriotic and cheerful), made several thousand dollars for the war effort (much money for those days). After that Hart House was "dark." Our beloved Manager, Willard Thompson, went to war and was killed.

Q. What caused the group to decide to disband?

CONOVER: We never disbanded - we simply never did come back. For one thing, we were tired, for another, Hart House after the war had an American Director who used only classic plays and student actors. We had no Leonora to make it a place - even had we wanted it. We didn't try.

Q. What happened to the various members of the group after the war? Are you still in contact with any of them?

KERR: Dora is the only one with whom I have kept in contact.

CONOVER: Most are dead long since. Only Lois and Win and I remain. Win gave up play-writing as a childish indulgence after her Father died and is just recovering after many years of nursing a sick husband. Lois is still beautiful and ambitious and on her way!

Q. If you don't mind, could I ask the Gordon Sinclair question? How much money did all these plays make for you?

CONOVER: As good as none. A few royalties (five or ten dollars) did get paid from time to time. Plays in the Toronto High School Drama Festival paid. A missionary from China once told me quite patronizingly that they had done *Winds of Life* and it was "quite good." No Royalty!

KERR: I've made about \$1500 over the years, mostly from *Nellie McNabb* which Samuel French (Canada) Ltd. picked up for their Canadian Playwrights' Series after two outstanding adjudicators from England said it was a good play. It has been popular with amateur groups since it was published in 1937. I receive half of the five dollars royalty plus six cents for each copy sold.

Q. If it was not for the financial reward, why did you write, and do you still continue to write?

KERR: Because I can't *not* write. But now I'm doing some non-fiction and articles for magazines. There's always hope ahead that one play will make it.

CONOVER: Personally, I had things to say and seemed to have to write. Anybody would have to be crazy to expect to do it for money in Canada. Plays have to be played, as Edgar said. No stage. No plays. As for me, my husband's many years with, and final death from, cancer seemed to leave me with no writing life in me.

Q. The plays of the 1930s by you and others have not been revived; why do you think that is so?

KERR: Some of the comedies and farces may not go over today. Our plays often needed and didn't have reworking - the incentive of a major production dangling in front to attain excellence.

CONOVER: Plays aren't just written, they have to be born alive - preferably to loving and interested parents and friends. We never pushed them - plays don't get born-alive without much effort.

We struggled through the Dirty Thirties (for the fun, mostly) but we couldn't survive the Real War. Besides, though some of our plays were considered rather "far out" we'd pale in the modern "School of Piss and Fuck Literature."

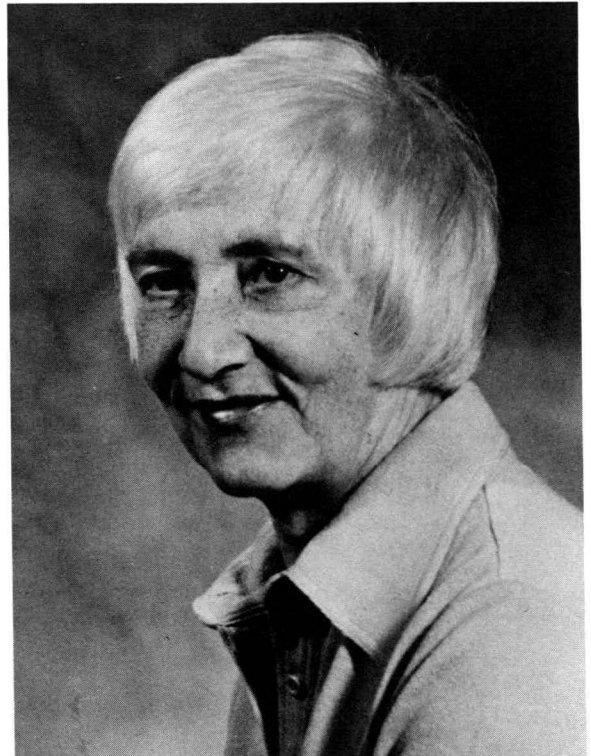
Q. To turn the focus of this discussion from the general to the more specific, can you list all your plays?

CONOVER: No, not possibly - though I once counted up to over forty - all of which were produced, published or won prizes of some sort. Since the war we have been living in the country thirty miles from Toronto. I have done several

skits and playlets for our Women's Institute and was asked to do (and paid for) in 1967, a Centennial Play for the country school house for use across Canada. It was produced twice locally. Designed for a low, open platform and to give every child "a part." Not your regular type play. My play *Turns Again Home* was produced on the radio by Rupert Luca who was one of the Greats during that early time when Canadian Radio Plays were cutting a wide swathe. Rupert liked my work, did two of my plays, and his death was a sad blow to Radio Drama - and to me. The second play was one which was requested and especially written for the Infantile Paralysis drive.



DORA SMITH CONOVER, 1936



LOIS REYNOLDS KERR, c.1976

KERR: I have finally gone through all my files and I think I have dug up the sum total of all my plays over the long years. I reread all my old plays and was surprised to find some of them better than I anticipated. A total of twenty-six plays, not including a few I was not at all proud of.

Q. How do you evaluate your involvement with the Playwrights' Studio Group after fifty years? Was it worth the energy?

KERR: It is only recently, since the history of Canadian drama has become important, that the Playwrights' Studio Group has become of some significance. I am sure that if I had known that we were making drama history I would have taken more trouble to remember all the details about everything. It is rather like putting together a jigsaw puzzle or an exercise in sleuthing, putting together plays and dates and other historic facts about my writing career which I have been coping with during the last year.

CONOVER: Wouldn't have missed it for anything. We had glorious times. Have almost forgotten them but they are still a part of what we are.

NOTES

1. Terence Goldie, "Canadian Dramatic Literature in English, 1919-1939." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1977.
2. The review for the first performance of the group appeared in the *Toronto Globe* on 4 February 1933 and concludes: "This program was one of the most encouraging signs of vital dramatic activity seen hereabouts in some time, and the welcome announcement was made that another similar evening is in the prospect. Whoever is ultimately responsible for making possible the work of this group is doing a fine thing for Canadian drama."
3. *Well of All Things* performed at Hart House Theatre on 29 January 1940, and *Keep It Flying* performed at Hart House Theatre on 2 October 1940.

APPENDIX

A Checklist of plays written by Dora Smith Conover:

- "Returns Again Home," first prize in the Women's Press Club Contest, 1929.
- "Winds of Life," in *Six Canadian Plays*, ed. Herman Voaden, Toronto, 1930.

- "The Horizon the Goal," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1933.
- "The Joker," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1934.
- "The Cat and the Mushrooms," performed at the Play Workshop, Toronto, 1935.
- "Lord's Will," performed at the Mousetrap Theatre, Toronto, 1935.
- "Wanted - Baby for Adoption," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1935.
- "The Lie Detector," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1935.
- "The Tale of Lotus Blossom," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1937.
- "Bachelor Bonds," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1937.
- "The Duckling Sisters," with Paul Conover, first prize in the Children's Bureau Play Contest, 1937.
- "Fear Fantasy," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1937.
- "Turns Again Home," in *Canadian Stage, Screen, and Studio* 1:4 (March 1937).
- "Through Darkness," performed at the Dickens Fellowship, Toronto, 1937.
- "Those Dear Dead Days," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1938.
- "The Polite Parents of Pretty Toad," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1938.
- "Growing Pains," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1938.

A checklist of plays written by Lois Reynolds Kerr:

- "The Master Mind," a one act poetic fantasy, 1929.
- "The Golden Scorpion," 1929 and rewritten as a musical, 1930.
- "Open Doors," in *Echoes* (June 1930).
- "When Our Ship Comes In," a one act drama, 1932.
- "Among Those Present," in *Curtain Call*, 10:1 (October 1938).
- "Jolly Good Fellows," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1933.
- "Queen Victoria," a three act play, 1933.
- "Doctors Dunn and Macdonald," a one act farce, 1934.
- Summer Hotel*. A one act tragedy. Chicago, Denison, 1936.
- "The Moon's Shadow," performed at Hart House Theatre, 1936.
- "Guest of Honour," a full length play, performed at Hart House Theatre, 1936.
- Nellie McNabb*. Toronto, French, 1937.
- "Mother of the Bride," a three act comedy, 1938.
- "XY7," a full length spy comedy, performed at Hart House Theatre, 1939.
- "Twenty Extra Years," a one act drama, 1955.
- "Mad House Party," a full length comedy, 1963.
- "Ring Out the President," a full length murder mystery, 1967.
- No Reporters Please*. A full length comedy. Vancouver, New Play Centre, 1971.
- "Hot Line to God," a full length drama, 1970.
- O Woman!* A full length drama with music. Vancouver, New Play Centre, 1973.
- "The Neurotics," a rewrite of "Mad House Party," 1972.
- "Snow for Christmas," a one act play, 1975.
- "Adventure on Point Grey," a historical play for children with music, 1979.

Television Plays:

- "Not Only as a Woman."
- "The Lady Was a Doctor."
- "The Saunders Mission."