By Judith Thompson

Directed by Danielle Wilson
Designed by David Vivian
Department of Dramatic Arts of the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University
Presented in the Sean O’ Sullivan Theatre Centre for the Arts, Brock University St. Catharines, Ontario February 16-18, 2012

Study Guide Prepared by Erica Charles, Dramaturge and Third Year Dramatic Arts Student with the Assistance of: Danielle Wilson, Director and DART Instructional LTA; David Vivian, Scenographer and DART Associate Professor; Virginia Reh, DART Associate Professor
“It’s this animal we all have tucked away in the corner of our subconscious and it’s very frightening to see the cage unlocked...”

—Judith Thompson

Figure 1: "The Lion" by Suloni Robertson
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1. COLLABORATION

*Lion in the Streets*

Written by Judith Thompson

February 16, 17, 18, 2012 at 7:30pm; February 17, 2012 at 11:30am

Brock University Department of Dramatic Arts

Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts

Presented in the Sean O’Sullivan Theatre

Centre for the Arts, Brock University

St. Catharines, Ontario

CAST (Students of the Brock University Department of Dramatic Arts):

Isobel ........................................................................................................ Kaitlin Race
Sue, Jill .................................................................................................... Emma Bulpin
Nellie, Rhonda, Scarlett ......................................................................... Kédie McIntyre
Rachel, Lily, Joanne, Christine ............................................................ Olivia Jackson
Laura, Ellen, Sherry ................................................................................. Tanisha Minson
Martin, Bill, Father Hayes, Edward, Midnight Man ......................... Dylan Mawson
Antonio, George, Maria, David, Michael ............................................ Matt DaCosta
Scalato, Timmy, Ron, Rodney, Ben ...................................................... Jonathan Phillips

PRODUCTION TEAM:

Director ................................................................................................ Danielle Wilson
Scenographer .......................................................................................... David Vivian
Assistant Director ......................................................... Rebekka Gondosch (student)
Assistant Designer ............................................................................. John McGowan (student)
Dramaturge ............................................................................................. Erica Charles (student)
Movement Choreographer .................................................................... Gerry Trentham
Stage Manager ...................................................................................... Nick Carney
Assistant Stage Manager ....................................................................... Jessica Johnston (student)
Production Manager........................................................................... Brian Cumberland
Technical Director ................................................................................ Adrian Palmieri
Assistant Technical Director .................................................................. Kate Hardy (student)
Technical Assistant ............................................................................ Doug Ledingham
Lighting Design .................................................................................... Ken Garrett
Audio Design ........................................................................................... Doug Ledingham
Composer ................................................................................................ Max Holten Andersen
Head of Wardrobe .................................................................................. Roberta Doylend
Apprentice First Hand ........................................................................... Jo Pacinda (student)
2. PLAY SYNOPSIS

Written by award-winning Canadian Playwright Judith Thompson, Lion in the Streets is a play in which the obsessions of the characters erupt forth in heightened, surreal and imagistic language. The young protagonist, a Portuguese immigrant to Toronto named Isobel, is a ghost in a purgatorial condition who deftly moves in and out of critical, extreme moments in each of the characters’ lives. A series of interconnected episodes which provide graphic glimpses into desperate lives advances through the passage of the characters from one scene into the next. The play is constructed like a ritualistic dance; the characters moving through a shared theatrical space, their expressions and actions witnessed by the ever-present Isobel who spends much of the play searching for the man who killed her seventeen years prior. Twentieth century music underscores the critical moments in these characters’ lives animated with contemporary movement inspired by dance company La La La Human Steps, and choreographed by Gerry Trentham, Artistic Director of Toronto’s Pounds Per Square Inch Performance company. This unique mixture complements and elucidates surreal moments while revealing Thompson’s brilliant, sparkling humor. The production embodies our contemporary quest for faith, truth, and a “state of grace” while contending with the absurdity of daily life.

Premiered at the Tarragon Theatre in 1990, Lion in the Streets won the Chalmers Outstanding New Play Award in 1991. Thompson’s plays embrace subconscious elements of human experience not often seen on stage, capturing audience’s attention across the country. Canadian theatre companies regularly perform her work, such as Soulpepper’s 2011 production of White Biting Dog at the Young Center in Toronto. Lion in the Streets continues to be one of Thompson’s most known and most popular plays. High school students will be confronted with daring subject matter which could provide context and relevance to their lives. The play explores themes of repressed violence and sexuality, the search for identity and the powerful nature of love and forgiveness. While the subject matter is dark, Thompson has crafted this exquisitely surreal play with moments of humor, hope and redemption or what she calls “moments of grace”.

Lion in the Streets: A Study Guide
Brock University Department of Dramatic Arts
Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts
February, 2012
Our production will showcase 8 second to fourth-year Brock students, playing a total of 29 roles, with additional assistance from students studying the areas of production, stagecraft, design and directing. With this production, both Director Danielle Wilson and Scenographer David Vivian look forward to honoring the wit and intelligence of our departed colleague, Dr. Marlene Moser, a leading scholar of the oeuvre of Judith Thompson. Moser’s published thesis entitled *Postmodern Feminist Readings of Identity in Selected Works of Judith Thompson, Margaret Hollingsworth and Patricia Gruben* (Ph.D. Thesis, 1998. Graduate Center for Study of Drama University of Toronto)* and the article *Identities of Ambivalence: Judith Thompson’s “Perfect Pie”* (Theatre Research in Canada, Volume 27 Number 1/ Spring 2006), explore themes of gender, narrative, identification of the subject and patriarchal abuse, dwelling upon their relationship to the stage, the language and how the audience will perceive them.

*See “Additional Resources”*
3. THE PLAYWRIGHT: JUDITH THOMPSON

Judith Thompson is one of Canada’s most highly regarded and frequently studied playwrights. Thompson graduated from Queen’s University in 1976 with a B.A in English, then from the acting program of the National Theatre School of Canada in 1979.

Her approach to playwriting ventures far beyond the comfortable conventions of realism and her works focus on the inner workings of the human mind. Though raised Roman Catholic, her plays are heavily influenced by an interest in the theories of Sigmund Freud, centering in on the psychological motives, desires, repressed thoughts and dreams of her characters. Her plays give voice to harsh realities encouraged to remain hidden in a repressive society, and confront the “horror and violence”iii of life disguised behind the illusion of a desired ideal world. Thompson’s characters exist ‘on the edge’ and threaten to obstruct such a society. They are guided by primal instincts of emotion and fear and reflect the unpredictable, and often, irrational mind. Thompson’s works are ultimately meant to try to “induce in [the audience] a prolonged sensation of psychic unsupportedness”iv almost like a dream. Her spectators are not meant to know exactly where they are, but are encouraged to take the journey to try and find out.

Thompson has a strong association with the Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre, which hosted the premieres of many of her plays including Lion in the Streets (1990). However, her work as both playwright and director is enjoyed widely across Canada and abroad; her plays performed in both official languages across the country and in translation elsewhere. She is a two-time winner of the Governor General’s Award for White Biting Dog (1984) and The Other Side of the Dark (1989), and is the recipient of the Chalmers Outstanding New Play Award for I Am Yours (1987) and Lion in the Streets (1990). She has also received an ACTRA award for Best Radio Drama for her radio play, Tornado (1987) and was awarded the Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts in 2007.
In 2008, she was given the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for *Palace of the End* (2008), which also received the Dora Mavor Moore Award for “Outstanding New Play” and an Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award. Thompson is currently a professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, and resides in Toronto with her husband and five children.

**Plays by Judith Thompson**

— *The Crackwalker* (1980)
— *I Am Yours* (1987)
— *Tornado* (1987) (Radio Play)
— *The Other Side of the Dark* (1989)
— *Lion in the Streets* (1990)
— *Hedda Gabler* (adapted from the classic by Henrik Ibsen) (1991)
— *White Sand* (1991) (Radio Play)
— *Sled* (1997)
— *Habitat* (2001)
— *Capture Me* (2004)
— *Enoch Arden in the Hope Shelter* (based on *Enoch Arden* by Lord Alfred Tennyson, and the musical melodrama with the same name by Richard Strauss) (2004)
— *Palace of the End* (2008)
— *Body and Soul* (2009)
— *Such Creatures* (2010)
— *The Grace Project: SICK* (2011)
— *Lost and Delirious* (2001) (Screenplay)
4. DIRECTOR’S NOTES

“When you go to sleep you dream. They’re your dreams, but it seems as if they’re just happening to you... that’s what the ideal theatrical experience is for me... And I hope I have stumbled upon a kind of collective unconscious so that it’s like a dream happening.”

—Judith Thompson

Judith Thompson’s work has been called dark perhaps because she dares to approach difficult topics without apology or embarrassment. The characters speak the unspoken unabashedly and this can result in a disquieting theatrical experience when watching her plays. Thompson has described this as the feeling of “being turned deeply red”. In Lion, Thompson has created a landscape of the unconscious that borders on nightmare. We are tossed into a world where there is no distinction between the real and the imagined, between past and future, between life and death. For me, the most fascinating aspect of this play lies in its contradictions. It oscillates between violent brutality and moments of incredible tenderness and intimacy; it confronts us with extremely uncomfortable subject matter while at the same moment daring us to laugh at the absurdity of the situation; the language turns from pragmatic, realism to heightened lyricism. Her plays are not naturalistic. They enter the realm of magical realism; they are journeys into the unconscious through the revelation of the inner landscape of the characters’ most deepest desires and dreams. Lion exposes each character’s most intimate thoughts and feelings and strips them of their public persona like lions escaped from their cages. As a company rehearsing this play we discovered our own contradictory responses to the material. One moment in tears, the next moment in fits of laughter, the next moment turned deeply red; terrified of the material, yet ever so excited to rehearse. But most of all, we laughed. A lot. As Nancy Palk, Soulpepper founder and actor in many of Thompson’s plays says, “You can’t get too caught up in the logistics of her plays. At a certain point you have to let go and ride the wave.”

We invite you to let go and enjoy riding the wave as much as we have.

—Danielle Wilson
5. DESIGNER’S NOTES

The scenography for our production of Lion in the Streets began with a visit to the residential neighbourhood of Kensington Market in Toronto, the ‘real’ location of the events of the play. Personal experiences of the neighbourhood were combined with research of the archives of historical images from the area. We began to develop a visual and spatial description of the play space, always mindful of the need to provide for not only a sense of recognizable place but also the fantastic, literary, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the play. The Director and the Scenographer quickly determined that a series of dissolving thresholds, walls, and contained or elevated space would provide the topography of our setting.

Visits to urban sites such as Toronto and New York (including alleys of the Coney Island Amusement park or the colourful neighbourhoods such as the Meat Packing District on the west side of Manhattan)—even though they are not referenced in the play—provide us with source images for colour, texture, and also sound.

We are challenged to present a series of interrelated-scenes that breathe across the lightness of time and reveal multiple realities. Elements of video projection will be used to animate certain moments, evoke poetic visual imagery, or provide elements of left-brain-hemisphere meaning such as the name of child character we see in a 3-minute scene. Similarly music and dance will stretch and contract the rhythms of the performance.

The development of the costumes of these characters had to reflect the fact that our actors are playing multiple characters and in some instances had quick and sometimes surprising costume changes that would occur in front of the audience. We are painting the picture with a light touch—the show must be fast, sometimes humourous, and always unburdened. As the Director has indicated “The production embodies our contemporary quest for faith, truth, and a ‘state of grace’ while contending with the absurdity of daily life.”
The actors have all contributed to the costuming process, remembering sometimes their own histories or memories of family life. In some instances the challenge of revealing the characters in the play has invited us to make costume references to our family and friends, our memories suspended in that fuzzy period of the ‘near ago’, that time when lived experience hasn’t yet been pasted to the page of the examined history of life, when loving nostalgia or conflicted regrets of things that did or didn’t happen still buzz around us like the ghosts in the machine of life.

/dv
6. ISOBEL AND HER LION

The Ghost of Isobel

In many of her recent plays, Judith Thompson personifies the paranormal through certain characters, such as Isobel in Lion in the Streets: a ghost-child stuck in a purgatorial condition following her murder seventeen years before. In many of Thompson’s plays, characters such as Isobel serve the role of a guardian-angel or mentor who tries to improve the lives of the living characters and guide them throughout their troubled and questing journeys through life. Isobel’s function in Lion in the Streets is to take each character and the audience through a personal reflection and examination of their own life, while she (Isobel) continues searching for the one who robbed her of hers. Isobel is a unique ghost. Despite that her murder took place seventeen years before, she appears in the form of a child. Thompson has Isobel project an aura of an “angry, confused” youth, as she (Thompson) believes one’s inner-child is a ghost in itself; a force within every human being. She holds the conviction that children are the epitome of complete purity; their behaviours derived solely from instinct and emotion and that they are unaffected by social biases. One’s ‘inner-child’ is then like an unconscious force in the adult mind that drives the outward expression of the most extreme internal desires.

Through Isobel, Thompson references Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of the subconscious. According to Freud, the human personality contains three elements that influence the administration of daily functions: the Superego, Id and Ego. All three work together to govern the mind into making decisions that satisfy the needs of the conscious being. The Id is the area responsible for one’s deepest and instinctive desires, similar to Thompson's notion of one possessing an internal child that acts as a similar supernatural force in the adult mind. Isobel's function as a guiding spirit in Lion in the Streets then prompts the release of the individual ‘ghosts’ of each living character as her presence incites the revelation of their innermost thoughts, aspirations and inner-demons as she (Isobel) moves through each scene. Each character with whom Isobel interacts is, in some way, perched on the edge of life and death, at risk of falling into an “abyss”: a state of identity ambiguity and uncertainty about the meaning of their existences. To the living in the play, the abyss is the ultimate death and they express their fears by bringing their internal ghosts to life through Isobel’s presence.
To most of the characters in the play, Isobel remains invisible. Those who have the ability to see and physically make contact with Isobel are the children who bully her at the beginning of the play and those whose ghosts have consumed and degraded them to a point of corruption: Sue, Sherry and in conclusion, Ben, Isobel’s murderer.
The Lion in the Streets

The lion is an animal that has been represented by many literary, theoretical and cultural interpretations throughout the ages; some of which are recognizable in Thompson’s symbolic beast in Lion in the Streets.

In Literature

The Violent King and Angry Wanderer:
In Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare, lions appear in the visions of characters Calphurnia and Casca. Calphurnia dreams of a lion giving birth in the streets of Rome (comparable to the title of Thompson’s play), and Casca recounts a vision of an angry, ill-tempered lion that walks throughout the Capitol. Another character, Cassius (a conspirator against Caesar) refers to Caesar himself as a lion, suggesting that if Caesar were to rule the Roman Empire, he would violently destroy any and all who opposed him.

The Hungry, Violent and Proud Guardian of Hell:
Another noteworthy piece of literature featuring lions is Dante Alighieri’s Inferno, in the first segment of his fourteenth-century poem, Divine Comedy which tells of his journey through hell. At the beginning of the poem, Dante finds himself in a dark forest where he encounters a lion, along with a leopard and a she-wolf. He cannot escape them and they block him from continuing to seek deliverance from hell. Unable to find the correct path to salvation, Dante believes he has begun to fall into a dark place, like the abyss that endangers Thompson’s characters in Lion in the Streets. Dante is eventually rescued by the Roman poet, Virgil and guided through the nine circles of hell, not unlike Isobel’s function to each living character in Thompson’s play. The three beasts Dante encounters are believed to represent three of such circles of hell: the leopard, lust; the lion, violence and the she-wolf, fraud—others have suggested they may also represent the sins of jealousy, pride and greed.

Figure 5: “The Three Beasts” by William Blake
In Psychoanalytic Theory

The Dark Shadow of the Soul and Mind:
Like Cassius’ blaming savage behaviours on the lion in Julius Caesar, Dante describes the nature of his confrontation as an encounter of “ravenous hunger”, and extreme ferocity which he illustrates by saying that even the surrounding “air was afraid of [this lion].”\textsuperscript{vii} In Lion in the Streets, Isobel refers to her murderer Ben as a lion to personify a similar evil, and illustrate the horror she encounters in the play. Interestingly with these descriptions of their beasts, Thompson, Dante and Shakespeare all symbolize the darkest and most animalistic thoughts of the mortal mind, and reference Freudian and Jungian views of desires for violence manifest within human beings. According to psychologist Carl Jung, one’s collective unconscious consists of archetypes: symbolic or primeval images of one’s personal psychological experiences. Among them, what is known as the ‘shadow’ archetype is thought to be connected to instinctive, carnal behaviour; the unprincipled side of the psyche (the human soul/mind). It is here that one’s deepest desires linger, similar to Freud’s views on the subconscious Id and Thompson’s illustration of the ‘inner-child’. In presenting her lion in such a threatening manner, Thompson particularly communicates an awareness of the lustful impulses within human beings, and demonstrates through Ben and Isobel, the human potential for extreme destruction and harm when provoked.

In Religion and Myth

Lions are also notable figures in religious doctrines and practices—particularly in Christianity and Ancient Egyptian myth. The title of Thompson’s play itself is even thought to be derived from the Biblical passage Proverbs 26:13: “There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets.”\textsuperscript{viii}

![Figure 6: "Daniel in the Lions’ Den" by Scott Gustafson](image)

The Tamable Beast:
Chapter 6 of the Book of Daniel in the Bible accounts the parable of Daniel, an official to the Persian empire under King Darius who was cast into a den of lions after continuing to pray to God following a decree that no man should worship any figure other than Darius. Because of his powerful faith in God, Daniel was rescued by an angel who “shut the lions’ mouths”\textsuperscript{ix} and Daniel remained unharmed.
At the end of Thompson’s play, Isobel shuts the mouth of her own lion by confronting Ben. She battles the “forces of vengeance and forgiveness” and spares him (similar to God’s grace on Daniel), yet she gains eventual retribution through repentance. Isobel destroys Ben through kindness, responding to him with a simple “I love you”, prompting a realization and remorse for his evil acts and in turn, bringing her peace, salvation and grace.

The Warrior, and Governor of the Subconscious:
In Egyptian myth, the focus of lions is centred on the power and vigor of this animal as opposed to its barbarity. Sphinxes—statues of lioness bodies with royal human heads—are clear representations of these animals. The lioness was a prominent figure in pantheons of ancient Egyptian cultures, symbolizing warriors and guardians of the countries. Sekhmet, the goddess of war and daughter of the sun god Ra, is depicted as having a head of a lioness and the body of a woman. She is thought to symbolize “divine retribution” and embodied a power that protected virtue, balance, order and justice (termed Ma’at) and she destroyed those who defied this concept. In the myth, Ra sent Sekhmet to earth in the form of a lion to punish humankind as they failed to uphold this sense of order and justice. Her prime duty was to protect Ra from those who rebelled against him, much like Isobel’s responsibility to her living characters in her ghost-guardian function.* Sekhmet and other ancient presentations of lions have often been linked to the sun. At the same time however, as lionesses hunt most frequently during the night, they have also had lunar symbolism attributed to them. Because of this, lions have also been represented symbolically as having control over humans’ unconscious and dream-like thoughts, much like Isobel’s control over the subconscious minds of each character in Lion in the Streets.

*Isobel’s embodiment of Sekhmet may also be seen during the ‘Sugar Meeting’ scene in “Lion in the Streets”, where she protects Rhonda from her oppressive confrères by mimetically shooting them dead.
7. SYMBOLISM

You are the Snake

The scene which prepares for the conclusion of Lion in the Streets features aggressive and passionate interactions between Edward and his girlfriend Sherry, whom he refers to as the “snake” after he forces her to describe her ordeal of being raped. Although Thompson’s serpent image occurs only briefly, late in the play, it offers vast insight into human behaviour through the joining of Biblical and psychological references. The most familiar representation of the snake in the Bible is arguably its association with Lucifer the devil who, as written in the Book of Genesis, tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden to eat fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. The serpent deceived Eve into believing that she would not die, but that she and Adam “shall be as the gods” and know good from evil. As soon as Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they were indeed aware of right from wrong and they were immediately punished by banishment from Eden by God. In Judeo-Christian belief, this is the source of human’s understanding of morals, virtue and sin. In Lion in the Streets, Edward declares “...the snake tempts others to sin...SATAN tempts others to sin.” He refers to Sherry as the devil herself, for tempting her rapist to assault her with her provocative dress and with this statement, Thompson allows her audience to ponder their own sense of morality by encouraging them to confront the controversial issue of victimization.

The Bible also portrays snakes in a positive light through a representation of restoration. The Book of Numbers describes Moses creating a serpent of brass and placing it on a pole, stating that if this “serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived”, suggesting that this rod and the serpent itself, portrays a symbol of healing. In Lion in the Streets, Thompson writes that Isobel carries an interpretation of Moses’ staff with her “crooked stick” that she possesses throughout the duration of the second act, most significantly when she follows Sherry. Isobel believes that she smells the “Lion’s spray” of cruelty on her, and by being present during Sherry and Edward’s encounters, she encourages healing in a unique way. Thompson has Sherry unwillingly relive her traumatic experience of rape, recounting every detail as narrated by Edward.
Through Sherry’s recollection of her trauma and the serpent label given to her, Thompson suggests healing through the violence as she fuses this Christian image of healing with Freud’s concept of psychotherapy. Freud believed that in order to be relieved from unpleasant thoughts or experiences, one must make conscious their unconscious emotions, like Sherry’s forced reenactment of her rape. In being referred to as the “snake” following her verbal release of her repressed memories of her ordeal, Thompson combines the healing properties of serpents with Freud’s concept of psychological relief through revealing painful, buried memories.

Serpents are common motifs featured in Jungian dream analysis. One view suggests that snakes are seen as phallic symbols, denoting sexual behaviour and desire. This interpretation is comparable to Thompson’s portrayal of Sherry in her physically-dependent relationship with Edward and her experience of sexual assault. In being labeled as a “snake”, Sherry involuntarily surrenders to the venereal masculine dominance of both Edward, and her subconscious memory of her assailer.

Figure 8: "Moses and the Brass Serpent" by Judith Mehr
Isobel’s Last Breath

When Isobel comes face-to-face with her murderer in the concluding scene of *Lion in the Streets*, she exclaims he “took [her] last breath” before she ascends to heaven in her mind. Breath, and breathing are common symbols in Christian anthropology: the study of humanity from a Biblical perspective. This branch of study outlines how the physical aspects of the human being relate to the spiritual, and is something that Thompson explores through Isobel and her focus on breath in *Lion in the Streets*.

The Book of Genesis in the Bible communicates that God made man “in His own image” setting humans apart from all other creatures on earth and some believe that humans were created with two facets: the material and immaterial. The ‘material’ is one’s physical makeup: body structures, bones, cells, organs, etc. The ‘immaterial’ is what is unseen and immortal: one’s conscience, thoughts, spirit or soul. The Book of Genesis says that God created man from dust and gave him life through His breath. The immaterial was breathed into the material frame, and man became a “living soul.” Thompson plays on this concept with Isobel, as she (Isobel) is a palpable ghost that makes conscious the immaterial of each of the other characters. Although she has the ability to liberate the souls of the living, she herself cannot be set free as she was robbed of her last breath by Ben. It is at the end of the play, when Isobel forgives her murderer that she finds grace by reclaiming her breath. She takes her life back from him, suggesting that through forgiveness, God has returned to this ‘breath of life’ back to her and her soul can exist eternally in heaven.

References to breath are also seen in three-part perspectives of Christian anthropology: beliefs that humans possess a body, soul and spirit. The meaning of the term ‘soul’ relates to the English translation of the Hebrew word “nepes” which means “breath” or “breathing being.” In the Septuagint—the Ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—“nepes” is believed to mean “psyche”. It is thought to indicate the heart of one’s emotions, wills and desires, which relates to Thompson’s idea of the release of her characters’ subconscious thoughts through Isobel.
The ‘spirit’ is related to the soul, as the term is derived from the Greek root “pneuma”, meaning “breath”, although it is specific to the belief that it is the characteristic of man that allows one to connect with God from the breath He originally gave to him. John 4:24 states that “God is a spirit”\textsuperscript{xxiv} Himself, and some believe that when one uses the term ‘spirit’, they refer to that aspect of themselves that allows them to communicate and have a relationship with God. In Lion in the Streets, Isobel embodies this three-part essence as she herself is a force that connects to those who suffer from spiritual ailment and in turn, connects each character to one another as their presences overlap through the play’s sequential structure. When Isobel confronts Ben she is met with players singing a “religious-sounding chorale”\textsuperscript{xxv} in which Ben joins after Isobel pardons him and ascends to heaven. Although it is not specified of whom this chorus is comprised, their singing at the end of the play may be seen as a proclamation of each characters’ connections to Isobel, joining together to indicate that their belief in this spirit has resurrected their own, and breathed new life into them.

Figure 9: James Fagan Tait as Father Hayes, and Guillermo Verdegchia as David in Touchstone Theatre’s production of Lion in the Streets, 1991
8. IMAGES

“I hear the Lion ROAR!!” xxvi

Figure 10: “Lion in the Street” by Nicolau Corentin
Joanne’s Ophelia

“...she got all these flowers, tropical flowers, wild flowers, white roses, violets and buttercups, everything she loved and she kind of weaved them all together...”

Figure 11: "Ophelia" by John Everett Millais
Figure 12: “Ophelia” by Pagli Rajkonna

Figure 13: “Ophelia” by Alexandre Cabanel
The Snake with the “Diamond Back, Glittering”

Figures 14 and 15: Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes

© Tim Knight
Eleanor Wachtel: Your work is filled with... I don’t know if I should say this... horrifying moments, moments of confession, revelation and emotional crisis. It doesn’t matter whether you’re writing about yuppies or working-class people or characters who are self-aware or characters who are crazy. Why do you feel drawn to this dark side of the psyche?

Judith Thompson: It’s not so much that I’m drawn to the dark side as that I’m interested in the invisible side of human beings. I think that’s what the theatre should do, is show us what is invisible and covered up with piles of everydayness and everyday life.

EW: But what’s invisible tends to be... not a pretty picture. What’s kept hidden seems to be maybe hidden for a reason.

JT: I don’t know that it’s not pretty. For instance you look at the sugar scene [in Lion in the Streets], when the working-class caregiver expresses her rage towards the “yuppie” parents. They would be unaware that they had deeply insulted her by saying that they think it’s disgusting that she gives their children yogurt with honey in it—

EW: What you’re calling the sugar scene is the scene where there is the mother of a child at the daycare centre who is upset because she doesn’t want her children to be given any sugar at all and the caregiver has taken the kids out for donuts, right?

JT: That’s right, one time.

EW: And eventually the caregiver vents her rage.

JT: She tells them what she thinks of them and how deeply insulting and classist the whole thing is. It’s a kind of catharsis. It’s what we all want to do in some situations at some time and haven’t been able to do because we have to hang on to our job or keep our reputation intact, or whatever. That’s what I always love to do in the theatre, to give us a chance to do what we want to do, through the characters.
EW: I was going to say that that’s not the most grotesque scene of the undersides or the invisibles that is shown! There is the scene with Isobel, who’s probably dead herself, coming on and shooting all the parents.

JT: That’s right! She’s sort of enacting Rhonda the caregiver’s deepest wishes at that moment. I guess what I’m exploring there is the source of that kind of homicidal rage. I’m not saying it’s ever justified in any way, but we have to look at the source, in order to explore it at all. Often, I think it comes from a perceived persecution; why do certain individuals feel they’re being persecuted? Where does that come from? They might blame it on someone who’s altogether innocent—they do—completely innocent.

EW: I think virtually every scene—in, for example, your newest play, Lion in the Streets—uncovers, or makes visible this invisible side. But it uncovers something pretty disturbing.

JT: Yes. Well, I suppose it’s Isobel’s journey-odyssey through an ordinary neighbourhood, which is becoming gentrified, so we get a little bit of everything—rooming house, basement apartment, renovated Victorian house—and she descends into the underworld of these lives, what we don’t see. You’re walking down the street and you see lights and houses and you peek through and see a television or a little dinner party going on, but what’s happening really, inside each life?

EW: What I’m interested in is why you want to walk through the underworld of all these lives?

JT: Well, because it’s theatrical, it’s what’s true, and it’s like the purpose the church used to serve: for an hour a week we would confront our spirits, what was really happening. In the theatre I think what one must do is confront the truth, confront the emotional truth of our lives, which is mired in the swamp of minutiae, everyday minutiae. Maybe it has to be that way, because we couldn’t confront it every day. But I think the theatre must. I’m not interested in theatre that doesn’t.

EW: You once said that even ordinary conversation seems extraordinary on the stage.
JT: That’s right. One critic said that a lot of these things couldn’t happen, but yes, they definitely could, and we could all come up with ten newspaper accounts of things like that that have happened. The only thing that couldn’t happen—although maybe it could!—is that someone could come back from the dead. But who knows!

EW: Your first play, The Crackwalker, which you wrote ten years ago, and which is currently being remounted at the Tarragon Theatre, is set in a very harsh world of poverty and abuse. You don’t romanticize or sanitize these lives or that world. Is it risky for you, brought up in a basically upper middle-class background? Is it risky for you to cross class lines, to try to get into that world?

JT: I suppose presumptuous, in a way, although I really feel that I had connected with the people that I wrote about, in The Crackwalker, when I worked as an assistant to an Adult Protective Service worker. I became quite close to them—this was for the Ministry in Kingston, and these people were supposedly permanently unemployable. When I wrote it, it wasn’t about the class thing so much as about these human beings.

EW: I wonder if you have to think about whether you’re being exploitive or if you have to think that—on the other extreme—you’re humanizing these people, giving them a voice—do you sort of walk between those two kinds of lines?

JT: I don’t know. Sure, I felt, how can I represent these people? But I guess these people, to some extent, must reside within me, just in the way they reside within you and in all of us. I think that’s kind of my unconscious point: we do share a collective unconscious and we have as much in common with Alan, the so-called deranged fellow in The Crackwalker—who goes right off the edge—as you and I have with each other, really. We just have to look beyond his choice of language—the way he expresses himself, the way he lives—and into his soul, and there’s really no difference. That’s why I’m kind of dismayed when the press approaches and says this is the underbelly, these people are very foreign to us. In my mind these people are us, in those circumstances.
EW: I can go along with that, up to a point. We want what Alan wants, Alan wants what we all want. We want love, we want some sort of family, or some sort of connection to each other. He wants that, but then he takes it to a place... He ends up murdering, killing his baby.

JT: Yes, because he’s been so weakened by all the forces acting upon him, including internal forces. It’s like the notion that it’s only the Germans in 1944 who made the holocaust. They were just, needless to say, people like us—that’s what’s truly horrifying to me. That’s what I can’t get out of my head. We’re living in a pathological state of denial, as a society, as a culture, and we have to stop it right now. Just having to walk past homeless people, having to—just deny, deny, deny.

EW: What happens if you don’t?

JT: I think you can barely put one foot in front of the other. Especially if you allow yourself to try and imagine, try and experience the horror... I almost felt it was my duty to experience the fear that people have had to experience. I think ultimately that’s good for us. Ultimately, as a culture, we can stop these things if we experience them, if we have to go through what other people have to go through.

EW: It’s a bit like the idea of the scapegoat. It’s like you have chosen to sensitize yourself or be so responsive to all the evil vibrations that are out there.

JT: I have—and it’s not to say that I’m this noble Joan of Arc. It’s like they forgot to nail in the storm windows in my head! But it’s true, sometimes I find it totally unbearable.

EW: I want to go back to these moments of crisis in your characters, for a moment, where they lose themselves or they go over the top, or something bizarre is exposed. You once said that your own creative processes could possibly be linked to your experience of epilepsy, something that first affected you as a child.

JT: I don’t know, that’s just a shot in the dark, but I thought maybe the reason I can draw on these things fairly easily—it’s not difficult for me. My little metaphor about the storm windows is that something’s kind of loose. I’ve been very fortunate, I’ve had very mild epilepsy—three to four attacks in my whole life—the last one being six years ago.
But I sometimes think the firing goes on—the electrical storms they talk about—is what results in this gush of language that I'll stand back from after I've written it and say wow, where did that come from? Not to be immodest but I sometimes don’t know myself how I could put it together with the emotions and everything that’s going on. I don’t know if it’s a musical instinct...

**EW:** You described your epilepsy in a story you wrote for radio. In that piece you talk about epilepsy as a kind of evil animal or monster, with a lot of different faces. In some of your plays there are characters who feel devoured by animals or different kinds of things that are eating them up. Are these the same animals, these monsters, are they related?

**JT:** I think they are. It’s probably just radical evil. And epilepsy is just something organically going wrong, obviously, but it feels like an outside force. I really understand why, in ancient times, they thought this was possession. Maybe it is!

**EW:** The notion of radical evil—it sounds so absolute.

**JT:** We’ve always been aware of it, they created the notion of Lucifer. Some people believe there is a Lucifer. And the notion of God. But they’re inside us, and that war is going on inside us all the time. I think we’re aware of it, it’s much harder to beat.

**EW:** Do you feel that? Do you feel you have God and the Devil inside, warring in you?

**JT:** In me, not so much—because I have been civilized. And I don’t have evil impulses. But I think each character in my play is a sort of microcosm for the whole culture, because there is evil and good warring in the culture at all times. And I do think it’s in every human being.

**EW:** Is this the Catholic in you?

**JT:** Probably! But don’t you think it’s true? We are animals, and that’s what we try to persuade ourselves that we’re not. There’s a sort of mass delusion that we’re not. A lot of our behaviour is almost biologically determined. You see that with a baby. With my baby, I’m just observing this. She’s in a great mood, at some hours of the day, because everything digestively is going well. It’s not really situational. It’s biological.
EW: The body is very present in your work. The characters talk about bodily functions. They’re very close to their bodies: they grow tumors, they bear children. Why do you think the work is so focused on the physical?

JT: I don’t think it’s any more focused on the physical than the emotional or the spiritual. I guess it’s because I let each character speak. If we dive into any individual’s inside or interior, we’re going to find a lot of thinking about the body, unless you have these strange people who don’t live in their bodies. There you get a really peculiar individual.

EW: Some of your characters are physically reduced to the level of animals, or they’re trapped inside their bodies. There’s a character, in Lion in the Streets, who has cerebral palsy—she’s trapped in a wheelchair. She describes these vivid, erotic encounters that she may or may not actually be having, and she becomes almost a monster figure. She threatens to swallow up the reporter who comes to see her and who’s very exploitive.

JT: Yeah: “I’ll open my jaws and swallow—you will spend the rest of eternity in my body, and ohhhh, time goes slow!”

EW: Very creepy!

JT: That’s right. She’s just got the mind, and she’s stuck, imprisoned.

EW: When one watches this omnivorous almost-monster, are you thinking there is some kind of monster that needs to be heard or recognized or unleashed?

JT: I don’t find her a monster at all. I think she’s a lot of fun, Scarlett. She’s just enraged at what she’s seen this journalist do. She suddenly realizes that she’s been treated as an object, as a thing. So she is telling the journalist that she will go to hell for this.
EW: It’s a very personalized hell. She’s not just sent off to hell somewhere below, she’s sent to hell somewhere within.

JT: “I am your nightmare, baby, I’m your worst nightmare, and you’re going to be me, for having hated me.”

EW: There are a number of images of possession in your plays. In Lion in the Streets, a character accuses an old schoolmate of holding his memory. Do you think other people, or past experiences, become part of us in ways that we don’t necessarily acknowledge or that they possess us?

JT: Absolutely. And form us, too. It’s like a piece of a puzzle, but a puzzle glued with cement. Once this experience—like the betrayal of Rodney by Michael—once it’s in the puzzle, it’s there. And it bleeds into all the other pieces. There’s nothing he can do but worry it. He can’t resolve it. That’s why this is really a fantasy of Michael coming in and them having this encounter and him cutting Michael’s throat—it doesn’t really happen.

EW: These are two adults and they’re recalling when they used to play chess together as school kids.

JT: That’s right. But it’s really only Rodney, you see. He just imagines Michael comes in, because he needs to play it out. I got that idea from my daughter—she once had a toy. We had to hurry and cross the street and she dropped it. A sports car came whizzing along and ran over it, flattened it. She was extremely traumatized by this and asked me to tell her the story over and over and over. Finally, after I’d told her day after day for a week, two weeks, then she would tell it, very unemotionally, but she’d tell it and she was fine about it.

EW: Children do figure a lot in your work. This was even before you became a mother of three—in rapid succession. Characters fight over children, over babies... There’s a baby that’s kidnapped in I Am Yours, there’s a baby that’s murdered in The Crackwalker.

JT: Children are a huge part of ourselves. They’re the beautiful, pure god in us. I felt, when I first had a baby, that I saw the face of God. If there is a God, that’s what the meaning of it is. Complete purity. Children move me, and there’s the child in all of us and how we try to beat it down and make it cower, or how it takes over in a terrible way, too—the terrible tyrant it can be.
EW: I think some of the invisible parts of characters that are given vent in Lion in the Streets are childlike: that pure emotion, that purge rage, that childlike part of ourselves.

JT: That’s right. And we have to temper it, of course, and civilize it, but I think we also lose a lot of the wondrous purity at the same time.

EW: But that’s not the side of the characters that you focus on. The wondrous purity.

JT: Oh, I think I do! Just think about Joanne’s speech about Ophelia. She’s dying of lung cancer and she’s fantasizing about something that to her is extremely precious and beautiful. All of them have something they find precious and beautiful. Isobel loves Trans Ams, and she loves being invisible.

EW: Isobel is the young, dead Portuguese girl who winds her way through Lion in the Streets.

JT: That’s right. She makes connections with each person who’s suffering some kind of spiritual death or sickness.

EW: You do have what is almost, for you, a happy ending.

JT: It is. It’s very hopeful. It’s Isobel saying, “I want you all to have your life.” It’s the triumph of the spirit. I realized I have to be true to what I believe in, and I do—

EW: Believe in happy endings?

JT: Not happy endings—well, I believe that the spirit can triumph. We don’t have to be walked over. It’s like sticks and stones can break your bones but names can never... our bones can be broken but our selves, our souls, are much stronger than any destructor. It’s saying to the evil forces, There’s more, don’t think you’ve got us. Don’t think you’ve had any victory. I really sound like I live in a comic-book world.

EW: It’s quite amazing! You want to be in touch and provide a forum, or expose, or whatever, all the evil that we spend our lives denying, in order to function. But at the other end of it you also want, and do, seem to feel hopeful.
JT: I really do. It’s acknowledging that, yes, it’s a jungle out there, there’s a war, but we have our wonderful spirits and great strength, and yes, we have the Force—it’s like “Star Wars:” we have the Force. And that’s what Isobel’s about, finding that Force in yourself and using it.

(1991)
10. ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

For further insight on Lion in the Streets and other works of Judith Thompson, we invite you to read the following articles:

   

2. Pathways Into the Dark: Three Windows on Judith Thompson’s “Lion in the Streets” by Kathleen M. Lindsay. M.A. Thesis, 1992. The Faculty of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre and Film: The University of British Columbia
   
   URL: https://circle.ubc.ca/bitstream/handle/2429/3019ubc_1992_fall_lindsay_kathleen.pdf?sequence=1
11. LIST OF FIGURES


Figure 1: “The Lion” by Suloni Robertson. Photo Copyright: Suloni Robertson. <http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/gallery01.html>.


Figure 7: “Sekhmet.” <http://www.paganspace.net/xn/detail/1342861:Group:8378057:xg_source=activity>.


Figure 10: “Lion in the Street” by Nicolau Corentin. Photo Copyright: Nicolau Corentin. <http://midnightstreet.deviantart.com/art/Lion-in-The-Street-138411338>.


Figure 12: “Ophelia” by Pagli Rajkonna. Photo Copyright: Pagli Rajkonna. <http://www.humanflowerproject.com/index.php/weblog/comments/who_was_the_real_ophelia/>.


Figure 14: Western Diamondback Rattlesnake. Photo Copyright: JungleWalk.com. <http://www.junglewalk.com/shop/Products/Western-Diamondback-Rattlesnake-Poster-12275.htm>.


Figure 17: Christine and Scarlett in *Lion in the Streets*. Tarragon Theatre image. Photo Copyright: Tarragon Theatre. [http://www.tarragontheatre.com/about/production-history.php](http://www.tarragontheatre.com/about/production-history.php).

12. ENDNOTES AND
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Endnotes


Bibliography


Lion in the Streets: A Study Guide
Brock University Department of Dramatic Arts
Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts
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