

Didactics for The Clichettes: Lips, Wigs, and Politics

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Main exhibition didactic written by guest curator Ivana Dizdar.

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Main Exhibition Didactic

The Clichettes: Lips, Wigs, and Politics

Bridging theatre, lip-sync, dance, drag, costume, and comedy, the Canadian artist trio The Clichettes developed a groundbreaking practice at the crossroads of performance art and feminist satire. This exhibition focuses on The Clichettes' collaboration from 1978 to 1993, as Louise Garfield, Janice Hladki, and Johanna Householder performed to fervent audiences in Toronto and internationally, animating galleries, bars, cabarets, concert halls, festivals, benefits, rallies, and the streets. They produced four full-length plays, performing sold-out shows at theatres and alternative venues across Canada.

In hundreds of performances over a fifteen-year period, The Clichettes adopted dozens of personas—from love-sick girl to metalhead to lounge lizard to femme fatale—scrutinizing the tropes of femininity and masculinity as they sought to invert the archetypes embedded in our cultural landscape. Greek mythology, art history, B movies, science fiction, 60s fashion, Motown, and hard rock: these were just some of their sources and reference points. Their characters were equally eclectic: Medusa, a quail hunter, a beanbag chair, a turtle, Fidel Castro. Unequivocally experimental, playful, and humorous, The Clichettes' work was always—above all—political, exposing the structures that define power under patriarchy.

In the group's first-ever retrospective, the McMaster Museum of Art presents The Clichettes' many dynamic collaborations with artists, writers, designers, and directors. Costumes, props, and video documentation (on display in this gallery) and photographs, drawings, and ephemera (in the gallery to your right) illustrate the group's work and process. Taken together, the objects on display attest to The Clichettes' radical vision for a better world.

Curated by Ivana Dizdar

Centre Stage

She-Devils of Niagara

In the show *She-Devils of Niagara*, The Clichettes played space aliens who find themselves trapped on Earth, working as nightclub performers in Niagara Falls. They must perform as "Mock Males" because Earth has fallen under a regime called Monogender, a government program aimed at eradicating women. To combat this, Jan secretly experiments with DNA in an attempt to invent new genders. Meanwhile, Joh has taken a job in the wax museum next door, where historical figures like Mother Teresa and Fidel Castro have been banished to the basement. Lonely Lou has fallen in love with a turtle named Mort and tries to convince the others that interspecies sex is the future. (Lou and the human-sized turtle, played by Hladki, dance to Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing.") This is a comedy about the

limits of gender stereotypes, written and staged decades before our current conversations about gender fluidity.

Clockwise, starting from the stage left of the main gallery door

Half Human, Half Heartache

In 1980, The Clichettes performed their full-length show *Half Human, Half Heartache* at the Horseshoe Tavern in Toronto. Garfield, Hladki, and Householder played aliens from the planet MORE who come down to Earth to harvest sound waves—specifically, the fertile blend of emotion and music known as pop songs. They disguise themselves as female humans, form a Motown-style singing group, and bone up on the rules of girlhood. Monica, the Voiceover, reports on their progress:

“And study they did... with an intensity and focus unknown to human beings. In order to impersonate girls, they learned how to make conversational groupings with furniture; they made fudge, and whipped egg whites ‘til they were stiff, but not dry.’ Late at night, while Earth slept, Hoj, Naj, and Oul practiced worrying about cellulite, or stayed up writing applications for a cotton-ball grant. They were always running out of cotton-balls; as a girl, you had to put them between your toes, over your eyes, and in your bra. Sometimes, it seemed as if Earth girls were all balls. Every morning, they did fire-baton twirling and impromptu speech-making, just in case one of them won a beauty contest.”

Up Against the Wallpaper

In *Up Against The Wallpaper*, premiered in 1988, The Clichettes kicked their brand of conceptual costuming up another notch by performing as furniture, walls, and appliances: Garfield played a neglected reading lamp; Householder was a paint chip, a dresser with a bowl of fruit on top, and finally a truculent shag rug; Hladki was a lava-like beanbag chair—when she wasn’t portraying a vacuum cleaner with a French accent. All three also played cut-throat real estate agents competing to sell “the last house in Toronto under \$450,000”. (The price was upgraded to \$750,000 for the 1989 production.) Over 30 years ago, The Clichettes saw the housing crisis coming and created a show about real estate that could easily play today—if the prices in the script were quadrupled.

Out for Blood

Out for Blood had a wild cast of characters: Bernardine Dohrn, of 1960’s and 70’s radical Weather Underground fame; snake-haired Greek goddess Medusa, whose gaze turns men to stone; and Patty McCormack, the demonic eight-year-old girl starring in the 1956 psychological thriller *The Bad Seed*. Three women representing female rage. *Out for Blood* reflected the rise of Black solidarity actions, anti-Vietnam protests, and deep frustration in America. It also pointed out how the revolutionary fervor of the Weather Underground movement left out sexual politics—and women. The show’s three main characters are at once heroes, martyrs, and warnings: disempower women at your peril. But it wasn’t all serious, of course. The play reflected The Clichettes’ tradition of bad jokes and strange songs, including Eartha Kitt’s “I Want to be Evil,” lip-synced by little Patty as she smokes a cigarette and strokes her braid. Funny. Lethal. Ahead of its time.