

# SISTERS ON STAGE: DEIRDRE AND PHYLLIS HURST

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(see images after text)

*Actors are always already on the stage,  
within the terms of the performance.<sup>1</sup>*

Wreathed in shade, abutting muffled parlour curtains are the sisters Phyllis and Deirdre Hurst. Posed, as if on stage, they are the quintessence of 1920s Canadian feminine fashionability. So much so, that the milky photograph was included (as we are told in scrawl on the obverse side) in “a National Exhibition in Ottawa as an example of Canadian youth.” Under soft light the cropped, bobbed hair, satin ribbon headbands, small strings of pearls and graphic, floral-patterned, sleeved-dresses—fashionably boyish and angular—carry cultured, gendered signals of 1920s Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> The young women are, to be sure, *the bee’s knees*. Styled as flappers, with an aura of the Parisian *garçonne* boho-chic, their androgynous, independent demeanour is telltale of a 1920s wayward femininity.

In this homosocial, anti-authoritarian culture of post-prohibition Canada, women ditched their mothers’ corsets and performed a fresh feminine ideal.<sup>3</sup> It was one marked by a new hedonism: reckless, drinking, cigarette-smoking, automobile-driving, dancing, dating, indignant young women with a disdain for social mores and enthusiasm for a liberated lifestyle. They abandoned the puritanical constraints of Victorian femininity in favour of the ‘free-woman’ ethos of the Roaring Twenties, and adopted stylish trends set by theatre and film stars.

Theirs is an observably close relationship. The elder Deirdre (right) emotes a protective, tending care over her younger sister Phyllis.<sup>4</sup> While we may witness Phyllis' transformation facing the camera's lens – a trace of disquiet in her eyes, lips just parting, Deirdre's is a perceptive and deliberate gaze.

Addressing us, the Hurst sisters foreground the image as a scripted role they play. The elder's confrontational, nearly antagonistic expression is not without elements of theatricality. Hers is a disguised face, a scripted masquerade she wears shrewdly. Both are a performance of selfhood: gendered bodies registered in silver. Theirs may be exemplary of the liberation of Victorian youth marked by the exodus of small-town girls to live independently in the city. Indeed, several years after the taking of this photograph, Deidre did just this, leaving her maternal home in Vancouver to live first in Devon, England then in New York City.

In England she studied under the great stage actor and theatre practitioner Michael Chekhov. Amongst his other students were Yul Brynner, Clint Eastwood, and Marilyn Monroe but it was Deidre who would stay with the master, developing his publications and later educating others in his technique. Its method was the uncovering of dormant creative powers hidden within oneself in order to play a character 'true to life'. This has had significant influence in the development of acting on stage and screen.

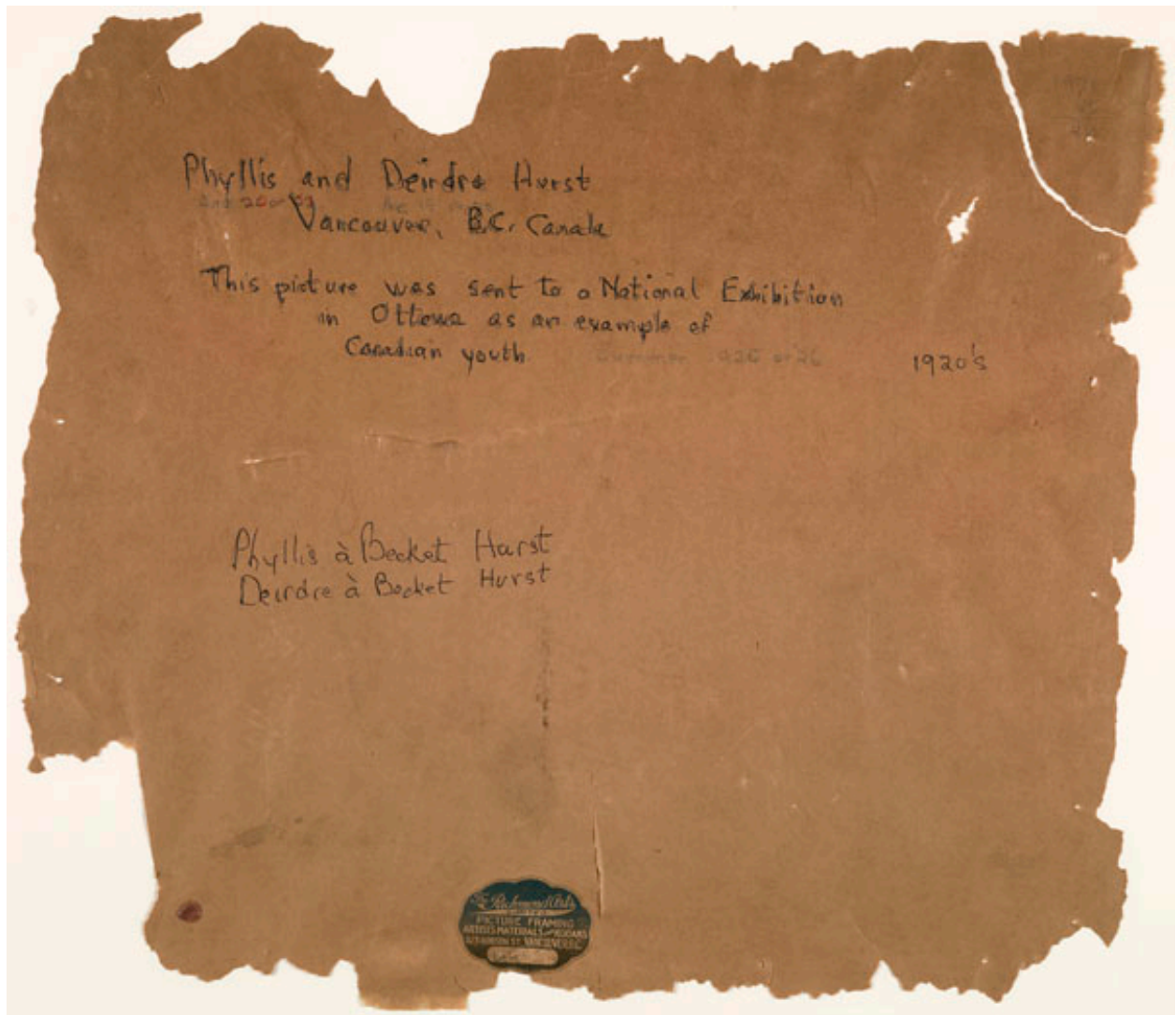
Even at the time of this photograph's exposure is the dexterity of performance manifest in young Deirdre. Astride her self-consciousness we may also glimpse the *style* of her character. As Judith Butler reveals, "this style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities."<sup>5</sup>

It is here that Deidre plays by design a cultural fiction of her gender. Social conventions are embodied in her figure, a dramatized reproduction of cultural codes. Her adolescent sister Phyllis, more juvenile, disposed, no less portrays a subject transforming via conventions of sex and representation. Both participate as on stage in a play of performing their gender identities.



“My aunt Phyllis (b. 1905) was the elder and is on the right in the photo; my mother, the younger sister by a year and in the end more of a “go-getter,” despite appearances, is on the left.” ca. 1920s; by Artuna Photographic Studio; silver gelatin print; MIKAN 3699242; B/C 2001645130

[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3699242&rec\\_nbr\\_list=3699242,2984013](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3699242&rec_nbr_list=3699242,2984013)>.



Deirdre Hurst du Prey and Phyllis Hurst Leonard [obverse]; ca. 1920s; by Artuna Photographic Studio; silver gelatin print; MIKAN 3699242; B/C 2001645130  
<[http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3699242&rec\\_nbr\\_list=3699242,2984013](http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3699242&rec_nbr_list=3699242,2984013)>.



Faith Swank Burrows Example of Flapper Filosophy daily panel by Faith Burrows, November 12, 1927. ©King Features Syndicate, Inc. Bristol board size: 3 1/2" x 6 1/2", image size: 3" x 6".



Deirdre Hurst and George Shdanoff at Redworth House at Dartington 1936

Photographer unknown © Dartington Hall Trust Archive, Devon

<<http://www.dartington.org/archive/display/MC/S10/A/001/016>>.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40:4 (Dec. 1988) 526.

<sup>2</sup> As Deirdre later recalled: "In our teens my sister Phyllis and I became members of the Little Theatre Movement in Vancouver, with the encouragement of our mother. I think, frankly, that's where my whole life in the arts began." Diane Caracciolo, *The Pencil: Memories of Dartington Hall and the English Origin of the Michael Chekhov Acting Method*, Adelphi University (2000) 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia R. Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of a Modern Canada, 1920-1950* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For an historical account of siblinghood, see: Linda W. Rosenzweig, "Siblings," *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society* (Macmillan Reference USA, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Butler, 521.



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