

AS

ALL STAGES MAGAZINE
THEATRE IN ALBERTA | SPRING 2011

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ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP

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Check in

The rise in popularity of the photograph in the late 1800s led to a revolution in the field of painting in the western world. Until then one of the main concerns of painters was accuracy in representation—how real could the image appear? But because of this new artform, one that achieved realistic representation with pinpoint accuracy, things changed. Freed from this need, painters did a very smart thing—they began to focus on what paintings could do that a photograph could not. They began to engage in a different kind of dialogue with their audience, a dialogue that involved the viewers in determining the artwork's possible meanings. And so began a progression of abstract movements.



The popularization of moving pictures in the early 1900s was a similar game-changer. In that era (with a few notable exceptions) European theatre was attempting realism on stage, led by writers like Ibsen and Chekhov. The motion picture similarly freed our form from the need to imitate real life, leaving room for the work of the expressionists, the political theatre of Bertolt Brecht, the *grand guignol* of Alfred Jarry. But though the motion picture changed the content of the theatre, for the most part the means of how the audience relates to the artwork has stayed very much the same. As James MacKinnon writes in this issue, attendance at the theatre for most patrons involves “sitting quietly in the dark among several other anonymous strangers, trying to pay attention to the actions of another group of strangers who are doing something nearby in a pool of light.”

We have not followed painting's lead in renegotiating our relationship to our audiences, and we're paying the price for it. Far more Albertans spend their cultural dollars on movies and television than on theatre, and it's our fault. In order to re-engage our province in the art of the theatre we need to look closely at what the play does that the movie can't do—and a big part of that concerns the changing landscape of dialogue with an audience. We need to realize that the phrase “dialogue with an audience” may be more literal than we had thought.

This issue of *All Stages* is about the ways in which Albertan theatre artists are attempting to make this change. **Mack Male** and **Wil Knoll**, two bloggers who write about theatre, let us in on their dialogue about our changing communication landscape. Publicist **Brad Walker** provides principles of how theatre practitioners can find and reach their audiences. Three Albertan Artistic Directors, **Heather Inglis**, **Mark Bellamy** and **Nicholas Hanson**, share their experiences in engaging their patrons. Long-time critic **Martin Morrow**, now relocated to Toronto, writes candidly about his experiences with the Calgary theatre community and its audiences. **Scott Peters** investigates how video technology is or isn't changing how audiences experience theatre. And **James MacKinnon**, as noted above, describes four innovative approaches to the audience/artist relationship from four Alberta performances. Added to that, we've got selections from new scripts by **Mieko Ouchi** and **Jonathan Christenson**.

And while we're on the topic, we're craving dialogue with you, our audience. If you've got something to say about what you read in this issue (or any other issue), by all means send me an e-mail, snail-mail, tweet, wall post, carrier pigeon, text, status comment or smoke signal. Let's talk.

DAVID VAN BELLE
EDITOR

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Photo credit: Aldona Barutowicz

Amy Lynn Strilchuk Assistant Dramaturg, Alberta Theatre Projects

How many plays did you read this past year?

For consideration in the Enbridge playRites Festival: 20.
Contemporary plays looking for a second or third production: 40.
Adaptations of classics for our Family Holiday slot: 12.

How much is your audience in mind when you're selecting plays for development?

Our audience expects us to produce plays that provide an experience they haven't yet had in the theatre and this is what we always strive to achieve through our programming. The members of our artistic team are always challenging one another about what makes a new play great and wrestling with what plays are most likely to connect with our audience.

Does audience feedback impact your selection? If so, how?

Though we love engaging our audience in conversations about the work on our stage, we are careful to not be reactionary and start programming around their individual tastes. If you're reactionary, you're dead—you're telling an audience you aren't a confident theatre tastemaker. When you lack confidence, you become less attractive and you actually lose the audience you were struggling to gain in the first place.

Why bother making theatre anyway?

There are a million reasons why we shouldn't bother and most of them have to do with why theatre is a taxing business, art form and lifestyle. But, for me, strong theatre is built on solid relationships. So ask yourself this: if friendships can be demanding and marriages aren't always easy, should we not bother being in them because they're sometimes difficult? No—because life is built on our relationships and the beautiful things we achieve together. Theatre is about connecting across our experiences through the means of storytelling. What's more beautiful and human than that? **AS**

Cur[?]iousGround

BY VANESSA SABOURIN

Polyglot Theatre

Australia's Polyglot Theatre creates interactive theatre for children up to 12 years old. Founded in 1978, the company specializes in puppet theatre, large-scale interactive installation work and participatory workshop programs. The company describes itself as "interested in the active agency of audience members; their experiences fused within the work, so that their engagement with it irrevocably changes the performance, or affects another's experience of it."

Polyglot fuses 'gallery' and 'theatre' to create a 360-degree interactive experience. One project of particular interest is *City of Riddles*, in which the audience explores a landscape of little buildings, peering inside each one like giants in a miniature world. They work together to rearrange this landscape and solve puzzles until they are drawn into a theatrical story in which they help a little girl recover her stolen voice.

Polyglot's work explores the place of children in society and aims to stimulate conversation between children and adults. Inspired by the play, artwork and ideas of children, the company engages children throughout the creative process including conceptual development, artistic input and script development. Collaborative artists are hired to develop strong concepts that both arise from and provide frameworks for this input. Visit www.polyglottheatre.com **AS**

Vanessa Sabourin is an Alberta theatre artist. Recently she has been performing with Catalyst Theatre's *Nevermore* and co-directing *Shatter* for her company, *The Maggie Tree*.



Polyglot Theatre's *The Big Game*.

Source: www.polyglottheatre.com

MIDDLEMAN

A veteran Alberta critic talks about the uneasy place between artist and audience

BY MARTIN MORROW

During his time as a theatre and music reviewer, George Bernard Shaw wrote that the ideal critic was a lone wolf: “his hand should be against every man, and every man’s hand against his.”

It’s a romantic credo that today could be embraced by those solitary, unaffiliated bloggers offering up their opinions on the internet. However, those of us who are professional critics have to acknowledge that we are in the service of the media outlet that pays us and, by extension, the audience for that outlet.

That’s something I’ve always kept in mind in my more than two decades as a theatre critic for daily and weekly newspapers. It doesn’t mean I’ve felt obliged to reflect any agendas, political or otherwise, that those publications might have had (although more on that later); but it does mean that I write

As someone who felt the reason for the existence of a local paper was to provide local news—whether it was about City Hall, the city’s sports teams or its performing arts—I found this attitude disheartening. And it happened to coincide with a period of rapid growth in the theatre community.

I waged my own small battle against the forces of homogeneity and vapidness by insisting on covering many of the small theatre companies then emerging. A review of an obscure local show in a tiny venue was always of more value to our readers, in my mind, than filling that same newspaper space with a wire story about some movie star.

At the same time, I like to think my advocacy was tempered by critical standards. I made allowances for limited experience and resources, but I was never afraid of calling a play crap if that’s what

drum for it. I wrote those pieces dutifully but reluctantly, feeling I wasn’t doing my job as either a critic or a journalist. I parted company with that paper years ago.

I still resist the idea of being a full-on member of the theatre community. I think of myself, rather, as being a friend of the theatre who is on cordial terms with the community. But we have an understanding: the theatre artists have one job to do and I have another. I treat their work with respect and an appreciation of the effort that has gone into it. In return, they know that I have to be free to say things they might not like.

At the same time, I’m also a representative for the paying audience. More often than not, I attend opening nights packed with well-wishers and friends of the cast, but I’m there to report to the customer who’ll be shelling out anywhere from \$10 to \$100 to

A review of an obscure local show in a tiny venue was always of more value to our readers, in my mind, than filling that same newspaper space with a wire story about some movie star.

for a specific readership, always conscious of the responsibilities I have as a journalist.

There is another viewpoint, though, that says the theatre critic is part of the theatre community. It’s an attitude that for years I was suspicious of. Get too close to the people you’re writing about and it will inevitably cloud your judgment.

But at some point in my career I found my sympathies were shifting toward the community and I was becoming something of an advocate for it. This was largely due to a cultural change in the major daily I wrote for—okay, let’s call a spade a spade, it was a dumbing down, and in the entertainment pages it was reflected in less arts coverage and more Hollywood gossip.

I thought of it. And part of my issue with my employer was a new series of marketing alliances with local organizations, including theatre companies, that didn’t encourage any independent scrutiny by reporters. When one major but much-troubled theatre was on the brink of collapse, my inclination was to ask some hard questions about whether it had served its purpose and it was time for it to fold. Obviously, not a popular notion in the community, but someone had to broach the subject. Someone not part of the community, but with a genuine interest in its health.

Instead, I was essentially instructed to write good-news stories about the fund-raising efforts to save the theatre—my paper having decided, in this case, to beat the

see the show. I parse the forced laugh from the genuine one, the tearjerking from the truly affecting. If the emperor is naked, I’ll paint you a picture.

In a healthy situation—or at least, the one I prefer—the critic shouldn’t need to advocate for the theatre. Just writing about it is an acknowledgment of its importance. Nor should she or he feel constrained by some editorial policy or agenda. The critic should be simply the middleman between artist and audience, offering an informed, independent opinion on the art. **AS**

Martin Morrow was formerly theatre critic for the *Calgary Herald* and arts editor for *Fast Forward*. He’s the author of *Wild Theatre: The History of One Yellow Rabbit*. Currently, he reviews film for CBC.ca and theatre for the *Globe and Mail*.

@AlbertaTheatre

Two Alberta bloggers discuss how electronic media are changing interactions between artists and audiences.

Wil Knoll and Mack Male are two Alberta bloggers from Calgary and Edmonton, respectively. They're letting All Stages listen in on their dialogue about how social media are changing the artist/patron relationship.

Wil: I know that you've been a community and tech blogger since forever, so did it come naturally for you to just start reviewing shows as well?

Mack: I can't say it came naturally to me to review theatre. And I certainly don't do it very often. But just as I occasionally mention movies I've seen, games I've played and other things, I like to mention the shows I take in. My partner Sharon Yeo is the one who got me interested in theatre in the first place. She does much more in terms of reviewing. I'm just her unofficial editor.

Wil: When you and Sharon started arts tweeting/blogging, did you feel that you were almost the only people in #YEG doing that? I've noticed that until the past year there really wasn't much theatre arts on Twitter.

Mack: I did feel like nobody was tweeting about local arts when I started. I decided to start using #yegarts as the hash tag for stuff, following the convention that has been established here in Edmonton (the Fringe festival is big enough that it has its own tag though, #yegfringe). I still don't think there are that many local arts tweeters/bloggers but there are signs that is changing.

How and why did you get started?

Wil: I went to Twitter when I was looking for community. With work schedules it was becoming hard to just make friends and hang out. Three years ago, Twitter was very young in Calgary, but I ended up with a group of solid friends and I think we helped to foster the community a bit. Posting quick reviews of plays I was seeing came naturally, but they were being posted to a group of people that didn't take in the theatre at all.

I think that putting reviews into their streams acted like a bit of a primer into the theatre community. I believe that I've helped some people add theatre arts into their cultural diet. It developed organically from

there. When getdown.ca and then Avenue Magazine asked if I would continue to speak about theatre in a long format blog for them, I jumped at the chance.

Looking at the High Performance Rodeo, which is running in Calgary as I'm writing this, I'm seeing that the theatre community is starting to understand social media as a tool for engagement. If theatre companies are just using a Twitter account to pump out their media releases, then it's pretty useless. But they're not.

An example is the #HPRodeo. @DownstageYYC was giving people updates about how many tickets were left to this year's 10-Minute Play Festival and about how to get them. @swallowabicycle was joking around about their creative process. Personalities around the Rodeo were tracking [Rodeo headliner] Brian Eno's progression through the Epcor Centre. It was more than just media releases, it was personality.

I have to admit, though: I don't think Twitter is a performance tool at all. Or at least I haven't conceived of a way that works. Attempts to shoehorn it into performance so far have not worked well. As a tool for conversation it's great—it forces people to be concise.

You've been a conversation builder for a while. I'm wondering if you've found that the theatre companies you've been a patron of have connected back with you through your blog at all.

Mack: Absolutely. Everyone likes to be recognized, so it's not uncommon to have a comment from someone I've written about, whether they are in theatre or not. It is much less common on Twitter, but blogs can be really effective at hosting a conversation.

Then again, I think we all too often treat theatre differently than other forms of media, and theatre companies different than other organizations. Sure there are some unique aspects, and that's what makes theatre great, but there are also a lot of similarities. Let me put it bluntly: the people that take in a theatre show have cell phones and Facebook accounts just like the people that take in the latest Hollywood release. Patrons of each share their thoughts as they walk out of the theatre. That's the



Wil Knoll.

Photo credit: Ben Laird Arts & Photography

Mack Male.

Photo courtesy Mack Male



new reality. Technology is having a big impact on the conversation about theatre.

I sense a lot of resistance to this, however. What do you think?

Wil: The resistance seems to be fading away. In Calgary the major theatre companies and all of the top independent theatre companies have joined up on Twitter. How well they use that opportunity varies. Alberta Theatre Projects won a blogging award last year for their efforts to invite people into the process and behind the scenes. It's hard to find a theatre company that is not taking a stab at social media in Calgary today.

In terms of participating in discussion... Well, two years ago Lunchbox Theatre tried a feedback experiment for a play that was being workshopped. A few Twitter users (myself included) were asked to post feedback in real time while watching a staged reading of a show. The idea was that instead of just getting a bunch of comments afterwards, it would be possible to build a timeline of when questions came up and line it up with the script.

Unfortunately some of the theatre community misinterpreted and thought that Lunchbox Theatre was actively encouraging people to use their cell phones during shows. This was not the case, but the argument that exploded on a Facebook thread showed that there's still a lot of misunderstanding about

these tools and what can be done with them.

Mack: The situation is much the same in Edmonton—arts organizations of all types are all experimenting with social media. The Edmonton Symphony Orchestra in particular has had to deal with criticism about encouraging the use of cell phones or other devices during shows. In addition to a misunderstanding about what can be done with the tools as you pointed out, I think there's also a certain amount of etiquette that is still being figured out.

Wil: If you had to explain to a non-technical person what benefit these tools can provide the theatre, what would that be?

Mack: I think these tools are extremely beneficial for audience engagement. Gone are the days of the passive theatregoer, who takes in a show, perhaps reads a review in the local paper, and moves on. The tools we have now allow for the theatre patron to be engaged at all stages of a production. Gathering feedback, promoting upcoming events, reaching a demographic not normally tuned into theatre, all of this is possible with the tools. Today arts organizations still have the opportunity to lead the way with using these tools—they are relatively new and continually evolving. In the not too distant future however, patrons will demand it, and organizations will have no choice to but to engage.

Wil: Well said Mack. Well said. **AS**

TALES FROM THE STACKS

The following titles are just a sample of Theatre Alberta's library collection items that complement this issue of *All Stages*.



CTR - Canadian Theatre Review Issue No. 140 Fall 2009

CTR contributors were invited to consider how theatres and theatre artists communicate with their audiences, and how their audiences communicate in return. Articles include: "The Peripatetic Audience" by Susan Bennett, "Walterdale Theatre Associates and the In(ter)vention of Audience" by Robin Whittaker and "Without a Map: A Cautionary Tale of Interactivity" by Vicki Stroich.

The Stage Directions Guide to Getting and Keeping Your Audience

Edited by Stephen Peithman and Neil Offen

Provides essential information on advertising to motivate ticket-buyers, creating attention-getting mailings, using newsletters and surveys, cultivating repeat customers and planning successful marketing and promotion strategies.



Subscribe Now! Building Arts Audiences through Dynamic Subscription Promotion By Danny Newman

The classic book on how to attract or revive an audience through innovative promotion techniques. Newman provides a useful, no-nonsense survival manual for theatre marketing.



All of the above reference titles are available to Theatre Alberta members through our library. Go to theatrealberta.com/script_library.htm to find out how to access these resources.

Artistic Directors, their Theatres and their Audiences



All Stages asked three Albertan Artistic Directors how they establish and develop their relationships with their audiences.

Heather Inglis runs Edmonton's Theatre Yes, an independent company. Mark Bellamy is at the helm of Calgary's Vertigo Theatre, whose mandate is to produce shows in the mystery genre. In 2008 Nicholas Hanson took over as AD of New West Theatre, the only professional theatre in Lethbridge.

Do you feel like you've been able to build a consistent, re-attending audience for your work? If so, how did you make that happen? If not, why not?

Inglis: Theatre Yes works on a project-by-project basis. We prioritize creating a unique experience for the audience ahead of producing a specific quantity of work each season. Venue is very important to us. We choose each venue specifically because of the relationship we want to create with the audience in that production. This all means that we are not the easiest company for audiences to find. Over the years we do seem to have built a small core of people who are familiar with our work and look for our productions. But finding a consistent audience is a distinct challenge. For us, though, we have placed the work before the ticket sales. We can only do this because we are a small company.

Bellamy: Vertigo has an incredibly loyal audience base of subscribers. Part of the reason for that comes from having a very specific mandate—it's very clear what kind of an experience you can expect when you come to Vertigo. That doesn't mean that our work is all the same, in fact a lot of our success in building attendance has come from broadening the mandate

as much as possible. It's not a fast process by any means; it's been a gradual progression over the last six years to craft a journey for our audience that challenges without alienating them. The knowledge that our audience is now incredibly receptive to new ideas and new approaches to the work is the real testament to how well this approach has worked and a large reason they choose to come back.

Hanson: Over 21 seasons, New West Theatre has developed a large and stable audience; our recent seasons of six to eight productions have attracted approximately 25,000 people. Almost all of our patrons attend two or more productions each season. Various strategic priorities facilitated the nurturing of an audience. Historically, productions were selected for their popularity; this plan built a solid foundation of patrons, which has allowed us to program more progressive Canadian plays in our recent seasons. Moreover, New West Theatre aims to maintain the lowest ticket prices possible, making our shows accessible to various demographics while allowing us to generate significant ticket revenue through a high volume of sales.

What kind of opportunities for dialogue between your audience members and your artists have you pursued?

Inglis: Our STRIPPED DOWN reading series features significant new Canadian and international plays that have not been produced in Edmonton. Following each reading, a host/dramaturg facilitates a discussion with both artists and the audience. Since these are not plays in development, these discussions don't serve to provide feedback to playwrights; instead they invite the audience to participate in a public conversation about art. We find these dialogues provoke excitement about plays, which is rare in our community. Theatre demands that people leave their homes and come to be together in a room and share

Above right: Nicholas Hanson at New West Theatre's Season Launch Soiree.

Photo credit: deJourdan's Photographics

an experience. Engaging in discussion with audiences can deepen that experience and acknowledges the contributions both artists and audiences make to the specific chemistry of an evening.

Bellamy: Like many other companies in Calgary we utilize pre-show chats but only on selected performances. Usually once a season I'll pick a show to blitz on, doing a live chat every night. It's a bit onerous but it works and really makes the folks feel like they are a vital part of the company.

We also have a few special nights to engage the audience. Behind the Scene of the Crime is a pre-show discussion with designers, focusing on what it takes to get a show onto the stage; Forensic Friday is a post-show talk back with the cast and a police detective that focuses on the forensic realities behind each show. Both are very successful.

Hanson: Over the past three seasons, we have initiated a season launch party, post-show talkbacks, backstage tours and other artistic/social events. In 2009-2010 we launched a subscription series that we promoted not only for its cost-saving value, but also for the opportunity for patrons to meet our artists; so far, audience response has been keen, with a doubling of sales from one season to the next. Beyond the repetitious 'buy tickets to our shows' messages, we have used social media to provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse of rehearsals as well as personal comments about the arts and our community. Lastly, and stepping far away from trends toward technological connectivity, the artists for our music-comedy revue shows actually greet patrons in the lobby following most performances. Sound folksy? Sure is. Does it build a relationship that compels patrons to return? Sure does—with astonishing levels of enthusiasm.



Theatre Yes Artistic Director
Heather Inglis.

Photo credit: Marc-Julien Objois

When programming for your company, how much of your decision-making is influenced by your perceived audience (as opposed to the mandate of your company)?

Inglis: Theatre Yes is all about mandate first. We want people to see our work and we work hard to find audiences. We also know that we are not mainstream and so we don't expect to sell out all the time and we don't evaluate our success in terms of our ticket sales. This is not always an easy road to walk, especially when granters look at the value of arts organizations in quantitative terms. But it is our choice and we stand by our work.

Bellamy: Hmm. For me, the two things go hand in hand. I look at the task of programming as the opportunity to have a dialogue with my audience. It's the best part of the job. I'm always aware of where I want to take them, when to push them a little and when to give them a bit of theatrical "comfort food". For me it's looking at programming in really long arcs, over a three or more year span. "Where do I want to be able to go in three years? How do I get them to go there with me?"

Having a specific mandate is a double-edged sword. On the one hand I know exactly why my audience comes to this theatre, so it makes some of the programming obvious. The challenge then is to not only find the ways to expand the work we do so we don't become artistically stale, but also to actively broaden the tastes and perception of our audience to allow the work we do to grow. I actually can't even think about programming without taking the audience into account. Because, really, without someone to tell our stories to, we're all just pretending in the dark.

Hanson: As the only professional theatre company within a 200 kilometer radius, New West Theatre has a wide mandate: basically, we endeavour to create theatrical *seasons* that will appeal to our entire community (which we view as meaning something very different than suggesting that every *production* needs to hold universal appeal). **AS**

Left: Vertigo Theatre's
Mark Bellamy conducting a
backstage tour.

Photo courtesy Vertigo Theatre

MACEWAN

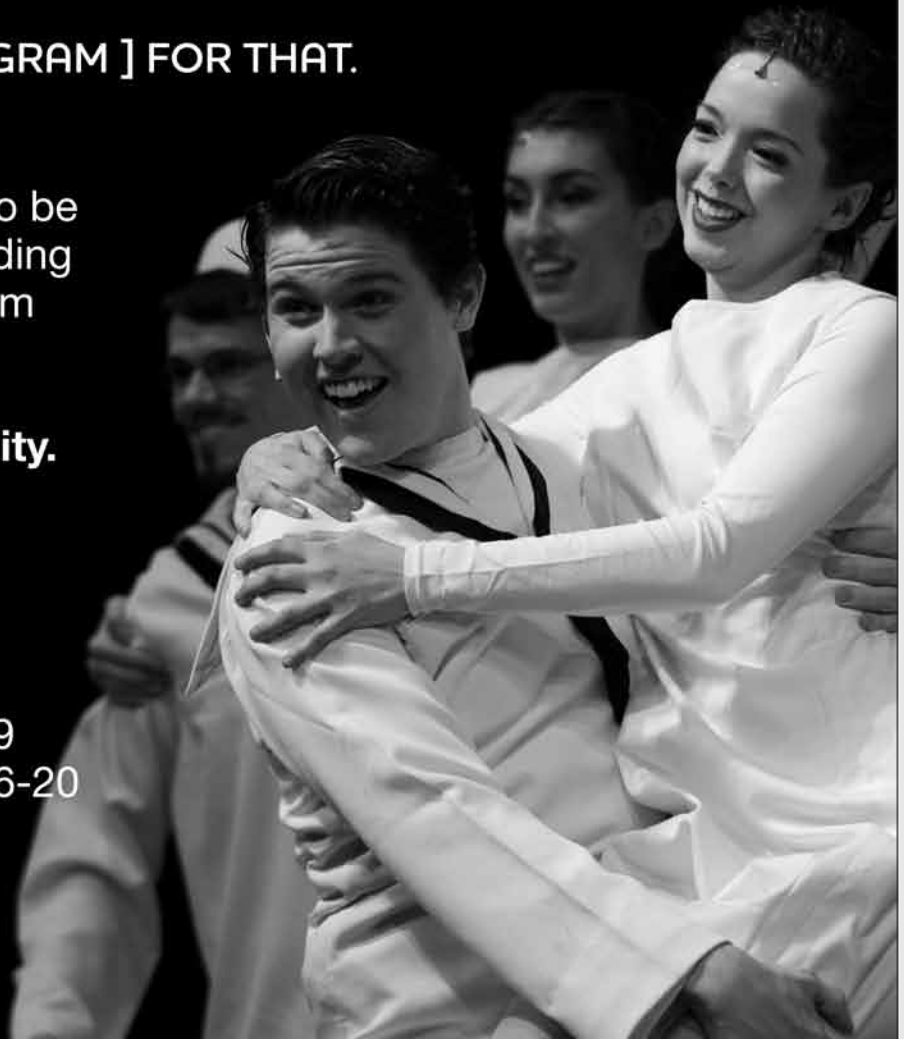
Like making a scene?

WE HAVE A [PROGRAM] FOR THAT.

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it, we have a program
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Theatre Arts
www.MacEwan.ca/TheatreArts

Theatre Production
www.MacEwan.ca/Production

Tools for Getting Bums in Seats

BY BRAD WALKER

Publicity: you want it, you desire it and you think *everyone* should know *everything* you are doing. But who cares about you... or your work?

You have to make *them* care, make *them* want to be a part of something they can't refuse, something they feel passionate about and something they can't live without. In order to do that, think of the time you put into your publicity strategy—and yes, it is a strategy—as building community. We all want to engage and be engaged in community, including our stakeholders—which includes your audiences and patrons, who are, or who want to be, part of your community.

How does what you say about your work affect patrons' potential engagement and expectations? How do you prepare your community for a challenging theatre piece? How do you change community opinion when your company is experiencing transition?

All these questions can be answered with publicity, which is a marketing tool. Yes, publicity is part of the marketing plan, and as such, it's a strategy rather than a right. It's something you must earn rather than expect. The flow chart below provides some clarity.

Product, Price, Place and Promotion

This refers to the product you are selling, the price you are selling it at, the place you sell it and the promotion required to sell it. Each of these P's has a huge impact on your community's decision whether to engage with your company or with you as an artist.

When looking at your product, consider which community members would enjoy it, where they would be willing to go to participate, how much they will pay, how will they hear about it and why would they be willing to participate.

Public Relations (PR)

Public Relations is distinct from other forms of marketing in that it refers to the way you as a person interact with your community. Professional interaction is a huge part of PR. Get involved in other communities; attend other cultural events as often as possible. Asking for advice from leaders in industries, both from the cultural and the larger marketing industry, and finding mentors (on both the creative and administrative side) can provide guidance and cement your position as a serious and dedicated artist.

Be the face of your brand. Think critically about how people interact with your brand—do your website, Facebook page, season brochure, *et cetera* reflect your goals, mission and creative vision? PR can form, continue and change public attitudes toward you or your organization, ultimately with the end result of making a sale. What efforts can you make to ensure those interactions are positive and reflect your product in the truest sense?

Advertising

There are four main areas of advertising:

- Broadcast—television & radio ads
- Print—newspaper & magazine ads
- Outdoor—posters, billboards, bus ads
- Interactive—ads that appear on the Internet. They can include video and audio elements

When choosing advertising methods, it's important to keep a few key items in mind:

- Who am I trying to reach with this ad?
- What can I afford?
- What medium will best showcase my product? What medium will best reach my intended audience?
- When and where will my advertising messages have the most impact?

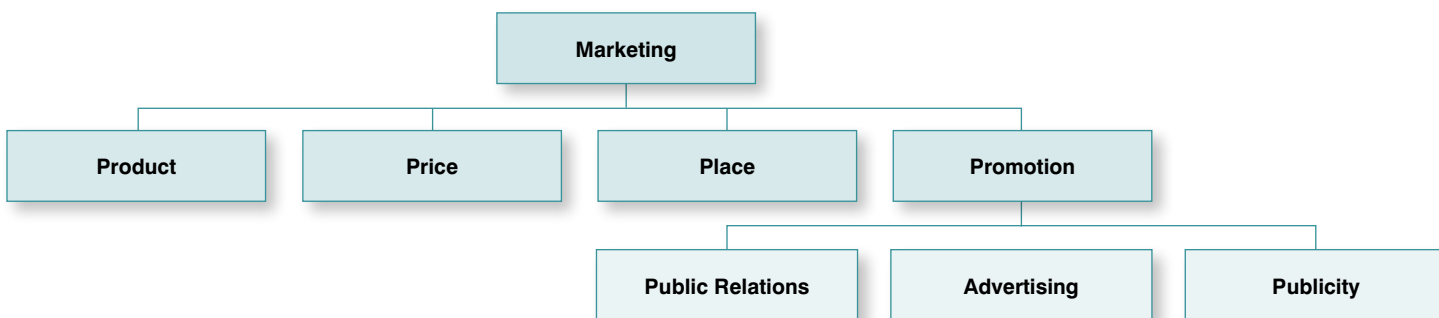
Publicity (also known as Media Relations)

Publicity is the process of delivering information about your product via the media. It is a great tool for artists who have amazing stories and experiences to share. It is important to remember publicity is virtually free, and therefore is not guaranteed or deserved, it is earned. Always deliver on your media pitch, and ensure it is 100% reflective of your product.

As your strategy and its various components roll out, ensure you research your market and identify the best action to take. Track stakeholder involvement and interactivity in your community. Ask yourself how you can improve and whether a project worked.

Good luck! I can't wait to be welcomed into your community. [AS](#)

Brad Walker is Vice President of Bottom Line Productions Inc., and works with many Alberta theatre artists and companies. Bottom Line and its staff can provide marketing and media relations workshops upon request. bottomlinepro.com





BEYOND STRANGERS

Four Alberta performances experiment with alternative audience engagement models

BY JAMES MCKINNON

Take a moment to imagine yourself attending a play. What did you picture yourself doing? Most likely, you saw yourself sitting quietly in the dark among several other anonymous strangers, trying to pay attention to the actions of another group of strangers who are doing something nearby in a pool of light. You're pretending they aren't aware of you, and they too are pretending that what they're doing is unaffected by your presence.

But it wasn't always so. Until relatively recently, everyone at a performance was visible to everyone else, and performers openly acknowledged both the presence of their audience and their vital contribution to the event. But the rise of dimmable lighting and proscenium stages radically separated spectators from the performers and each other, by directing their gaze toward the stage and away from each other. The enhanced illusion of reality comes at a high price: audiences are no longer acknowledged as *participants*

Above: Actors Jed Tomlinson and Patrick MacEachern (on floor) with Co-Artistic Director Charles Netto (standing centre) in Swallow-A-Bicycle's *Freak Show: Forbidden Spectacle*.

Photo credit: Tim Nguyen/Citrus Photography

in an event but as passive consumers of it, whose contributions are neither acknowledged nor invited until the curtain call.

While this arrangement may seem normal to some, others would argue that it isn't working—according to a November 2010 Hill Strategies report only 2-4% of Albertans regularly see theatre. But some local companies, including Swallow-a-Bicycle from Calgary, and Theatre Yes, Cowgirl Opera and Northern Light Theatre from Edmonton, have made it their mission to bring the audience back into the theatre—in every possible sense. By challenging the conventional, rigid separation between artists and audiences, these artists seek to acknowledge, even emphasize, the audience's vital contribution to live performance. In the process, they seek to foster more exciting, direct and sustained relationships with their audiences and the general public.

While these four companies are diverse in their range of programming and aesthetic styles, their artistic directors all share a commitment to *engagement* with their audiences. For these artists, engagement means a constant and careful consideration of the audience/artist relationship. This relationship is often conceived (and architecturally constructed) as a boundary, and while many performers and spectators take that boundary for granted, these companies see it as something to be exposed, explored and altered.

Sometimes, performances expose conventional boundaries between audiences and artists by abolishing them entirely. Both Swallow-a-Bicycle's annual *Freak Show* and Theatre Yes's recent Edmonton Fringe production of Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* dispense with theatres altogether: spectators are mobile, and the performances take place in public locations which are occupied simultaneously by actors, spectators and even the general public. In *Freak Show*, spectators were guided through Calgary's Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts, where they witnessed scenes created for and performed in the Centre's *non*-theatrical spaces, including the freight elevator, the +15 walkways and the boiler room. Similarly, in *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, audiences were asked to gather at a public meeting place, where they met a guide who led them to performances at four "secret" yet public locations (a parking garage, a hotel room, a hotel corridor and the kitchen of a spa). In each case, the performance's vulnerability to unscripted interventions actually reinforced the bond between actors and spectators. Theatre Yes director Heather Inglis was struck not only by how her audiences persevered with the show as it traversed the Fringe grounds, but also by how they seemed to make an unspoken agreement to ignore the distractions posed by people retrieving their cars or using the playing space to get to and

from their hotel rooms. The presence of bewildered passers-by makes both the performers and spectators aware of their own special bond as participants in an experience unavailable to the “outsiders”.

In addition, both shows quite literally fill a void in their respective communities’ theatre scenes: unlike most theatre companies, Theatre Yes and Swallow-a-Bicycle do not make a virtue out of being attached to a particular space, but seek to transform a variety of public spaces into theatrical spaces. For Swallow-a-Bicycle Co-Artistic Directors Charles Netto and Mark Hopkins, using public space as performance space is part of their mission as “community-builders”, particularly when they invite their audience members to places which they pass through every day, helping them see those spaces in a new light, as places alive with local history.

Artists can also use spatial proximity to create more intimate relationships. Northern Light Theatre’s recent production of *The Fourth Graders Present an Unnamed Love Suicide* allowed spectators to sit in rows, but in a tiny rehearsal room in Edmonton’s TransAlta Arts Barns, where even the small audience of 35 filled over half the space. The close proximity of spectators and actors created a powerful sense of shared experience and community, which is enhanced, in the case of *Fourth Graders*, by the fact that the audience is assigned a “role”: the actors play children, performing a play written by a classmate just before he killed himself, and from the moment they enter the space, the spectators become their parents, teachers and schoolmates.

This intense intimacy, combined with disturbing content (*Shoot* is a graphic exploration of various kinds of “terrorism”), endows the act of watching with deeper significance. Rather than passively observing the events in a perceived solitude, the spectators experience the event together, with the performers, and their presence is not incidental to the play’s meaning but constitutive of it: as Inglis puts it, their function as “witnesses” rather than spectators is precisely what makes the performance meaningful. After *Fourth Graders*, spectators were

stunned. Director Trevor Schmidt recounts how many would stay in the space, simultaneously desperate to speak and yet “incapable of articulating how the show moved them.” Several spectators reported that they went home and wept—and then returned to see the show again. There was another payoff, too: both shows sold out their entire runs.

Cowgirl Opera’s *Pig!*, created by Kristine Nutting, also explicitly acknowledges both the presence of the audience and its role in *creating* the experience, not simply watching it. *Pig!* is a cabaret-style performance in which the actors acknowledge their audience in a variety of ways—spectators are directly addressed and the play is explicitly a performance for them, with no pretence of realism. Like *Shoot* and *Fourth Graders*, *Pig!* deals with provocative content—it tells the story of a travelling evangelist who (literally) preys on young women—and it also employs deliberately provocative shock tactics: spectators risk not only being offended by the premise of a cannibalistic preacher, but being splattered with fake blood (or worse), or mocked by the performers. The result? The audience, delighted at the acknowledgment of their presence, ate it up (so to speak): they packed houses in Winnipeg, Edmonton and Calgary between 2008 and 2010.

All four of these performances deliberately provoke spectators by defying their expectations—of escapist fantasy, of anonymous voyeurism, of conventional beginnings, middles and ends, of even a seat. All these artists are driven by the desire to create a feeling of community and shared experience among the participants in an event. They seek not to shock, but see themselves primarily as community builders. And their success speaks volumes: each show drew capacity crowds, often consisting largely of people who aren’t regular theatregoers. Far from offending the audience, these artists use unconventional means to build an audience, in the hope of forging bonds that last beyond the duration of the performance. **AS**

James McKinnon is an educator, theatre artist and researcher. After 20 years in Calgary and another 10 in Edmonton, he recently left Alberta to pursue career opportunities in New Zealand, at Victoria University of Wellington.



Molly Flood in the Edmonton production of *PIG!*
Photo credit: ChalifouxProcktor.com



Julie Golosky in Theatre Yes’s production of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*.
Photo credit: Ian Jackson/Epic Photography



(l to r) Meilie Ng and Duval Lang in *Nisei Blue*.
Photo credit: Trudie Lee

from *Nisei Blue* by Mieko Ouchi

Nisei Blue premiered February 11, 2011 at Alberta Theatre Projects 25th Annual Enbridge playRites Festival. A retiring detective is haunted by visions from his past: a glittering nightclub in 1939, a beautiful Japanese Canadian jazz singer and a rookie case that never got solved.

Fumi gestures to the old stage, to a curtain at the back. It leads to the dressing rooms.

A long moment. John crosses to the curtain and opens it. The room revolves to reveal the dressing room as he remembers it. Except everything is covered in dust covers. He slowly takes the sheet off of one of the largest piles and finds stacks of old LPs, a portable turntable. Everything as he remembers it. He puts on a record.

As the music begins, he begins to take more covers off. Dim outlines of old photos stuck to the mirror. Familiar faces. The old dusty tasselled costumes hanging... newspapers piled on the dressing room table. Cigarette butts in an ashtray. Congratulatory notes. Dried roses hanging upside down. He slowly touches a dusty burnt out bulb and turns it slowly. It comes on. Still working. Just loose. It's like he has turned on a machine that hasn't worked in a long time.

Something shifts under a dust cover draped over a chaise long in the corner. An arm raises and a body on the chaise rolls over and sits up. It is Lily in all her beauty, naked and holding the sheet to cover herself.

She smiles at him.

Lily: What are you looking at John? See something you like? I know you better than you think. Remember?

I know you.

You liked me because I wasn't some delicate traditional Japanese girl. I was a jazz baby remember?

I chopped off my long black hair with kitchen scissors and gave myself finger waves and shut my ears to my mother crying in the kitchen. Don't think she didn't see how the story was going to end. But I didn't care what the old people said under their breath. I rolled my stockings down and my skirt up and danced 'til dawn.

That music. Black folks knew what it was like to be different. To face the stares of people when you walked down the streets. Avoiding the stares of the white people, wondering where the old country went. Avoiding the glares of the old Japanese ladies buying tofu. They don't glare at you for being yellow. Their glares are for my red glossy lipstick and celluloid barrettes. And all the time, I'm thinking to myself. Me, I'm not like you. I'm Canadian.

Sundays, me and my friends, we listen to jazz records on our parents' turntables, playing hooky from the United Church, and practice all the new dances so we'll be smooth Friday night. The Big Apple. The Black Bottom. The Charleston. The Lindy Hop. And our own special dance we make up... The Little Buddha. I use the broom stick and become a torch singer. We're looking forward, not back, and nothing is going to stop us. Who *could* stop us?

The Orchid. At first it's your friend. It's so fresh and new and exciting. Men look at you there. No catcalls, no slurs or names like on the street. They think you're beautiful. They want to marry you. And for a while you consider the unthinkable possibility. A little house out in New Westminster with a white picket fence and a handsome husband who can't handle the sun. A garden out back. Fresh wallpaper. Nothing like the places we lived. The boarding house rooms. Newspaper on the walls. The cramped apartments at the back of the shops our parents lived in while they tried to get things together. The smell of cooking. The snippets of Japanese. The old people sitting at their radios, trying to catch bits of news from home.

And so you flirt, a little at first... shy... getting bolder as your success rate goes up. And one day...

She looks at him sadly.

Are you really so surprised that I ended up where I did?

I thought I'd fall in love. I thought I'd be married. I thought I'd have kids. I thought...

She slides her hands down to feel her stomach. Where her child might have been. As she does, the sheet bloodies. There is a huge and gaping wound in her stomach. She looks down sadly and then out to him.

I thought it might be you. **AS**

from *Hunchback*

by Jonathan Christenson

From the rehearsal draft of Catalyst Theatre's upcoming production *Hunchback*, adapted from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The show was commissioned by the Citadel Theatre and premières March 10, 2011 on the Shoctor Stage.

ACT 2, SCENE 1: THE PALACE OF JUSTICE

GRINGOIRE: The Palace of Justice –
An unfortunate name –
For though it was grand
It could hardly proclaim
That within its walls,
Its gilded halls,
Righteousness ruled
Or truth prevailed.
No, here little was just or fair,
Wrongs were never put right,
Crimes were rarely set square,
For this was before the age of
enlightenment,
When courtrooms were no more
than circus tents,
Full of sadistic clowns,
Opportunistic hounds,
Whose idea of justice
Would disgust us – wouldn't it?
For it comprised –
By way of lies
And superstition,
An inquisition
Employing the wheel
Or the rack
The cradle,
The cat –
Finding the fleetest path
To the gallows!

The Magistrate appears, an enormous puppet that towers over the players.

MAGISTRATE: I call this court to order!

GRINGOIRE: A witness is summoned –

MAGISTRATE: Bring her in

GRINGOIRE: And the prisoner sees
A trembling old hag
Dissembling so sweetly,
Resembling completely
The old crone
Who had shown
Her to the room
Where her handsome groom,
With his helmet so beautifully
plumed –

Had awaited her ...
Before the flood,
Before the blood
Which around him pooled
As he lay on the floor
And she tried to comprehend
How a beautiful evening could
come
To such a terrible end.
And now here she stood.

FALOURDEL: People tell me
"Falourdel, don't use your
Spinning wheel too much at
Night –

CHORUS: "It's not right!"

FALOURDEL: "The devil he likes to comb
Old women's wool
With his horns!"

DEVIL: Ha! Ha! Ha!

FALOURDEL: Then, one night I was spinning
When there comes a knock at the
door.

"Who's there?" I says,
And two men come in,
One, a handsome captain,
The other cloaked in black.
I couldn't see a thing of him –
Except his eyes,
Which for all the world
Looked like two burning coals.
Your Honour, it sent a shiver
Up my spine,
What with all the talk
Of the devil,
And those rumours
Of a goblin-monk haunting
The streets of Paris.

PHCEBUS: "St. Martha's Room,"

FALOURDEL: The Captain says –
That's my room upstairs –
My very best room.
He gives me a crown,
A single gold crown,
Which I puts in my drawer
thinking
"Tomorrow, I'll buy a tasty
Tripe at the butcher's"
Well, we goes upstairs,
And while my back is turned
The man in black, he disappears –
Which amazed me a little!
But I don't likes to interfere
In the business of customers.
You understand.
Then the captain, out he goes,
So I return to spinning
And after I'd done

Maybe a quarter bobbin or so
The captain, he comes back again,
This time, with a girl,
A beautiful doll of a girl,
A real looker!

So I takes them upstairs
And I leaves them alone
And I gets back to my spinning.
Well! It's not too long
Before I hears a scream
And something falls to the floor.
Then, I hears the window open.

And I run to my window –
It's right underneath –
And I sees a dark figure
Fall through the air
And land in the river –
Plain as day,
For the moon was full
And bright.
And I didn't know then,
But I'm certain now
What I saw that night
Was a demon!

Dressed as a priest!
The goblin-monk!
Well, the guards arrive –
What with all the commotion –
So up we goes,
And what do we find?
But my very best room
Drenched in blood
The captain, lying there
Dead on the floor –

GUARDS: Hardly the night
He had planned

FALOURDEL: And the girl on her knees
There at his side
With a blood-stained knife
In her hand.
"A pretty job!"

I says to the guard
"It'll take me weeks
Of scouring and scrubbing
Of brushing and rubbing
Of soapsing and sudsing
To get this floor
Clean as it was before!"
And they takes away
The poor young man –
Cut down in the prime
Of his life –
And the girl with her bosom all
bare,
Still clutching in her hand
That blood-stained knife. **AS**

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(l to r) Mark Jenkins and Jesse Gervais in Theatre Network's *Buddy*.

Photo credit: Ian Jackson/Epic Photography

VIDEO KILLED THE THEATRE STAR?

BY SCOTT PETERS

1991—I am designing a “multimedia” show using a Betamax player, a tri-colour television projector and a mile of co-ax cable. Fast forward to 2004, where it has become a stack of home DVD players and several 1000 lumen projectors. These days it's laptops slaved to laptops, live digital cameras, video switchers and wireless projectors brighter than any lighting fixture. Video design has become a staple of modern theatre design, but to what end? I talked to three award-winning video designers who have designed some of the most captivating and engaging video presentations that Alberta stages have ever seen.

Ben Chaisson has been a consultant and designer with a wide variety of companies and created the video design for Ghost River Theatre and Alberta Theatre Projects' *The Highest Step in the World*. Jamie Nesbitt works across Canada and recently designed Theatre Calgary's *Beyond Eden* and Theatre Network's *Hardcore Logo: LIVE*. Ian Jackson has been a photographer and video designer for over 15 years and has recently designed Theatre Network's *Buddy* and *Poster Boys*.

Does video engage the audience more in live theatrical performances? “Not necessarily,” says Jamie Nesbitt. “Sometimes it can do the opposite. Go to any bar and try to not watch the television.” Ben Chaisson agrees: “Video opens up a lot of design possibilities but not always for the best results. Video, like any design element, needs to be treated with care.... It has to serve the piece. It is an aesthetic that needs to be both nurtured and fully embraced in the creation process to work at its most effective.”

Does video make theatre more interactive for an audience? Ben Chaisson: “Theatre is interactive by its very nature.... Things can go wrong or, even better, things can go right. Video doesn't make this any more or less true for audiences; it's simply another element to observe and be entertained by.”

Are audiences starting to expect video as part of their theatre experience? Ian Jackson says yes: “As theatre audiences grow younger they expect more from a production. They have grown up with CGI in their movies, live stadium concerts with robotic lights and live video mix.... How can they not expect higher production values from theatre when they see it? To think that theatre should not try and keep up with other forms of entertainment relegates it to an antiquated and dying art form. I don't believe it has to be this way.” Chaisson agrees: “I think younger audiences are impressed by projection and video, but if it doesn't serve the piece it is considered bad. Video technologies are everywhere and marketers are using highly adaptive video technology to sell stuff faster than we in theatre are able to use the same technologies to entertain. It can be a bit of a struggle for us to keep up, so it's more important to use technology well to serve our narratives than to use the latest and greatest techno toys.” Nesbitt cuts to the chase: “The actor on stage speaking text is still the most powerful element of the stage. If I can somehow enhance that event then I'm doing my job. Audiences will ultimately come for the story, and if our stories are good then people who experience the telling of that story will tell other people about the story, and then you have a wider audience.... I don't want to be part of [an audience] that only comes to see spectacle.”

Is the video component bringing more people into the theatre? “That's hard to say,” says Jackson. “My cynical side says we are not going to see more audiences flocking to the theatre to see video design. But, I am hopeful that audiences will stick with theatre because of the live experience that is enhanced by video design.” **AS**

Scott Peters has worked in technical theatre and theatre design for 20 years in Alberta and beyond.



John Mann in Theatre Calgary's *Beyond Eden*.

Photo credit: David Cooper

David van Belle in Ghost River Theatre and Alberta Theatre Projects' *The Highest Step in the World*.

Photo credit: Aldona Barutowicz



Widows and Orphans

BY MIEKO OUCHI

Fearing the Audience

We are hitting the stage for the first time with my new play *Nisei Blue* at Alberta Theatre Projects, and in these first days in the space, as I look around the theatre, suddenly their ghostly presence is becoming real. Palpable. Terrifying. Ready or not, they are coming.

The audience...

Do we think enough about the audience in the theatre? Sometimes not enough. And probably sometimes a little too much. Both carry their risks.

Not enough thought and we risk irrelevance. If we are producing theatre that isn't connecting with people, then where is the vitality in the theatre? The importance? The relevance?

Too much thought and we can become obsessed with making sure that every single person knows what's going on. That every person gets every reference. Every joke. This can destroy the mystery of the work. Writing to the lowest common denominator can kill the stretch that we ask the audience to make.

But back to the fear.

Okay, I've been to a lot of opening nights. Plays I've acted in. Plays I've directed. Plays I've dramaturged. I usually really enjoy myself. I'm excited to see the audience encounter the work. But somehow that all goes out the window when it's a play that I've written. And a première? The first time an audience really comes into contact with the work? I am already sussing out my hiding place in the theatre. It may sound ridiculous, but this is something I have begun to do each time my plays open.

Because opening night is terrifying.

First of all: that day, you have nothing to do. The actors, stage manager and crew are all busy preparing. Even the director usually has some last minute tweaks to keep them occupied. But your job as writer? It's done. At least for this run. And this lack of useful things to do seems to do something to me biologically.

Something physical happens to me that day. Somehow, inexplicably, I get ninja hearing. You know the uncanny ability to hear every cough and program

rustle across a theatre? The sixth sense that catches every yawn and stretch when it's still just the spark of a thought in an innocent spectator's mind? I'm one raw nerve.

Intermission? That's the worst. This is where my pre-determined hiding spot comes in handy. Opening night I hide there during intermission, only sticking my head out to accept glasses of wine from my patient and loving boyfriend.

And I can drink the wine at this point, A) because clearly I need alcohol... but B) because I've dehydrated myself the rest of the day. On purpose. I mean, can you imagine being in the bathroom line up with folks discussing your play at the break? Mortifying. What if they hate it? What if they're confused? What if they ask you what happens in act two? What if they say nothing at all?

So instead, I drink alone in the darkness and slink back into my seat as the house lights come down for act two.

It's strange, slowly, as the second act unfurls and even more as the run of the play continues, the ninja hearing seems to fade or at least become a little more tolerable. Bit by bit, I regain the ability to sit in the house and actually look around without terror. I can slowly begin to stop hiding at intermission. My ears become accustomed. Laughs become more regular. Shuffles the same. I start to learn the rhythm of the production and suddenly begin to breathe and think again. The good news is, my critical eye returns as the fear retreats, and I begin to see the tweaks I want to do. Cuts and changes become apparent, and I actually start thinking ahead to the next draft. And looking forward to what will hopefully be a second production of the play. The audience begins to morph into something more friendly and helpful—an important and welcome partner in the development of the play.

Which is what they are and should be...

...if I can just survive opening. **AS**

Mieko Ouchi is an Edmonton based playwright, actor and director. Her new play *Nisei Blue* is currently premiering at the Enbridge playRites Festival at Alberta Theatre Projects.



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