

AS

ALL STAGES MAGAZINE
THEATRE IN ALBERTA | WINTER 2011

THIS ISSUE:

ON THE ROAD IN ALBERTA

EXAMINING THEATRE IN
SMALLER COMMUNITIES

Karl Sine and Steve Waldschmidt in
Rosebud Theatre's *Queen Milli of Galt*,
directed by Morris Ertman.



Photo credit: Morris Ertman

 THEATRE
ALBERTA

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Check in

I'll admit it—I'm one of those guys whose experience of Alberta is mostly confined to Edmonton, Calgary and whatever I can see to the left and the right as I'm driving the QE2 between the two cities. And so when I did an overview of article topics we've covered during two years of *All Stages*, it wasn't surprising—yup, only 17 percent of the theatre we've featured has taken place outside of Alberta's two largest cities.

I'm not trying to be a bean counter here—I don't have any inner sense of quotas that we need to meet in order to be a provincial theatre magazine. My dis-ease has more to do with the value of the total theatre ecology of the province. I don't want to miss out on the chance to explore the things that different communities have learned about how to engage audiences, about how to overcome adversity and about the immediacy of art within a particular population.

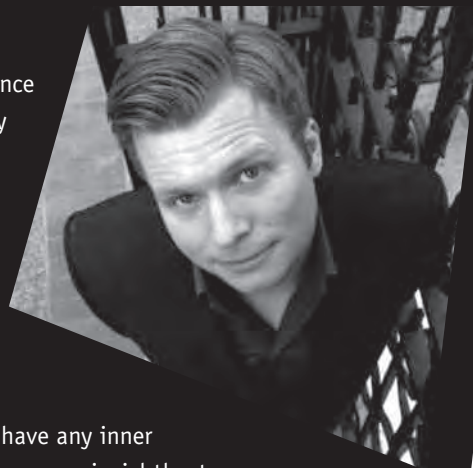
A few months ago I went to the Arts Champions Congress, a one-day strategy and networking event hosted by Calgary Arts Development. One of the repeated themes was the notion that city-based artists will benefit by leaving their familiar haunts and getting out into the rest of the province. And it's not because of some kind of misguided 'bring culture to the masses' crusade. It's because there's a lot to learn.

In my city I compete with at least two dozen other professional arts events on any given performance night. I struggle to capture people's limited attention and, even more importantly, their limited time. My patrons are often exhausted—getting the suburb dwellers to stick around downtown after work for my 8 o'clock curtain is a challenge. But outside the city it's a different picture. Produce a show in, say, Alix, Alberta and people will drive for 30 minutes to get there. And the show won't be just one more thing to get done on the social calendar—it may very well be the highlight of the week.

This issue talks about all of the joys and challenges of making theatre outside of Alberta's largest cities. In the true spirit of "all stages" we're examining some places you may never have heard of—**Trent Wilkie** takes us on a Tour de Alberta of some interesting theatre nooks. **Scott Peters** presents a special two-page Q2Q on the large-scale technical requirements of *The Canadian Badlands Passion Play*. **Col Cseke** examines Rosebud Theatre and its School of the Arts' religious beliefs and their increasing engagement with Alberta's professional theatre community. **Brenda O'Donnell** from the Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta gives professional tips on how to get your show on the road in our province. **Russell Thomas** talks about the connection (or lack thereof) between boom times and culture in Fort McMurray. And I had a great chat with **Jake Tkaczyk**, a 17-year-old from smalltown Alberta who's reviving the theatre culture in his area. We've also got two new script excerpts from **Arun Lakra** and **Chris Craddock**.

Let's roll down the windows, put on some tunes and hit the road. It's a big province.

DAVID VAN BELLE
EDITOR



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In *All Stages* Fall 2011, there was a misrepresentation of the Betty Mitchell Awards and our recognition of independent theatre productions within in Calgary. In the article "Indie State(s)," Lana Michelle Hughes writes,

"...the Sterlings have a separate category for best independent production... In contrast, there are no specific independent theatre awards for the Bettys...Although awards certainly aren't everything, one has to ask why the independent scene isn't recognized

to the same extent in Calgary as it is in Edmonton."

The Betty Mitchell Awards do recognize independent theatre to the same extent as the Sterlings, if not more. We simply recognize independence differently. The article states correctly that the Bettys have no specific category for indie theatre. This is because we place indie productions in the same pool with all professional productions. An Equity Co-op is eligible in the same categories as a production at Theatre Calgary. Our

Nominating Committee adjudicates every eligible show based on one thing: outstanding achievement.

The Bettys recognize indie theatre for what it is: theatre. Theatre of the same value and importance as that produced at the established/PACT houses. To us at the Bettys, theatre is theatre and there need be no distinctions made.

Trevor Rueger, Chair
Betty Mitchell Awards
Steering Committee



CuriousGround

KNEEHIGH THEATRE - kneehigh.co.uk

Kneehigh Theatre is based in Cornwall, on the extreme southwestern tip of England. Founded 30 years ago as a youth theatre troupe, it has since grown to become one of the UK's most enterprising and innovative theatre companies. It is known for its physical, musical and visually arresting style of ensemble storytelling.

Their work often springs from fairy tales and is developed collectively by company members. Their rehearsal base is a cluster of converted stone barns outside of the city, which include a rehearsal room, a music studio, workshops for prop-making and set-building and a large kitchen. Artists must work together to maintain the barns as well as build new work.

This rural environment is at the heart of how they create and conceive their work. Emma Rice, Kneehigh's Artistic Director, attributes the bravery of their work to being less hindered by the fears that can come with living and working in a larger metropolis: "There is no room for neurosis or doubt, these will only undermine the process—hold your nerve, stay open and delight in the privilege of making theatre." **AS**

Kneehigh's adaptation of *The Red Shoes*.

Photo credit: Pavel Antonov

TALES FROM THE STACKS

Featured titles from Canada's largest fully-circulating theatre library.

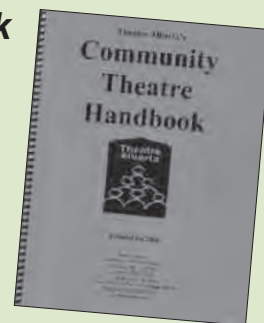
Three Really Nasty Plays by Ron Chambers

Playwright Ron Chambers was born in Brandon, Manitoba and raised on a dairy farm. Although he intended to become an engineer, he studied drama at the University of Lethbridge, where he has been teaching since 1988. This collection of three plays won the 1998 Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama at the Alberta Book Awards. *Marg Szkaluba (Pissy's Wife)* is about a woman escaping an abusive marriage who starts a new life as a country singer in small town bars. In *Pretty Blue*, a welfare recipient becomes a catalyst in the lives of a lawyer and his professor wife. *Dirt* is a comic murder mystery in which two eccentric cops attempt to pry the truth from a cruel, cantankerous murder suspect.



Community Theatre Handbook published by Theatre Alberta

Whether you are looking for advice on how to start your own community theatre, stage your first production or are part of an established company looking for guidance on your operations, the information in this handbook will help you organize, implement and sustain your theatrical endeavours. It provides a basic skeleton of theatre operations, and is intended to not only strengthen your current practices but also spark new ideas. The handbook is also available for purchase by Theatre Alberta members for \$10.00.



These titles are available to Theatre Alberta members through our library: theatrealberta.com/library **AS**

BEAVER REGIONAL ARTS CENTRE

Jake Tkaczyk outside the Beaver Regional Arts Centre in Holden, Alberta.
Photo credit: Kacie Tkaczyk



COMMUNITY PROFILE

Jake Tkaczyk: Grade 12 student at Ryley High School, “co-reformer” of the Beaverhill Players and member of the board of directors for both the Beaver Regional Arts Society and the Beaver Regional Arts Centre.

Jake Tkaczyk isn't your usual 17-year-old farm kid. Bitten by the theatre bug at Artstrek (Theatre Alberta's summer school for teens) when he was 14, Jake is in the process of transforming the theatre ecology in the area surrounding his hometown of Bruce, Alberta, a tiny village southeast of Camrose with a population of less than 100. In the past couple of years he has revived a long-dormant theatre company and emerged as one of the region's main cultural movers and shakers. Jake's story highlights some of the joys and challenges of producing theatre in rural areas, so for this issue of All Stages we're including a special two-page Community Profile of this remarkable young man.

What are some of the jobs you're doing in the theatre?

Well, I'm on the board of the Beaver Regional Arts Centre, so I help make decisions about what kind of performances get programmed. The Beaver Regional Arts Society leases the Arts Centre from Beaver County. The County owns the building but the Society takes care of it and leases it out to different performers or groups like the Beaverhill Players. All of these are in Holden [15 km from Bruce—Ed.].

With the Beaver Regional Arts Society, it's basically maintaining the theatre and helping out at some of the performances they bring in. The Beaverhill Players is more of the theatre scene. I typically involve myself a lot more with them, especially since I'm a co-reformer of it. So right now I'm stage managing and producing a show for them—*A Bad Year for Tomatoes* by John Patrick. I do a lot of performing with them. This is the first time I've ever stage managed or produced. I thought I would try something new. I do a little bit of light and sound stuff in there as well with Beaverhill Players, and I've directed a little bit. So I've done basically a lot of different roles.

One very, very important thing that we got started last November (but I've been working on since two Marches ago) was a children's theatre. Every Monday I volunteer to teach kids different aspects of theatre—acting, directing, design, some movement. Stuff I've learned from previous workshops, stuff I've learned from Artstrek. We got a good core of about 14 kids to come out every Monday, starting last November. We got awesome reviews from the kids and the parents and the community. So it was really great to see all the positivity based on what we've done, as well as working with kids who have never had a drama or theatre workshop in their entire lives. I'm looking forward to starting again this year.

You're 17. Why are you the one in charge of reviving the theatre in your area?

It's weird, because at 17 most people don't really know what they want to do or where they're headed. They don't know what courses they're going to take in



Tkaczyk (r) as Mortimer Brewster in Beaverhill Players' production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*.
Photo credit: Chris Shin

university. But after I started doing theatre I kind of knew that I wanted to do it forever and have it as a part of my career and a part of my life. So I figured 'Why not get something started?' Something that I can be a part of and can say, 'Hey, look, I helped create this.'

When did you start doing theatre?

My first real introduction to theatre was *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Artstrek, mainly because Holden School (our elementary school) and Ryley Junior and Senior High don't have any drama courses. So I was never given the opportunity to really explore it. When I went to Artstrek I didn't know what to expect because I had never been in a theatre environment before.

What was it about theatre that grabbed you so instantly?

That's a tough one. The thing about theatre is that you're always getting to work with new people, and you're always getting to try something new. And there's always just a whole bunch of creativity that surrounds you when you're working with other artists, which is awesome because when you're working with people and you don't know what's going to happen, that's where artistic things are created and that's where things that are remembered are created. I like going there to have fun, to make other people have fun, and to explore what you can do that you normally wouldn't be able to do in real life.

Tell us about the Beaver Regional Arts Centre.

The theatre is a nice small-town theatre, which a lot of other communities don't have. And probably should. It was originally a movie house. I don't remember the exact year that it was built—around 1953 or 1954. It's a really nice facility. It seats around 285 people. It has a great stage area, a nice backstage, good dressing rooms. They're actually redoing the floors and repainting the lobby.

What's it like to make theatre within a small community like yours?

There's a lot of challenges. Sometimes when you're putting on a production it's hard to fill the seats. And sometimes it's hard to find people to work on the production. We did *Arsenic and Old Lace* last March, and to find 14 really committed people was extremely difficult. Once you find them, you have them in your toolbox, right? So you know, 'Oh we need this person to come and act, let's give him a call.' That's really nice, to maintain connections with certain people in the community. But gathering an audience is really tough.

What do you think the theatre contributes to your community?

A lot of people who come to see theatre in Holden are looking for entertainment. I think that's what we provide. I think that for a small community we do really good theatre. It's something for them to volunteer and work at and just an outlet for people to be creative.

You're going to finish high school this year. What's the plan?

I want to go to Red Deer College and take the two-year Performance Creation program, and then, when I finish that, audition for the BFA at the U of A. I don't know where yet, but I would like to get a Master's in some form of fine arts and then teach at a university.

What kind of theatre do you like?

Oh boy. I guess because I've been deprived of theatre I like *all* theatre. But I must say I like watching original stuff more, or improvised stuff more, just because it's something that was created by other people or is being created right in front of you. I haven't had the opportunity to check out a lot of larger-scale theatre or urban theatre. I go to Edmonton during the Fringe and watch as many shows as I can. My favourite show at the Fringe this year had to have been *Elephant* by Alice Nelson. The way that Alice was able to play so many different characters flawlessly, one after the other, was awesome. It was something that I haven't seen very often. It touched me more than anything else.

Anything else we should talk about?

Some people don't necessarily think that young people know a lot. To any people from Artstrek or any young kids—I've been told this a million times and I'm finally just starting to figure this out—you have to follow what you want to do. And no matter what anyone says, if you think that theatre is for you but someone's against it, go and do it anyway because if it makes you happy you'll find time to do it. And you'll have a blast. That's what doing theatre in the community of Holden has done for me. **AS**

Walking the Tightrope

BY COL CSEKE

Nathan Schmidt and Heather Pattengale in Rosebud's *The Diary of Adam and Eve* by Mark Twain.
Photo credit: Morris Ertman

28 years after its founding, Rosebud Theatre negotiates a balance between identity and engagement

Calgary theatre artists often complain that it's difficult to convince potential ticket buyers living in the suburbs to make the long haul up Deerfoot Trail into downtown to see a play. But if the Epcor Centre is too far a destination, what does that mean for Rosebud Theatre?

The town of Rosebud, about 90 minutes northeast of Calgary, is proving that a small town, separated from city centres, can not only maintain a thriving professional theatre company with a full slate of productions and a post-secondary performing arts school, but can also fill its seats with a consistent and diverse audience. You could describe Rosebud as Alberta's "destination theatre"; last season's patron database shows audience members came from over 150 different communities. Artistic Director Morris Ertman describes the act of audiences coming to his theatre from all across the province as an act of pilgrimage. It's clear that Alberta audiences have found Rosebud worth seeking out.

But attracting audiences to the small town is only part of the job— attracting quality performers is another matter. Unlike larger cities where dozens of companies make it possible for freelancing actors to spread their season's work out over multiple stages, Rosebud Theatre is the only theatre hiring in town and it needs to offer

year-round employment to artists in order to retain the talent on which the company's success is built. In response, Rosebud formed a resident company of actors connected to the Rosebud School of the Arts. Artists split their time between performing on the stage and instructing in the classroom.

Many of the resident company are graduates of Rosebud School of the Arts. Karl Sine is an actor and director who has been working and living in Rosebud for over a decade. After graduating from the school, Sine made his home in the town, acting and instructing there while still trying to keep up a professional career in other parts of the province. Which hasn't always been easy. "There's a love/hate relationship—the distance and time required to go elsewhere can be really challenging. But on the other hand, I get to live in a community that's an arts community, and I always, always have a project on the go," he says. According to Sine, what actors may give up in exposure to the broader Albertan professional arts scene they gain in the security of full-time employment, something a lot of city actors would be pretty envious of. Sine doesn't appear to be too isolated from the rest of the province, however; last season he appeared as the malevolent Don John in Theatre Calgary's *Much Ado About Nothing* and was nominated for a Betty Mitchell Award (along with fellow Rosebudder Nathan Schmidt) for Outstanding Choreography or Fight Direction for his work on the Shakespeare Company's *Macbeth*.

Artistic Director Ertman describes the choice to have a resident company as "very pragmatic. We thought the way we can most effectively make plays in this place is to offer a life to a core of artists." Building a strong core of actors offers stability to both



Nathan Schmidt as Jake in *Jake and the Kid*.

Photo credit: Morris Ertman

the theatre and the company of artists. What exists now is a group that has been making plays together for over a decade. The payoff is a palpable chemistry between performers onstage and a great sense of ownership over the work and the theatre itself. The danger of the long-term company dynamic, though, is that with a dearth of outside artistic influences the company's work could turn stale. In order to combat this possibility, student apprentices from the Rosebud School of the Arts (who get to act alongside their teachers) and guest artists hailing from across the province augment the resident company in each production. Ertman describes the ideal cast as being equally comprised of those three groups. But inviting outside artists comes with added financial costs that a pragmatic small theatre company needs to consider carefully.

Negotiating between the theatre's artistic needs and the professional needs of its resident artists is not the only balancing act Rosebud has been performing in its 28-year history. The company has been walking a spiritual tightrope as well.

Rosebud Theatre was initially established in 1983 as a fundraiser for the Rosebud School of the Arts, which was founded ten years earlier. In their early days, the school and the theatre shared the same mission statement: "to provide facilities, organization, education and top-quality programs in the realm of the arts to express God's wonderful and universal gifts to His children in a spirit of hope, joy, forgiveness and love." The theatre attracted a predominantly Christian audience that sought out an alternative to perceived worldliness in Alberta culture. Rosebud was a centre where an audience member could be assured that content would not be offensive to a conservative Christian sensibility.

However, a shift began to take place, landmarked by the hiring of Ertman, Rosebud's first official Artistic Director, in 2002. When Ertman took the helm he began to shake the tree, challenging some of the more conservative spiritual choices and pursuing a more culturally engaged Christianity. The mandate of the theatre was separated from that of the school. The theatre now aimed "to present live programming that illustrates the beauty and complexity of life through an inclusive and grace-filled perspective." The mandate shift manifested itself in the first production under Ertman's leadership, Lucia Frangione's *Caribou Magi* (2002), in which a group of artists tell the story of the Nativity through the lens of *Hamlet*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The production culminated in the image of a drunken Anglican minister holding up the newborn Christ-child, dripping with blood. The next year's Christmas production of *Godspell* featured Jesus

crucified in a Santa suit—definitely an aesthetic and spiritual stretch for the company.

This shift wasn't universally celebrated. Some long-time audience members felt betrayed, as if they were losing a safe place to go. And at the same time, attracting new audience members meant that the theatre had to negotiate a leftover perception that they were presenting a sermon rather than a play. Rosebud School of the Arts Education Director Maki Van Dyke says the shift had more to do with "addressing spiritual journeys, and not just from a prairie religious tradition." This has led them to productions of South African playwright Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, produced last year, and to a planned production next year of an adaptation of Jewish author Chaim Potok's acclaimed novel *My Name is Asher Lev*.

Karl Sine believes that Rosebud's spiritual mandate has had the effect of creating a place where "artists of faith can come and not be afraid to be [of faith], and to grow from that. Often there can be, for a lack of better word, prejudice against different ideals... and when I say prejudice, I don't just mean against people of faith but also by people of faith against other people." It was Rosebud's insistence on inclusivity and openness that allowed Sine to see how he as an individual can have a place in the theatre world, without de-emphasizing something as personal and foundational as his faith. "While at Rosebud I've had the chance to really have a journey of self-discovery, and I don't know if I would have had that anywhere else."

In this way, what Rosebud gives Sine is space to find his own way through all of these complicated considerations. This space doesn't put him or any of the other artists living and working in Rosebud in a vacuum, but maybe it has provided a bit of a cushion. **AS**

Col Cseke is Co-Artistic Director of Verb Theatre and a member of the Downstage Creation Ensemble. This season Col will premiere new performance creation work at The High Performance Rodeo, ATP's playRites Festival and The Calgary International Children's Festival.



Alysa van Haastert and Heather Pattengale in *Queen Milli of Galt*.

Photo credit: Morris Ertman

GET OUT OF TOWN

HOW TO TOUR YOUR SHOW IN AND OUT OF ALBERTA

BY BRENDA O'DONNELL

With a little forethought, every production could be tour-ready. But many theatre makers don't quite know how to do it. If a production has all the right indicators—rave reviews, positive audience reaction, dedicated cast and extended rights—you may be in the right place to plan a tour. First you've got to ask some hard questions.

The hard questions

What does touring mean to you?

- Do you envision doing a run of a week or longer?
- Could you survive on one-night stands (or could your tech)?
- Are you shopping for a venue to self-present, a presenter with some local responsibility or a co-presenter to share the profits?

Is your production tour-worthy or versatile enough to withstand a tour?

- Can the production be remounted quickly?
- Is there adequate storage for production elements when you're not on the road?
- Will your production fit into a car, van, semi or airline container?
- Does the set breakdown and set up easily?
- How elaborate are the sets, costumes or other designs?
- If the work isn't original, how extensive are your rights—provincial, Canadian, North American?
- Have you considered royalty costs for your playwright, director and designers?
- What would a reasonable fee be for a single performance or a week long run?

Can you support the necessary administrative structure needed to tour?

- Will you be able to define, refine and develop a touring circuit?
- Have you developed a database of communities, community groups and champions?
- Could your company/production be relevant to school touring?

Will your production find its audience in Alberta?

- Is the script relevant (e.g. timely, history-based, issue-based)? Will it resonate with a rural audience or is it a totally urban piece?
- Who is your audience—grade school age, teens, adults, seniors?

Alberta Showcase

Rural Alberta is blessed with a network of Community Presenters, heroes that produce seasons of live performances in their rural communities. The Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta (ATAA) supports this network of presenters through Alberta Showcase, a weekend conference each October where 55 to 65 community presenters see upwards of 50 artists and groups. Many rural seasons are programmed at this event.

Even with 'Showcase', touring Alberta is not without its challenges. Presenting a 15-minute excerpt as a means of selling your production can feel unsatisfactory. Also many of our Alberta tours are music based—portable, solo performers or groups, minimal set-up/sound checks, strikes on the same night and no amortization of rehearsal time. But it has worked, when groups have aligned themselves with an agent or have a dedicated staff person who understands touring.

A few success stories: Kevin Bruce, with Kbam!, an agency based in Vancouver, began to 'Showcase' his artists several years back and now has upwards of 150 performances each year in Alberta. Seacoast Theatre 'Showcased' *Ten Lost Years*, a large show set in the depression years. Utilizing risers, slides and a cast of 12, the production has had solid touring dates throughout Alberta schools and with community presenters. It has also paved the way for future productions.

How the Arts Touring Alliance can help

- Attend Alberta Showcase—let your work be seen and meet presenters.

- The Alberta Touring Directory provides a list of presenting members, their venues and programming interests along with their contact information
- Put your information in the Directory, so those shopping for talent can find you easily

Other resources

The ATAA is part of an extensive network of presenters across the country. Presenters serve as a vital link in the creative chain of developing audiences and venues. If you're interested in touring, consider these network members as an option (all dates are in 2012):

Contact East

SEPT 26-30 | www.contacteast.ca

Ontario Contact

OCT 24-27 | www.ontariocontact.ca

Manitoba Showcase Contact

OCT 12-14 | www.communityarts.mb.ca

OSAC Showcase (Saskatchewan)

OCT 19-21 | www.osac.sk.ca

Pacific Contact (BC)

MAR 30-APR 1 | www.bctouring.org

Canadian Arts Presenting Association (CAPACOA) NOV | www.capacoa.ca

The Canada Council also has an excellent online learning tool available (www.canadacouncil.ca). *On The Road* is a great online tool for touring artists, featuring useful handbooks and a searchable database for up-to-date information on presenters.

If you are interested in school touring try:

Kbam!: www.kbamonline.com

ArtStarts: www.artstarts.com

Prologue to the Performing Arts: www.prologue.org. [AS](#)

Brenda O'Donnell is the Executive Director of the Arts Touring Alliance of Alberta. The organization is ready to help advise you on your touring options. You can find them at artstouring.com.



A performance in Aspen Crossing's railway car.
Photo courtesy of Aspen Crossing.

OUTSIDE THE EDMONTON CALGARY BUBBLE

Mostly Water
Theatre's Trent
Wilkie takes us on
a theatrical Tour de
Alberta

BY TRENT WILKIE

As a writer I deal in metaphor. Here's a metaphor I'd like to propose: Alberta theatre is, in fact, Alberta itself. Our province provides a rich variety, both geologically and theatrically. If you don't believe me, turn on the Google machine and suss it out for yourself. Also, check out what suss means; I'm not sure if I used it properly.

Fort Saskatchewan— The Shell Theatre

In this, we will take a majestic little journey and venture to the rugged panoramas of all things Alberta. We start with visiting Elizabeth Budd, production and program supervisor at the Shell Theatre in Fort Saskatchewan. When talking to her I felt like I knew her from somewhere. Like someone I may have went to school with, if the school was on the moon. "I do all our introductions before our shows and if you are over the age of 75, you will think I'm hilarious," jokes Budd.

"The fact is, we are in the community and we are the cultural meeting place," Budd says. "We have a mandate to program for everyone. We program what they already enjoy and sneak in what they are going to enjoy, they just don't know it yet."

Covering everything from classic rock cover acts to the family-friendly musical *Tortoise Versus the Hare*, Shell is a perfect example of diversity in a diverse land.

Mossleigh—Aspen Crossing

From Fort Saskatchewan we literally head down the tracks to Mossleigh. Aspen Crossing is a unique venue. Not only is it a dinner theatre in a train car, but the train car itself used to be Prime Minister Diefenbaker's business car. Manager Donna Biggar is doing her best to add to its lineage, one audience member at a time. "It only holds 32 people so the shows are very intimate," Biggar says. "You are right beside the actors and are so close you become part of the story."

On a site packed with greenhouses, a campground, a replica station and a historic train car, Aspen Crossing is a bit of a cultural landmark. So much so, Biggar may as well put time travel on the menu. "The horticultural aspect really does well with the train theme," says Biggar. "[The Canadian Pacific Railway] would plant gardens along the stations to show people coming west that the soil was fertile."

People come from Calgary, Vulcan and Okotoks. Some have heard of Aspen



Windmill Theatre's production of *Seussical the Musical*.

Photo courtesy of Windmill Theatre.

Crossing, while others don't know what to expect. Sometimes, they get a bit more than they bargained for.

"Sometimes the actors like to pull tricks on each other," Biggar laughs. "One time, one of the actors was supposed to be pantsed in a scene and he didn't do the suspenders up properly. And lo and behold, he got pantsed for real. He was shocked, as was the audience. Afterwards he said that he wished he'd worn something prettier."

High River—Windmill Theatre

Next we move on up to High River and the Windmill Theatre. Celia Penman is gracious enough to talk to me about what Windmill does. She is worried that since the players don't have a "proper" theatre and use Highwood Memorial Centre for shows, the Windmill might not be relevant. So I ask her if the hall is haunted.

"Well, I'm not sure," Penman responds. "It may not be haunted with theatre people, but it was an airport in World War II."

Spectral airmen? Possibly haunted production house? Relevance proven.

Windmill's forte is as community as community theatre can get. "The director is my sister-in-law and the stage manager is

my daughter and there is also my brother-in-law, nephew and a couple of cousins," explains Penman. "It's kind of a nepotistic group. For *The Wizard of Oz* we had over 90 people audition for parts. The hardest thing is telling some of your family that they don't have a part."

As for content, Windmill does what it and the community likes. And it seems what High River likes is what mostly everyone likes...to be entertained.

"We tend to do what the audience wants us to do," Penman says. "But what we really offer is an outlet for creativity. It relieves stress, and people have stressful jobs. Don't get me wrong, performing in a show is sometimes stressful, but it's a different kind of stress, and the community loves to come out and play."

Just outside Penhold— Popovich Patio Dinner Theatre

Next stop—Penhold. Reaching people is the goal of most theatres. If they aren't trying, then they aren't in the right business. Deborah and Richard Popovich go out of their way to reach people. Not only do they perform on the Stettler Steam Engine, but also they run a small dinner theatre and tour all over the province. They cross genres with their musical acts, from the roaring 20s to cowboys to a survey of 100 years of music.

"We keep our themes varied because we want to appeal to as large an audience as possible," says Deborah Popovich. "But something that we realized along the way is that there wasn't really a lot of entertainment tailored to the older crowd."

I know this article has had a silly through line to it, but this is where it gets real. A lot of their audience is not mobile. From long-term care facilities to seniors' lodges,



Deborah and Richard Popovich, owners of Popovich Patio Dinner Theatre.

Photo courtesy of Deborah and Richard Popovich.

the Popoviches bring their shows to those who can't come to them.

"When we do a show like our 'Roaring Twenties' show, you can see it actually transport them into a different time," Popovich says. "It takes them back in time and evokes memories and tears, but it's good memories bringing the tears. It's not our most popular show, but it does have a lot of impact on those people. It is very rewarding and emotional for us. They say things like 'Please come back next year—I hope I'm here to enjoy it' and 'Thank you for talking to me.' A lot of the seniors are quite reserved at first, because they aren't used to being stirred. They laugh and clap and their senses awaken. An added bonus is we get such a thrill out of watching the caregivers get a thrill out of watching who they are caring for have a great time."

From small town community theatres to historic dinner theatre and memory-inducing musicals, theatres in Alberta *are* Alberta, both diverse and picturesque. Now if can just sell Granum on my musical about a haunted steam engine from the future, I might be able to get on this list.

And yes, there will be pantsing. **AS**

Trent Wilkie is a writer/performer living in Edmonton. He has written for CBC Radio (*The Irrelevant Show*) and just finished his third play this year *Book On Tape*. Also, he is a member of Mostly Water Theatre (a multi-media sketch comedy troupe) and has been a wilderness canoe guide for close to ten years.

Rare Form Theatre, an Edmonton area children's theatre company, performs at the Shell Theatre in Fort Saskatchewan.

Photo courtesy of The Shell Theatre.





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Excerpt from *Sequence* by Arun Lakra

Dr. Arun Lakra is a Calgary Ophthalmologist. His play *Sequence* won the Grand Prize in the 2011 Alberta Playwrights Network Alberta Playwriting Competition.

The stage is divided into left and right segments, which intersect with each other. When viewed from above, the design might loosely resemble a spiral of DNA.

DR. GUZMAN enters.

She walks to the chalkboard, stares at the mess of diagrams, numbers and words.

She erases half of the board. She takes a moment to find a piece of BLUE chalk.

Dr. Guzman writes on the board with her left hand:

WHICH CAME FIRST?

She moves to a podium, addresses the audience.

DR. GUZMAN: The question is... which came first? The chicken or the egg?

THEO enters, holding an unopened umbrella.

He ducks under a ladder.

He opens his umbrella, then closes it.

Theo strides to his half of the chalkboard, stares at the mess. Theo erases his half of the board.

He picks up a piece of RED chalk.

He writes the word "LUCK" on the board.

Abruptly, he strides to a mirror, takes a big swing, and SMASHES it with the umbrella handle.

THEO: MacBeth!

Theo looks up to the heavens, opens his arms, waits for the lightning bolt that never comes.

DR. GUZMAN: I submit to you, despite popular misconception, the question is not rhetorical.

Theo stands at his podium, addresses the audience.

THEO: Luck is like irony. Not everybody who thinks they got it, got it.

DR. GUZMAN: One had to come first. Wouldn't you agree? Unless you postulate simultaneous creation. That is, unless you postulate God.

Dr. Guzman writes "GOD" beside "LUCK".

THEO: Luck is like breasts. It's relative. If everybody had big breasts, we'd just call them breasts. And we wouldn't stare. As much.

DR. GUZMAN: But we're scientists, are we not? At least until your mid-term results are posted. And we know Borel's

Law states, if the odds of an event are less than one in ten to the fiftieth, that event can never happen in the entire time and space of our known universe.

THEO: You are not all lucky, I'm sorry to have to break it to you. In fact, I suspect the truly lucky ones are those whose wives didn't drag them to a book reading three hours before kickoff on Super Bowl Sunday.

DR. GUZMAN: So the chances of the chicken and the egg evolving simultaneously, are perilously close to zero. Ergo, it must have been sequential.

THEO: You take a guy in a wheelchair, who can't even take a crap by himself. And ask him if he considers himself lucky. Trust me. He'll say yes. Every time. He has persuaded himself he's the luckiest guy in the world. But he can't possibly be the luckiest guy in the world. You know why?

Because I am.

DR. GUZMAN: Everything happens sequentially. Music. DNA. Every story ever told. There is an order to the universe. If chicken, then egg. Or if egg, then chicken. And even more importantly, the order implies causality. Egg creates chicken. Or chicken spawns egg.

THEO: What determines success? Does a Nobel Prize winner stand up at the award ceremony and say, "I'm here because I'm a lazy bum with average intelligence who got lucky?" They won't tell you that. But I will. I'm just like you. I put on my pants one leg at a time, always the right one first, as someone once pointed out to me.

DR. GUZMAN: But whatever you do, do not tell me it doesn't matter. That's a cheat. The only thing I detest more than cheating is laziness, and chaos is lazy. Entropy is lazy. God is lazy.

Dr. Guzman circles the word "GOD".

THEO: Except, on the luck scale, I am off the charts. If you look at the odds I've fortuitously overcome... I'm told I'm a one in a billion. With a "B".

DR. GUZMAN: Order is sweat. It is conscious. Order dictates everything. Including who you are. And that is why you're here today. In this classroom. On this planet. Wasting oxygen.

THEO: My book is called *Change Your Luck*. And that is the reason you're here today.

Theo circles the word "LUCK". AS

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Excerpt from *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams, adapted by Chris Craddock

Chris Craddock's adaptation of this beloved story is being produced as part of the Capitol Theatre's first season at Fort Edmonton Park. It runs December 9-24.

We hear Christmas music.

DAD: Christmas is crazy, right? I mean between the malls and the presents and the cooking, it's enough to make you nuts, especially if you're trying to do it on your own. But at the same time, I love it. I love Christmas! I always have, since I was a kid.

VIDEO: *We see a picture of him as a kid.*

DAD: That's me there. And then I grew up.

VIDEO: *We see Dad as a young man.*

DAD: And college and all that. But I always got home for Christmas. And then I met Mary, and we kept Christmas pretty well I think.

VIDEO: *We see Dad and Mary having a Christmas party.*

DAD: But when we had our own kids, it all got that much more special.

VIDEO: *We see some sentimental pics of early Christmases.*

DAD: First they're tiny babies tearing open paper, when they don't even know what's going on, right, but they know that something is going on. And then the excitement of the later years, presents and toboggans and putting out cookies for Santa. And me and Mary. Things were great.

VIDEO: *The image settles on one of Dad and Mary. He is wearing a Santa Hat. They seem very happy.*

DAD: Even me. Back then, I was awesome. Everybody wanted to play with Dad. I thought it would never end. But time passes and pretty soon the boys got to that age when they started to want a video game. Now at first I thought, why not? It's the new thing. I'm cool. I figured I might enjoy it too, because there was a time when I was pretty darn good at Frogger.

The two older boys sit on the daybed/couch with X-BOX controllers, playing hard. Dad sits and takes one of the controllers.

DAD: And as a Dad I get pretty used to being better at stuff than my kids. Tying shoes, cutting meat, driving the car. I'm great at all that and they're terrible. I figure this is gonna be the same thing.

Woah, what was that?

KID: You died.

DAD: Already?

KID2: You were just standing there.

DAD: I just started.

KID: Dad, it's a 3-D environment covering a virtual representation of a ten acre course, and we're playing online internationally. You can't expect them not to p'own you when you're standing there being a noob.

DAD: I hope none of that was swearing.

KID2: Sorry Dad. My turn.

DAD: My turn didn't even happen!

KID: We agreed to switch when we die. You died.

KID2: Noob. Haha. Just kidding.

DAD: And then I knew that video games had left me behind. And what's more, I wasn't awesome anymore. X-BOX is awesome. I was set aside, like an old toy. I got ready to get into that second phase of Dadding, where you're stupid and your music sucks and they wanna borrow the car. But then we had a happy accident. Five years ago, Leah tells me that she's pregnant, which is supposed to be impossible due to a vasectomy, which was simply *not as effective as we thought it would be*. We were ...so excited.

VIDEO: *A picture of a sonogram.*

DAD: We had our little girl, Willow, and she's great. Right now she's four, and she doesn't like the video games yet. The boys find her annoying to have around when they're gaming, and to be totally honest, I don't encourage them to share. I don't want her to learn about those games. Not yet. Right now she's in her own 3-D environment, called the world, and when she plays, she really plays, you know. The way I remember. She plays with her imagination, you know? She plays with her Dad.

WILLOW: Daddy, I want a story.

DAD: Okay, hop into bed and I'll be right there. And I know it's not forever, because they grow up so fast, but for now, I'm Dad, and that means only good things. For now, I'm awesome again.

Lights shift as Dad settles in to read The Velveteen Rabbit. AS

A PASSIONATE SECRET



The Canadian Badlands Passion Play is a massive technical operation

BY SCOTT PETERS, ALL STAGES
TECHNICAL EDITOR

Nestled in the Red Deer River Valley, just outside of Drumheller, is the site of one of Alberta's top cultural attractions—and surprisingly it has nothing to do with dinosaurs. After almost 20 years of existence, *The Canadian Badlands Passion Play* is perhaps Alberta's biggest theatrical secret.

As if scooped out of the Alberta badlands by the hand of God Himself, the 100-acre crater is a perfect natural amphitheatre that holds over 2,500 audience members, more than 200 cast members, one donkey, two horses, three sheep and 24 doves and pigeons. Performances aside, the site is a thing of wonder all on its own.

The brainchild of Rosebud Theatre founder LaVerne Erickson back in 1993, the production has now grown to include more than 500 volunteers, who put in over 30,000 hours each year to dramatize the life

and death of Jesus. The show runs for seven performances every summer.

Edmonton designer Daniel van Heyst was the show's first production designer, a position he held between 1994 and 2007. Van Heyst created a truly breathtaking set—a three-story castle complete with a main gate, watchtower and crenellations that dominate the main playing area. In front of the set stretches a road, a stone wall and a river, complete with a large dock. Among the hills that surround the audience are other playing spaces including the crucifixion site with its three large crosses rising twenty feet into the southern Alberta sky. Van Heyst has obviously been marked by his time working on the production: "I still feel the sparkling mornings on the set with only gophers for company, feeling God's face shining a benediction on me," he says. "I remember a pure white seagull sailing over Jesus as he rose from the baptism tank, and a glorious sun breaking through thunderheads as a hundred angels festooned the canyon's rim."

Last year, the production underwent major changes, incorporating a new script, a new sound design and, for the first time, microphones for the actors and a sound system for the audience. It also made

Steve Waldschmidt as Jesus (c) in *The Canadian Badlands Passion Play*.

Photo credit: Randall Wiebe

additions to the already massive set. "The rural landscapes on our set must include an impressive network of locations," says Barret Hileman, co-director. "By augmenting the beautiful natural landscape with designed hints of civilization, we are able to continually reinvent what each area of the space is, and serve the physical needs of the story. We create a sense that our set expands beyond what our eye can see, giving our audience a sense of the infinite nature of the Gospel story. A fitting setting for 'the greatest story ever told'."

To get a look into the backstage world of this massive production, I talked to Ailsa Birnie, the resident Stage Manager. "In 2011 we had a Stage Management team of five: a props ASM, a wardrobe ASM and a crowd ASM who works closely with the crowd director to track the villagers' movements. This year we also had an intern SM who worked closely with me. The whole team is also responsible for pre-settingting and assisting with the movement of the cast backstage and offstage." No small task considering there are over 200 cast members, plus the animals. The team takes

on a lot of responsibility for the production, according to Birnie: "This year's animal wrangler was also a cast member, and she and her husband moved onto the site to take care of all of the animals. Their niece also assisted them during rehearsals."

Rehearsals begin seven to eight weeks before the performances. The company starts with an orientation weekend and then holds six or seven weekends of rehearsals with the main cast. In the last week the show's summer school program joins the company for one last intensive rehearsal. 50 members of the cast are high school students, who spend an intensive month in Drumheller learning about the performing arts and acting in the Passion Play, for which they earn school credit.

Technicians? "We had a team of 12," says Birnie, and apparently they're kept very busy, with duties as varied as they are many. "In 2011 we extended our dock, added a new playing space, extended the concrete pad, removed all the doors of the set, repainted the concrete and many other projects." Because of the addition of a sound system last year, there was an audio crew for the first time. "We had a team of four, including the composer, mixer, sound assistant and an installer. They did an amazing job."

For a huge production with such a large cast, there are very few rehearsals. "We do a majority of rehearsals right on the set so any tech that needs to be added to the show is added throughout the rehearsal process," says Birnie. "We rarely do any rehearsals that are tech-focused as we have a very limited amount of rehearsal time with the full company. The cast starts using their costumes in rehearsals as soon as they have them and wardrobe joins for the last run or two to work out quick changes." A gruelling schedule for any production, let alone one of this size and majesty.

"The biggest highlight each year is the joy on everyone's faces when we finally get through the first full run," Birnie confides. "Due to our rehearsals being spread out over such a long period, sometimes [there are] weeks between when we first work something and when we get back to it. When we run the whole show for the first time the pride and joy on our actors' faces is just amazing."

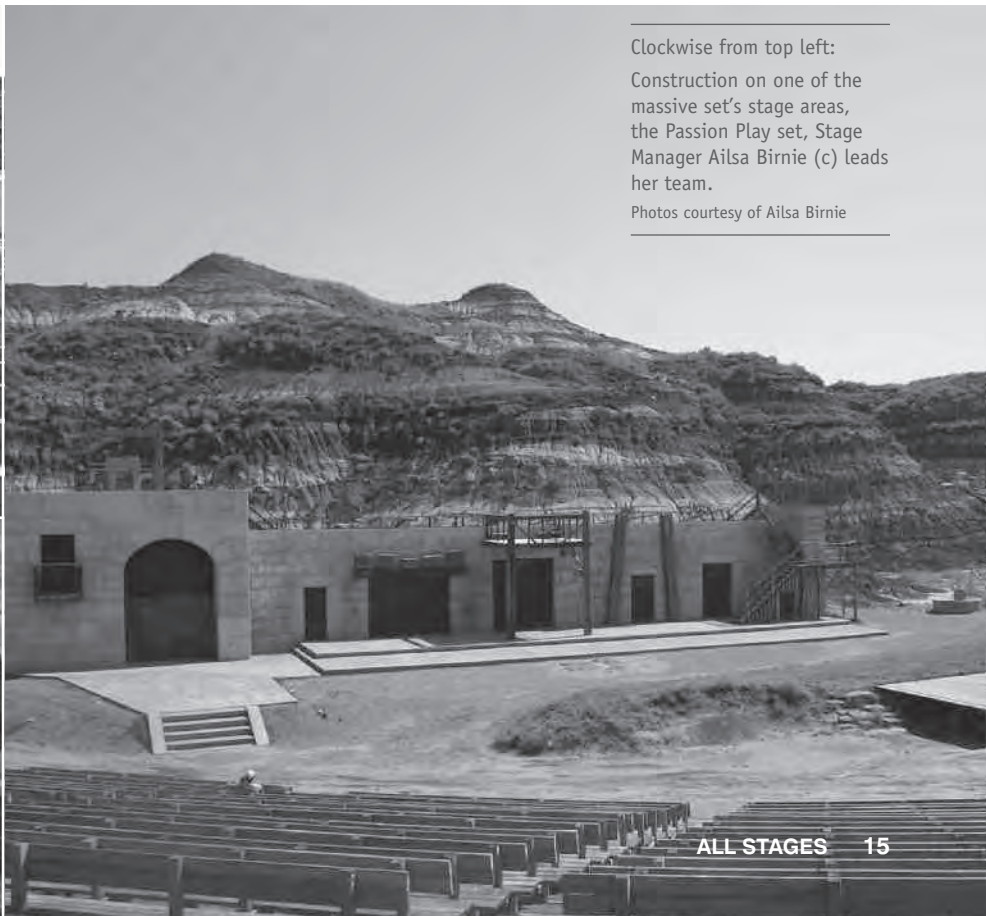
And what's the biggest challenge? Something that is completely out of everyone's control: the weather. "It dictates so much," Birnie says, "but we have been fortunate enough that the weather frequently travels around us. Sometimes we need to move rehearsals inside or postpone

while waiting for the sun to come out. Of the 106 scheduled performances in the past 20 seasons, only one has ever had to be cancelled." Miraculous.

Religion aside, you owe it to yourself to check out this wonderful secret, and witness the passion of the players. Birnie agrees: "The Passion Play is far more than a Christian play. Audience members of all backgrounds appreciate the amazing show we put on. I don't feel we are pushing any agenda, simply telling a story that happens to have a religious background. There is something in the show for everyone. It is a crazy, amazing show that overcomes all sorts of obstacles every year to happen in an outdoor venue in a small town with a mostly volunteer cast that has to rehearse and get built in the few short weeks between when the snow melts and the shows go up in July. I think it is time for the theatre industry in Alberta to stand up and take notice and check out this amazing production."

You can find out more about *The Canadian Badlands Passion Play* at Canadianpassionplay.com. **AS**

Scott Peters is *All Stages'* technical editor. He has worked in technical theatre and theatre design for 20 years in Alberta and beyond.



Clockwise from top left: Construction on one of the massive set's stage areas, the Passion Play set, Stage Manager Ailsa Birnie (c) leads her team. Photos courtesy of Ailsa Birnie

OIL BOOM, CULTURE BOOM?

BY RUSSELL THOMAS

I love change and transformation. There, I've said it. My fascination with flux might be rooted in the fact that I come from a small town in Saskatchewan where the speed of change was mind-numbingly slow. In 1996, quite by accident and with no strategic thought, I landed in an Alberta community where change is both constant and uniquely dynamic—Fort McMurray.

From helping on the set of *Crazy For You* when I first arrived, to writing a weekly arts column, to spending 15 years growing the annual interPLAY Festival, I've loosely been known as "that arts guy" for a long time. I'm less artistically active than I once was, having moved into the worlds of communication and municipal politics, but I'm still a huge supporter and an observer.

Intuitively one would expect that as the population exploded here (growing by 100 percent between 2000 and 2010) the arts and culture scene would have followed suit. That is not the case.

Alan Roberts is a good friend of mine. He's the Director of the Theatre & Arts Centre at Keyano College. He arrived here in the late 1980s and was immediately embraced by a theatre community that was thriving, with huge participation, a robust six-play season and cultural activity everywhere you turned.

"I was amazed at what Fort McMurray had to offer," says Roberts. His expectations sat far below the reality, which is a common experience for the thousands who come here on the two-year plan and end up staying a decade, two decades and in some cases, for the remainder of their working lives.

As we moved through the hard times of the Klein years to the boom times of the previous decade, cultural activities and cohesiveness declined, numbers started to go down at the box office and on the stage. In many ways, this decline was in contrast to what was happening economically.

Local actor and playwright Jeff Hoffman, who recently won several awards at the Alberta Drama Festival Association's

Provincial One Act Play Festival with his original production of *One Man Macbeth*, grew up through all of this and confirms that things were heading in the wrong direction.

"The world of theatre has grown and shrunk over the course of my years in Fort McMurray," he says. "Many brilliant artists come and go. Since there is a lack of professional opportunities for them, artists have a hard time developing roots here, so their stay tends to be notoriously brief."



Russell Thomas.
Photo credit: Chris Salvo

He's right. To make a living as an artist of any kind in this market is difficult, if not impossible. A professional dinner theatre made a valiant attempt, but faltered within its first year. Keyano Theatre moved in the direction of being semi-pro, but inadvertently weakened its community theatre base, as there wasn't a sustainable grassroots replacement.

While there have been ups and downs in culture during this period of tumultuous growth and community change, my sense is that we have finally reached a tipping point.

I've been emboldened by the entrance of the municipal government into the cultural

mix, which happened three years ago. We now have a whole Parks, Recreation and Culture department with a mandate to support, encourage and facilitate cultural development. This dramatic shift was a result of the many people who chimed in during several community engagement processes, sharing—shouting—that the arts were important.

"The expression of wants and needs from the community itself led to much of the growth in the [Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo] culture portfolio," says Leigh Agozzino-Organ, Culture Supervisor. "The Municipality's commitment and support has bolstered a sense of optimism amongst the arts community."

The opening of a community art gallery, concerted conversations about the necessity of creating an arts council, discussions about public art policy, the serious move to expanding our cultural asset base, are all indications that something significant has happened.

When I first arrived in Fort McMurray, this was a rather homogenous community, and the cultural scene reflected that reality. Today, we are a global community, with influences from all corners of the earth. The award-winning play *Rubbish* from this summer's interPLAY Festival featured an actor and writer from South Africa, an Aboriginal performer whose family has lived in Wood Buffalo for generations and a director who grew up on an Alberta farm. Together, they created one of the most compelling and beautiful theatre pieces that I've ever seen, with only the clothes on their backs and two pools of light.

I think the director of that show has it right: "I see huge potential in Fort McMurray," says Michael Beamish. "That's why I moved up here." **AS**

Russell Thomas is Director of Marketing and Communications for Keyano College in Fort McMurray. He is a key founder of Events Wood Buffalo.

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