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WRIGHTING PLAYS
The Craft of Play Creation in Alberta
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Want to subscribe to All Stages?
Become a member of Theatre Alberta at theatrealberta.com/membership and receive all three issues of our publication, plus access to our library, professional development programs and production resources!
One of my first tasks, after recently joining the Theatre Alberta team, as Programmer, was to help facilitate our biennial playwriting conference PlayWorks Ink, which was co-presented with Alberta Playwrights’ Network and The Banff Centre. While there, I had the pleasure of meeting many Albertans writing and creating plays—they ranged from the seasoned professional to the curious and adventurous first timer. I was absolutely inspired by their desire to learn at any age or ability and the simple act of wanting to grow at all stages. I see playwriting/making/creation as the seed of the medium of theatre. Where would we be without these purposeful creative individuals?

So now that Playworks Ink is over and we have descended from the Rockies, I am beginning to settle into my new role at Theatre Alberta. I start my journey as All Stages Editor by exploring that seed of the theatrical process: we look at the playwright as creator, those that draw on vast sources, compile, focus, and create theatre.

We’ve taken the word ‘wright’ and separated it from playwright to link back to its origins. Wright is an old English word related to occupational trades, shipwright or wheelwright for example, its root meaning is to craft, make, or build. Be it a ship, wheel, or play, to ‘wright’ something requires great practice, effort, and skill.

In the following pages we highlight methods and origins of playwriting in our province. We are fortunate to glimpse the processes of two very talented theatre creators in our newest regular feature, Follies: acclaimed improviser/creator Rebecca Norhan and Governor General’s Award nominated playwright Meg Braem. Our Technical Editor Scott Peters takes us stagecraft troubleshooting on a challenging new script in production. Offering some insightful counsel on adaptation is Theatre Calgary’s Shari Watling. Drama Professor Robin Whittaker pulls back the curtain on Alberta’s history of new play development in ‘nonprofessionalized’ theatres. We turn the tables and have Calgary actor Braden Griffths give us his perspective on the workshop process. Drama Teacher Pamela Schmunk takes us to school on the playwriting component of the Senior High curriculum. Playwright and Concrete Theatre Co-Artistic Director Mieko Ouchi gives us her opinion on the potential of theatre for young audiences as a social catalyst. We are proud to share excerpts of the winning plays from the 2013 Alberta Playwriting Competition by Katherine Koller and Ryan Reese in our Sides feature.

I want to humbly thank my new colleagues at Theatre Alberta for their sage advice and constant support in the process of bringing this, my first, issue to print. It would not have been possible without them. AS

FRAZER ANDREWS
EDITOR
Recent Releases

Lost A Memoir
Cathy Ostlere and Dennis Garnhum

Jail Baby
Hope McIntyre and Cairn Moore

Jim Forgetting
Col Cseke

Miss Caledonia
Melody A. Johnson

Café Daughter
Kenneth T. Williams

Jake’s Gift
Julia Mackey

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COMMUNITY PROFILE

Kristjanna Grimmelt, Co-playwright, Grande Prairie Century Play

Kristjanna Grimmelt is a writer, educator, and the former editor of the Peace River Gazette. She is researcher and co-playwright of the Grande Prairie Century Play, a community play which has been in development since June 2012 to celebrate the centennial of the City of Grande Prairie, in 2014.

The concept of the community play was developed by the Colway Theatre Trust (UK). The process involves using a core group of artists to help develop, create, and produce a play with community members, drawing from the history of area. The Grande Prairie Century Play will be performed June 12-15, 2014 at Muskoseepi Park in Grande Prairie.

We had such a great discussion with Kristjanna that we expanded Community Profile for this issue of All Stages... and we still weren't able to capture the entire conversation. To read the full interview, visit www.theatrealberta.com/all-stages.

The play is set to encompass 100 years of history: can you comment on the challenges of selecting significant historical details and finding a narrative that links them together?

Choosing which events to include is a process of determining which are most impactful in our area’s history, such as the natural human and environmental tensions created by the evolution of our primary economic base: from farming to forestry to oil and gas development. We also looked at stories we heard from residents and tried to weave in different historical events, such as destitute men who came to Grande Prairie during the Great Depression and attended a homestead party.

As for the narrative threads, we are still finding ways to weave our acts together. We do have one family that carries through our first and third acts—starting with an Aboriginal woman who falls in love with an American homesteader after the First World War. We’re also weaving small details into each act that connect with characters at another time in history.

The community play model is a two-year process. How has it been seeing the project evolve from the ground up?

Personally, it’s been a huge commitment to the project and to the Grande Prairie area. I had only been here a year when I agreed to contribute, first as a researcher and then as co-playwright with Catherine McLaughlin. Sometimes I marvel at how long I’ve been involved and how well I’ve come to know this community. I’m also seeing the project emerge from the heart and mind of our Artistic Director, Annie Smith. This has become a huge collective project that new people of all ages are getting involved in. I’m seeing the strengthening of art, theatre, and community in an area that is still very new itself.

The Century Play has held a series of public readings of different acts of the script. How has the public reaction influenced the production?

Our public readings have been extremely valuable and rewarding. Annie, our Artistic Director, organized a team of amazing volunteer actors to read each Act. They and the audience members then gave us detailed feedback on what they felt was working or not working. The feedback has led to significant revisions and additions to the script.

Given your background in journalism, how have you found tackling the playwriting process (on such a grand(e) scale)?

I do think my work in journalism taught me lessons that every writer needs: that accuracy, thoroughness, and timeliness are critical no matter what the genre. I felt extremely fulfilled when I worked as a journalist and I think that’s because I was doing what I loved (writing), completing projects that had meaning for people, and was constantly challenging myself and my beliefs. These are very important things to any writer, I believe, and show us what we’re capable of. I try to apply all that I learned to the way I approach the interviews, the playwriting, and the community outreach in this project.

We have launched our 2nd annual “Gift A Play” donation campaign for Theatre Alberta’s Library. Visit www.theatrealberta.com/gift-a-play to learn about the campaign and browse our wish list on Amazon.ca. Gift certificates would be great, too! We hope you’ll agree that it’s a unique way to give this holiday season, with tremendous impact on our organization’s most valuable resource.

‘Tis the Season...
to gift a play to Theatre Alberta for Christmas...
Back in 2003, toward the end of my term as Artistic Director of Walterdale Theatre Associates in Edmonton, I found myself in what would be one of the last of so many remarkable conversations with the late Wendi Pope, then Walterdale’s president. Wendi confirmed something we had both been thinking for some time, something that I will never forget: We expect our theatre volunteers to conduct themselves as professionals would. We knew from personal experience that nonprofessionalizing theatres—by which I mean theatres that reject the notion of becoming a professional company—require self-discipline in order to accomplish their goals.

Still, nonprofessionalizing companies are often seen in a limited view. For many they are, at best, pre-professional in both chronology and intention. In Canada, the common view is that their cultural importance faded with the ascendancy of the professional Canadian Actors’ Equity Association (CAEA) and the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) in the 1970s. This view is frequently articulated by embedding it within the cultural maturation myth that holds that Canada grew from infancy to adolescence before the wars, to adulthood at its Centennial, after which it came into its own apart from its British parent and its American cousin. In lockstep with this narrative, Canadian theatre grew from backwoods amateur practices to professional practices.

In my 2008 book, *Hot Thespian Action: Ten Premiere Plays from Walterdale Playhouse*, I argued that neither professional nor nonprofessionalized accreditation solely define the value of a new play. This was true in cities and towns through the mid-twentieth century that boasted writing talent, but no professional venues willing to take a chance on presenting their work; and it is true even in today’s urban centres that boast professional companies dedicated to new play development. Here, I briefly trace the development of new play production at early amateur theatres in Alberta in order to give a sense of the challenges, innovations, and creations that have nurtured the field before and during the onset of the ‘professional’ era.

In Alberta, as was the case across Canada, new play production began with the spread of ideas associated with the Little Theatre Movement in the 1920s and 1930s. The popular plays premiered by European theatre companies like André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre (1887-96) in Paris, Jacob Grein’s Independent Theatre (1891-97) in London, and W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory’s Abbey Theatre (1904-present) in Dublin were carried into Canada by civic-minded immigrants who found that they could address the challenges created by the scattered population of rural, prairie, and small-town Canada by bringing people together, indoors, with theatre. The small-theatre, naturalist aesthetics of these groups, coupled with a focus on the community rather than the commercial, found voice and practice in hundreds of amateur theatres across Canada that produced plays developed by those European companies—plays by Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, Pinero, Hardy, James, Yeats, O’Casey, and Synge. New Canadians hoped to inspire a homegrown dramaturgy by playing their favoured European fare.
Sterling Haynes while she was in Toronto and she in turn introduced new play production to Alberta, slowly but broadly, after she moved to the province in 1922.

In 1929, University of Alberta president Dr. Robert C. Wallace proposed creating the Edmonton Little Theatre (1929-45) after Birmingham Repertory Theatre (UK) founder Sir Barry Jackson visited the city on a Canadian tour speaking about the virtues of Little Theatres. Haynes became the group’s first director. Among productions of plays by Shakespeare and more contemporary British and American playwrights were Canadian plays, including several by Edmontonian Elsie Park Gowan and winners of the group’s local playwriting contest.

It was the founding of the Banff School of Theatre by Haynes and E. A. Corbett in 1933 that introduced the new play development aspects of the Little Theatre philosophy to the rest of Alberta; and it was CKUA Radio during the 1930s that gave Alberta playwrights their greatest venue to be heard across the province and, for a time, the country. As with Hart House Theatre, the Banff School produced at least one new play by a Canadian writer nearly every year, including Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Minnie Bicknell. Frederick Koch, former head of the Department of Dramatic Art at the University North Carolina, came to Banff in 1937 joining faculty members Elsie Park Gowan, Haynes, and Ringwood. Koch led the school’s playwrights in the creation of folk plays (produced at Banff) that reflected the land and the trials of those who lived on it.

University of Saskatchewan professor Moira Day notes that pursuant to a “holistic” approach, the Banff School taught “theatre history, directing, stagecraft, and production labs,” and that “between 1933 and 1952, over forty one-act Canadian plays, many of them premières, were presented as readings, workshops, or finished productions” at the Banff School. But after 1952, Banff almost entirely stopped producing new Canadian work for more than a decade in favour of classical and then modern established works, thus aligning it more closely with the new (then-titled) Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada (1953-present) and the emerging “regional theatres” in Alberta, out of about 350 English-language community theatres across the country that are listed as members of their provinces’ respective theatre associations. Similar to many professional theatres, most of these nonprofessionalizing companies do not produce new works with any frequency. But there are champions, particularly the country’s longest running companies that include Walterdale Theatre Associates, Toronto’s Alumnae Theatre Company (1918-present), and Ottawa Little Theatre (1913-present), that do produce new works every year.

It was not until 1961 when the Edmonton (now Walterdale) Theatre Associates (1958-present)—after three years of producing popular melodramas, musicals, and sure-fire hits by Agatha Christie and G. B. Shaw—premiered Mary Baldridge’s twenty-minute one-act Is This A Friendly Visit? that a theatre company in the province turned its attention back to new play production. Following Baldridge’s play were premieres by Jack McCreath, George Ryga, and several plays by Wilfred Watson and modern melodrama specialist Warren Graves.

Even after the professional theatres emerged across the province (and across the country) in the 1970s, and as the Edmonton International Fringe Festival (1982-present) began to spawn dozens of new companies, Walterdale remained as a distinct nonprofessionalized producer of new plays.

Today there are more than 80 “community theatres” in Alberta, out of about 350 English-language community theatres across the country that are listed as members of their provinces’ respective theatre associations. Similar to many professional theatres, most of these nonprofessionalizing companies do not produce new works with any frequency. But there are champions, particularly the country’s longest running companies that include Walterdale Theatre Associates, Toronto’s Alumnae Theatre Company (1918-present), and Ottawa Little Theatre (1913-present), that do produce new works every year.

Further Reading


Former Artistic Director of Walterdale Theatre Associates, author of articles on several Canadian nonprofessionalizing theatre companies, and editor of Hot Thespian Action! Ten Premiere Plays from Walterdale Playhouse, Robin C. Whittaker is a playwright, director, dramaturg, and editor of STU Reviews (@stu_reviews). He is Assistant Professor of Drama at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, NB.
I'm an actor by trade but sometimes I just need to build a table. I buy some wood and screws; I cut, sand, and paint. Upon table completion I'll take an object, a cup or a decorative gourd, put it on top of that table and say, “Look at that, I built that thing.” Nobody applauds for my table but I nonetheless take great pride in what I have achieved. I have built something that will keep things off the floor at slightly higher than waist level, and that achievement exists physically in the room with me.

A theatrical performance occurs uniquely, organically—in the moment—instantly. The exchange of energy between audience and performer is different every night. The risk of error is always present, riding tandem, with the opportunity for spontaneous and singular discovery. I feel ludicrously blessed to make my living in front of an audience. However, I do feel a sense of mourning when a performance ends because there’s no longer anything that I can point to and say, “Look at that, I built that.”

That’s why I love building tables. It’s also why I love to workshop new plays.

There’s a freedom in a play development workshop that does not exist in the rehearsal process. In rehearsals, we perpetually fight the clock. Opening night is hurtling toward us, like a meteor, and every aspect of the production must ‘click’ before it hits. A workshop is different. In a workshop, the audience is still a distant and abstract concept. The script is placed centre stage for the audience of artists assembled to workshop the piece.

My involvement in workshops can be broken down into two categories: script and creation. The script workshop focuses directly on the playwright and the play being written. The creation workshop involves a much broader range of production topics: movement, design, staging, as well as script. Every element of the production is considered and the play is usually formed on its feet.

In a script workshop, the actor’s job is to give voice to a character. Often this is the first time the playwright hears the character aloud—in conversation, in context. At some point in this process, the writer must take a leap of faith entrusting their character to the actor. The script workshop is a safe place to take that first leap. Questions are asked. Changes are made. The workshop actor becomes the cartographer of a character’s motivations; the writer gets to observe the actor’s discovery, the charting of peaks and valleys in the world of the play. As an actor, I might perfectly understand every moment of the character’s arc, or I might get endlessly lost and not understand a word the character is saying or (perhaps more importantly) why they are saying it. Either way, I hope the information I provide will be valuable to the playwright as they work towards the next draft.

In a creation workshop, what the actor brings into the room can have a more direct effect on the piece being built. The broader my skill set is as a performer, the better equipped I am to assist in the creation of the piece. For example, if the performance uses mask my improvisations could become part of the final script. If the story is told through movement the physical score that I offer might be tattooed upon the production’s choreography. In a creation workshop the actor can become the playwright; at times I may be placed behind a keyboard to write. The actor’s work becomes brick and mortar in the foundation of the script being built.

In either the script or creation workshop, I am left with a tangible sense of accomplishment that differs greatly from the accomplishment felt as a production closes. I may not be the one who places the first decorative gourd atop what I’ve helped to create; I may not be the first actor cast in a new production. Regardless, I will always be able to look at the piece being produced or published and say, “Look at that, I helped build that.”

Braden Griffiths is an actor based in Calgary. Perpetually workshopping something, he has co-written/created three productions with The Downstage Creation Ensemble: Bus(t), In the Wake, and Good Fences, all three of which were nominated for a Betty Mitchell Award for Outstanding New Play. His next play, My Family and Other Endangered Species, written with Ellen Close, will premiere with Downstage in Calgary, April 2014.
BY SHARI WATTLING

Adaptation. The very word suggests a process of change, an evolution: the idea that a specific environment and set of circumstances can bring forth a new form.

As dramaturg on a wide variety of adapted works at Theatre Calgary I have often been asked the question, “What makes a great adaptation?” I sincerely don’t mean to be glib when I often answer with the question in return, “What makes a great play?” I don’t profess to have any specific guidelines on the subject but one: the key to a great adaptation is in being original.

The more I work on adaptations, the more I recognize that there are no hard and fast rules about what makes great source material. I can only suggest that it’s less about the nature of the material being adapted, and more about an inspired idea and a specific perspective brought by the adaptor to the original work. I’ve enjoyed adaptations of narrative fiction, non-fiction, poetry, song-cycles, and collected short stories. Shakespeare adapted his work from a wide variety of pre-existing sources—classic plays, epic poems, and scholastic histories. Sure, it’s handy when there’s already dialogue and narrative structure to build from, but can you imagine if the Bard hadn’t added his own remarkable imagination and dialogue to his adaptations? It’s funny when I think of how many versions exist of Shakespeare’s Romeo & Juliet, and yet it is rarely mentioned that his play was an adaptation itself! We forget because he brought something to his adaptation that was invaluable to the process – himself.

I’m not suggesting that we blithely disregard an original author’s voice and intentions. Heavens no! I believe it’s tremendously important to honour the source and invest in a full exploration during the development process. I would never suggest an adaptor should presume to be smarter, or more clever, than the author they are adapting or the audience they are serving. In fact, I hope that the act of adaptation is fed by a longing to share an essential passion for the work with the audience and represent it with the deepest regard.

But here’s the thing – I also firmly believe it’s crucial to actually adapt and transform the work for the stage by shaping our perspective in a new way. As an adaptor, you must be bold enough to frame your lens on the source material in a manner that illuminates how the work connects with you – that reveals your interpretation as well as asks your questions. The very nature of changing the relationship of the audience from reader to witness irrevocably alters their experience already. So why not take it further and make the experience inventive and surprising. Let’s face it: some characters and sub-plots may not make the journey. Some beautiful words will probably be left behind. What may be magic for a reader may not work well on a stage, or fit within your theatrical vision. There will be at least one difficult parting when it’s time to let go of a beloved section of the original that no longer fits in your play. And this is okay because that section still exists and anyone can find it. It’s just not part of what you need to tell your version on the stage.

Whenever I read an adaptation, or work with a playwright during an adaptation process, I often ask, “What are you personally saying to me through this story?” My second question is usually, “What opportunity does the stage offer this story that nothing else can?” The funny thing is these are exactly the same questions I often ask about original plays.

I know that adapting text for the stage is a challenge that can’t easily be simplified or summarized. It’s a complex balance that, like most theatre-making, often doesn’t fully reveal itself until there’s an audience to participate in the act. I know one thing for certain: as theatre artists, we are fearless pioneers of new expressions and experiences. So let’s continue that exploration with the work we adapt as well.

Shari Wattling is the Artistic Associate, New Play Development, at Theatre Calgary. Recent credits at Theatre Calgary include production and development dramaturgy for Pride & Prejudice, Lost – A Memoir, Much Ado About Nothing, Tosca Café, Jake and the Kid, Beyond Eden, and their most recent adaptation of A Christmas Carol. Prior to joining Theatre Calgary, Shari was Resident Dramaturg at Alberta Playwrights’ Network.

Shari Wattling.
Supplied.
BY KATHERINE KOLLER

Last Chance Leduc was presented at the Alberta Playwrights' Network Calgary Reading Series in 2012, and excerpts were read as part of Peep Show at the 2013 SkirtsAfire Festival in Edmonton. As the Grand Prize winner of the 2013 Alberta Playwriting Competition, the play received a staged reading at PlayWorks Ink 2013 at The Banff Centre.

Set during the 1947 Leduc oil strike, Evalma and Wes struggle in the push-pull of a young marriage in peril, in winter, in a tarpaper shack with a baby, and another dry well. While Wes works all day and all night, Ev meets a lady trapper in the woods, Nohkom, who shows her the power of the river in the difficult landscape of marriage.

Wes has just struck oil, Ev’s been chasing through the bush with her sick baby, looking for Nohkom.

EVALMA helps WES take off his coveralls, and washes his face in the following.

EVALMA On the farm, the men tend their water wells better than their wives. And the wives bear it, they understand. Because the well is the lifeblood of the farm. Without it, there would be no life, no love left in the man.

WES It’s all for you, Ev.

Pause.

EVALMA I felt it in the night. Just before it started snowing.

WES Could you hear it?

EVALMA In my mind I heard it. I heard you, whooping with the guys.

WES We had to cap it off. They want to do a big show when we bring it in, let her gush and roar for the press and public and the government of Alberta. And the radio stations, too.

EVALMA Can I come, too?

WES I’d be proud if you did, you and Sal.

EVALMA I wouldn’t miss it for anything.

WES I’ll dig you a garden. For the land in you.

Pause.

EVALMA Does George say it’s really a field?

WES Big as an ocean. Wide as the sea.

EVALMA And you found it.

WES I found something for you today.

EVALMA You got a well! We got a field! Come to bed.

WES It’s for our bed.

EVALMA Hurry, let’s get warm.

WES This will warm us every night.

EVALMA What is it?

WES takes her hand, leads EV outside to the wolf pelt.

WES After I saw the smoke from our shack, and I knew you were home and safe, I found it, abandoned, in the bush. Like it was waiting for me. Feel it. Wild energy.

EVALMA Oh, no! No. No!

WES Look how white and thick.

EVALMA You can’t!

WES Why not?

EVALMA Koona looked at me, with her sad, lonely eyes! Because of me, because of our baby, Nohkom shot and killed her friend!

WES It attacked you?

EVALMA Taking it is like taking her name or her knife! Koona is hers!

WES Why would she leave it in the woods?

EVALMA She brought me cup after cup of tea and made me feed Sally over and over again, waiting for the fever to lift, waiting for the snow to stop, waiting for your well, waiting for you!

EVALMA goes in, to bed, with Sally, and closes the curtain. Suddenly, the radio comes back on, startling WES.

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Katherine Koller is based in Edmonton and writes for radio, stage, and screen. She teaches in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. Information on Katherine’s projects can be found at www.katherinekoller.com.
EXCERPT FROM
ASCENDING THE BLUE

BY RYAN REESE

Ascending the Blue was a finalist in the University of Lethbridge’s 2013 Striking Plays and Prose Competition and won the Discovery Prize in the 2013 Alberta Playwriting Competition.

Ascending the Blue was inspired by the 60,000 Canadians who fought for the North during the American Civil War. In the opening scene, Major Moses Smith illustrates his first impressions of Canada and meets Pascal Dubé, a young French Canadian volunteer.

A forest at dawn. SMITH stands amongst the trees smoking a cigar. He speaks to the audience.

SMITH On the way up here I was told two things... The people up here are very friendly and most hospitable. They have been so goddamn cheery since 1812 that literally anyone is welcomed with open arms... And what do you friendly folks do the minute I hop off the wagon? Set me up in a shack that, for all I know, was used as a shit hole right until the second I got here.

Pause.

Morning. My name is Major Moses Smith. Don’t let the name fool you. I am not religious and I am not here to lead you to salvation... Quite the contrary really. I am here to lead you to hell. Hell exists boys. It’s about a few hundred miles that way. South, if you might have guessed. Those of you who can quote the bible from cover to cover might have a vivid image of what hell might be like. I can tell you in all honesty that the description in that shit brick they call a holy book is strikingly accurate. There’s smoke, fire, blood and suffering. But it is not an eternal suffering. Once you die out there that’s it... Then you are of no use to anyone.

He stamps out his cigar.

My job is to instruct you so that you can inflict the maximum amount damage upon the enemy before you are killed. Oh... You will be killed, in case any of you were still entertaining the notion that you’ll make it out without so much as a goose egg. For a service rate of three hundred dollars a man don’t be expecting to lay down cover for my skirmishers and myself. You will be the first ones in and the last ones out... Every time. As far as I am concerned your sole purpose is to waste the enemy’s ammunition. You will not see a cent of that three hundred until the war is over and the rebels are runnin’ with their tails tucked. Understood? Now... For those of you who think they have what it takes to rise above statistics, this is lesson one...

He takes a branch from the forest floor.

Think small. The trees that grow here are about five times the width of those where you’re headed. I would give both my legs to be able to fight here. With all this wonderful cover I could take on a whole dispatch of Greys myself I’d wager. It’d be a goddamn turkey shoot you can be sure of that. You know what happens to a man who takes cover from cannon fire in a forest down where you’re goin?

He breaks the stick in half. Then he proceeds to break the halves in two. He repeats this process slowly, over and over again.

I’ll let your imaginations fill in the rest. Questions? Good. I suggest heading straight to your bedrolls once you are dismissed. Starting tomorrow morning at four you’re mine for sixteen hours, with one break to piss or change your socks... Not both.

He turns to leave.

Ah... Before you go... Any frenchies here?

Pause.

SMITH You stay in front of me at all times.

SMITH walks into the forest. PASCAL stands, unsure of what to do. A whistle blasts. PASCAL comes about left face.

PASCAL Oui... Yes! Me... [Yes]

SMITH Ah ouais? [Ah yes?]

SMITH slowly walks towards PASCAL.

PASCAL Pascal.

SMITH Pascal... Que? [Pascal... What?]

PASCAL Pascal Dubé.

SMITH Pascal Dubé... Savez-vous que le cote le combat français pour? D’où je viens... Moi? [Pascal Dubé... Do you know which side the French fight for? Where I am from?]

PASCAL does not know how to respond. SMITH’s French is quite poor.

SMITH You stay in front of me at all times.

SMITH walks into the forest. PASCAL stands, unsure of what to do. A whistle blasts. PASCAL comes about left face. AS

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Ryan Reese.

Supplied.

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Ryan Reese is an emerging theatre artist based in Calgary and a recent University of Lethbridge graduate. He was Co-Artistic Director of the University’s student run company, TheatreXtra, where he created the TheatreXtra Series of New Student Work, which highlighted student written plays with staged readings. Ryan’s upcoming projects include working on a new play and writing and creating a web series.
In recent issues of All Stages, we’ve featured a pair of articles, opposite one another on the page, with different perspectives on a single theme. In our Spring 2013 issue we contrasted classical and contemporary training methods for actors; in our Fall 2013 issue we had two designers advocate for the use of traditional drafting techniques versus digital modelling. We like this concept so much we’ve decided to make it a regular feature. Welcome to Foils: a continuing dialogue on creating, growing, and appreciating theatre in Alberta.

In our first official installment we have two unique perspectives on play creation. Meg Braem takes us through her playwriting process: from inspiration, into edits, drafts, and workshops; while Rebecca Norhan shares how her interactive and improv based shows are created. We realize that these two Foils are not the only ways that one can create new work... in fact we want your perspective on how to make a play. What’s your writing process? What do you do differently? Offer your Foil at www.theatrealberta.com/all-stages, and we will publish it online and share on social media.

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HEAT

Illuminating a Playwright’s Process

BY MEG BRAEM

All writing comes from impulse, all art for that matter. I’ve heard many explanations but my favourite is that our impulses come from a tiny flame lit inside us.

I once spent seven hours crammed into a corner of my basement holding a flashlight so that a repairman could take apart the furnace piece by piece. It was the dead of winter and I had arrived home from Christmas vacation to find a house so cold that I could see my breath, with pipes threatening to freeze. After a night shivering under every blanket in the house and later with knees stiff from crouching so the flashlight would shine at just the right angle, it finally happened... the pilot light ignited. As I watched the little blue flame dance around I knew everything would be all right... because there would be heat. This little blue light, this heat, is the very first part of the writing process.

I don’t usually sit down in the beginning; in the beginning I don’t even know I’m writing. When the impulse is strong enough for me to notice, I listen. That’s what playwriting is... listening. I listen to the thing that is rising from the pilot light. Sometimes it’s just warmth (a word, a phrase), sometimes it’s hot (a character, a situation), and sometimes it burns (an idea, an opinion, or something bothering me). That’s when I start to write... oh, and it never goes well. It’s a painstaking thing to try and translate. How do you write out what a little blue flame says? In words? So I sit at my desk and listen. Whatever it says, I write. I write and write. It all goes in there. It takes forever. I do normal things but am only half there because somewhere a part of me is listening to the little blue flame. I take a lot of naps, I try and surrender to it. Then when it’s time to take a breath I surface and decide that this part is done.

Next... this is the brutal part, this is the part where I used to quit... this is when I take a step back, look at the words alone, away from the blue light, like a normal human being would, and they are always, always, a mess. What felt real, right, and from the gut has spilled itself on the page in an effluent of raw words and unclear thoughts (nothing is spelled right either but that’s too superficial to care about at this stage). This moment is... what’s the word? Oh yeah, horrifying. I take a breath, remind myself to sit in the discomfort, Namaste, seek the Buddha, whatever... have a glass of wine. Sometimes I walk away for weeks before I start the next step: rewriting.

The thing is, for me, this is when I start to enjoy myself. When I get to sit down again and have a conversation with my impulse. Instead of the lecture it gave me in the first draft, we start to have a conversation. I talk to the little blue flame, “So what you mean is? So the best way to say that is?” I feel more like a participant in my own writing. This is when things like structure help. There are a series of drafts, each one slowly revealing the story. Here’s another way I’ve heard it said: the first draft is making the clay; the rewrites are sculpting that gray mass of hell into something recognizable.

The next step is the outside eye. An outside eye can be very, very helpful. Really they should be called an outside ear because if they’re good, they listen. They listen through all the things I am trying to do and they tell me what they hear... and it’s the little blue flame who has been sidelined while I pay attention to other things. So in the best workshop situations we all work—the actors, the dramaturg, and myself—to listen to that little blue flame once again. And I write another draft. And we get together and read. It’s closer. I write another draft. And at some point it’s done... because it’s clear. The workshop actors and I know that we have done it, we have translated what the little blue flame wanted. We feel satisfied because it feels satisfied. That’s clear.

Meg Braem’s plays have won numerous awards including the Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama, The Alberta Playwriting Competition, The Playwrights Guild of Canada University Competition, Best of Victoria Fringe, Victoria Critic’s Choice Award, and Intrepid Theatre’s Petri Dish Play competition. Her play Blood: A Scientific Romance was published by Playwrights Canada Press and has been nominated for the 2013 Governor’s General Literary Award in Drama. Meg’s newest play EXIA recently premiered at the University of Lethbridge.
I’m not sure if what I do is playwriting or play creation—or perhaps something else altogether. In any case, I’m not a huge fan of labels or pigeonholes, though I will reluctantly concede they have some value on occasion. I have been told straight-faced by several colleagues that what I do ‘isn’t theatre.’ When I pressed for a definition of theatre, again in all seriousness, I was offered the following: “You know. Theatre is the well-written, well-rehearsed play.” This strikes me as so narrow a definition it would exclude the majority of Canadian theatre companies from actually doing any theatre. I have also been told by several improvisers, “You’re not improvising: there is a structure to your show(s).” As though in the practice of ‘pure’ improvisation there is no adherence to narrative form. Or, if you’re one of those improvisers who prizes the spontaneous joke over things like story, character, and dramatic action, that there is no structure to a good joke. I am quite happy to fall between these two extremes.

So I follow the impulse. I say ‘yes’ to some vague notion that bubbles up. I develop a theatrical hypothesis then devise a structure for the experiment. I gather my favourite actor/improvisers and we have a go at it. We sort things out on our feet, in front of an audience, because a goodly portion of the knowledge is out there in the crowd. We refine, we polish, and we leave room for spontaneity. I believe the best idea is in the room but it doesn’t necessarily have to come from me. Great discoveries get scripted, but they can be shaken up or thrown out if they get stale. Is this a ‘New School’ approach? I don’t know. I remember doing something similar in my backyard as a kid: “Say that I’m a princess and you find me sleeping under a tree…” Haven’t we all played this way?

I’m told that it’s unusual that I am so deeply tangled up in the branding of my work, but I don’t see how it could be otherwise. I love writing press releases—no one else knows the show better than I do. I insist on collaborating on photo shoots and poster designs because marketing is directly related to ticket sales and paying my rent. I see myself as a businessperson and an entrepreneur. I want to do it all.

Recently my artistic partners Bruce Horak, Jamie Northan, and I have been toying with calling what we do Spontaneous Action Theatre: Spontaneous for the improv, Action for the engagement with the audience, and Theatre for the structure and partial scripting. Ugh. Labels. Still it has been useful to ask, “What defines our work?” I blush to admit that at the core of what’s really working for us are strong Clown elements. Bless you Mike Kennard & John Turner! With Clown there’s a conversation between the onstage characters and the audience, which can either be actual words exchanged or a simple acknowledgement of their presence. Either way, there’s no lying about the situation, no pretending there’s a fourth wall. There’s also an invitation for the audience to open their hearts—which is extended by the performer doing it first—with a sense of vulnerability, courage, and playfulness. Nothing pleases us more than getting an immediate response from the audience. I wonder if this speaks to some very young part of each of us who wanted desperately for our favourite storybook characters to talk back or to invite us into that Fantasy World to play?

At the end of the day, what marvels me is audience coming back to see a show four or five times! (I take them aside and kindly tell them to stop coming.) But there does seem to be a hunger for this pure form of dramatic action: watching an audience member be invited onstage—nervous and hesitant—then seeing them transform before our eyes into the Hero that they truly are. That’s a story worth telling, and I’m humbled each time it happens.

Rebecca Northan is an actor, writer, director, producer, improviser, and currently the playwright in residence at Alberta Theatre Projects—which means she’s often very tired but very satisfied. She collaborates with a core group of artists that include Bruce Horak, her brother Jamie Northan, and Renee Amber—all Loose Moose alumni. She co-wrote and directed Horak’s This Is Cancer, and continues touring her own show Blind Date. She also wrote Kung Fu Panties, and is currently workshopping Legend Has It for Alberta Theatre Projects’ Enbridge playRites Festival 2014.
Blood: A Scientific Romance
by Meg Braem

Finalist for the 2013 Governor General’s Literary Award for Drama and winner of the 2011 Gwen Pharis Ringwood Award for Drama.

Do relationships take on new meaning when they begin to shape not only our experiences, but our biology? And do we, in fact, complete one another?
Facilitating Playwriting in the Alberta High School Curriculum

BY PAMELA SCHMUNK

Confession time: as a Drama teacher, I puzzle yearly over how to facilitate the playwriting process for high school students.¹ I am a writer myself, but for me writing is a solitary endeavor. I am aware that most Drama students don’t come into my high school program believing they can write and perform their own creative work. Right now, my high school Drama classes have International Baccalaureate (IB) students learning alongside Literacy (with low to average abilities), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Special Needs students. So given the spread in reading ability and—let’s be honest—the motivation to write (or lack there of), is it even possible to properly facilitate playwriting in the classroom?

The short answer is yes… but I’ve learned that it’s up to me to create the necessary culture. If I blindly chase the playwriting curriculum objectives with a Drama 20 class, for example, it’s a good bet that I will end up with a class set of mediocre skits: filled with teen angst and populated by underdeveloped characters looking for an excuse to use bad words. I respect the craft of playwriting far too much to convey to my students that this kind of work is acceptable. That said, I do believe that even a 15-year-old can write and perform his or her own work. So I must meet kids where they are.

Early on in my teaching career, I created a step-by-step collaborative murder mystery building process modeled on a then popular board game. The results were… uhm, just okay. In my heart of teaching hearts, I knew that my efforts were inadequate. I had a handful of passionate and promising teen playwrights who needed more than I could offer. In frustration, I bankrolled several students’ tuition to the Citadel Theatre’s Teens @ The Turn playwriting program. Later, during my post-graduate work at the University of Alberta, I studied new works dramaturgy, among other things. I returned to teaching with knowledge and a new set of tools to utilize, but I faced several unexpected challenges: classes with mixed ability groupings, large class sizes, and a range of ethnic backgrounds. There could be no assumptions about a shared cultural understanding of narrative, character, or theatrical style. No more lesson plans that ticked off the curriculum’s playwriting objectives. I realized that I needed to approach playwriting with a less rigid conception of the final product and begin by finding ways to help each student find his or her authentic voice.

In Drama 10, students write and perform Character Scales,² which can be very challenging for those in the Literacy stream. These students need extra support, but when they take their work all the way to performance it is a sweet victory. I’ve even approached Playwriting without writing at all. For their clowning unit, Drama 10 students develop a duet clown turn with contrasting Joey and August characters, a clear conflict, and sustained objectives.

These days I revisit playwriting in Drama 20, 30, and Theatre IB. With the senior students, I try to link playwriting to other strands of the curriculum: theatre history, unfamiliar theatre styles, or notable theatre practitioners. In Drama 20 and Drama 20IB, I

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¹ Alberta’s Senior High Drama curriculum (1984) requires that Drama 20 students demonstrate understanding of a play’s basic structure, recognize character types and functions, construct a conflict, and follow script format. Through creation of a conflict between two characters (i.e. antagonist and protagonist), the student is expected to explore plot, character, thought, and diction.

² A Character Scale, developed by Robyn Shewchuck, is a cycle of five short student written monologues performed in succession: a child, famous person, vocal characteristic, fear/phobia, and extreme emotion, with the last word of one monologue being the first word of the next.
we focus on non-realmism. We might start with an over-arching theme. Students write haiku in present tense focusing on a specific conflict. The student’s haiku becomes his or her opening offer to the ensemble. Each haiku soloist then asks for support from the ensemble: becoming other characters, absorbing or echoing lines, creating tableaux or slow motion sequences, or generating ambient noise to create environment.

In Drama 30 and Drama 30IB, we might study politicized theatre like Anna Deveare Smith’s postmodern Twilight: Los Angeles (1991). We familiarize ourselves with her interview methodology and explore Brechtian acting techniques. Deveare Smith believes that in times of crisis, people find ways to talk about what’s uppermost in their minds. So we agree on an overarching idea: “The Day My Life Changed.” Students become actor-researchers interviewing others to gather personal, significant stories to perform verbatim.

Mentoring Theatre IB students also affects my pedagogy. The curriculum compels me to experiment with non-text playwriting stimuli: music, visual art, fables, and photographs. Most days, this scares me. I have little to no control over what these students do with their chosen inspirations. The whole playwriting process is creatively messy and much less linear.

This much I know is true: even a well-intentioned teacher covering the Alberta Drama Curriculum’s Playwriting objectives is not guaranteed student creativity. I regret my early slavish adherence to the objectives. My poor students, did I limit their sense of what was possible?

I believe that a student-playwright is ideally mentored by a working playwright or dramaturg: sustained, patient, and provocative mentorship is the best teaching model for a young playwright. This leaves me—the well-intentioned high school Drama Teacher—divinely discontent but operating on faith. I am obligated to expose Drama students to new plays, theatre disciplines, and practitioners, and I can only hope that these ignite the imaginations of young playwrights in my charge.

Pamela Schmunk is an Edmonton Public School Board Drama teacher, who studied at the Universities of Saskatchewan and Alberta. She has been known to act, direct, and dramaturg outside of the high school context for the Edmonton Fringe, Nextfest, and Promise Productions. Pam is blessed to count many former students among her friends.

BY SCOTT PETERS

Robert Picton. That name is the inspiration of Colleen Murphy’s new play, Pig Girl, which had its world premiere at Theatre Network in November. A visceral and brutally honest look at the mass murders Picton committed in British Columbia, the script for Pig Girl is not only controversial but also fraught with technical challenges. As I write this article, I am, as the Production Manager of Theatre Network, trying to troubleshoot these issues.

I asked Colleen why she wrote the play. “In 2010, when I heard that the Judge, after convicting a pig farmer in Port Coquitlam in the death of six of the murdered women from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, had decided not to proceed with trials for the other twenty women, I got so angry I wrote Pig Girl in a kind of sustained fury. I felt like the dead women were being silenced once again. It is often said that writers talk to the dead but a writer can also use their imagination to let the dead talk. I imagined a woman in this horrible situation and imagined that she fought for her life like a gladiator in the Roman arena and that she was, despite her death, heroic.”

One aspect of the play takes place in real time in front of the audience: the murder of our hero. The murderer eventually hangs
her on a meat hook suspended from the ceiling, and we watch her struggle more than 40 minutes while he hoists her higher and finally kills her, all within a few feet of the audience.

Easy, one might think: put her in a full body harness, add some theatre effects, and we’re good. Except that she is dressed in a mini skirt and tank top, has to bleed profusely, and it’s unsafe to have an actor suspended in a harness for longer than fifteen minutes.

I asked Colleen if she considered any of the technical issues as she wrote Pig Girl. “Yes, I knew the harness and pulley would be challenging. That said, I did not think through the physical dangers of having an actress in a harness for 45 minutes of the show. That is not doable so I have changed it…and that technical change has actually given the piece more dramatic strength.”

As for hiding the harness, set and costume designer Cory Sincennes explains it like this: “The difficulty of this production lies in the flying effect. It is an effect that is not highly theatrical, so its success is dependent on the realism we can achieve. This challenge is then made more difficult by the desired and necessary costuming. Unlike other productions where large costumes or full body coverage covers the harness, in Pig Girl the effect needs to be achieved with as minimal skin coverage as possible. To solve this, the costume was built around the harness, allowing the lines and straps to dictate the final shape. The addition of stage blood and costume breakdown helped to hide the mechanics needed to make the effect work. Our hope is that the final effect is highly realistic so the audience becomes engrossed in the story, rather than thinking about how the effect was achieved.”

Colleen Murphy is also a filmmaker and is going to film not only the performance of Pig Girl, but also the audiences’ reactions as they watch, and their opinions after seeing it. “My late husband, Allan King, was a master of documentary filmmaking. I have never made one but I listen carefully to his voice in my head,” Colleen says. “Film and theatre are totally different experiences – one is dead, one is alive. I hope to capture the physical and emotional experience of the stage performance – not only with the performers but also with the audience – and recreate it in two dimensions. Take a live performance, kill it by fixing it on film, then bring it back to life by reconstructing the tension using cuts.”

Colleen Murphy is a playwright, filmmaker, and librettist. She has had two new plays premiered in 2013, Armstrong’s War at the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver in October, and Pig Girl at Theatre Network in Edmonton in November. In 2011/12, she was Canadian Playwright-in-Residence at Finborough Theatre (UK). Colleen’s play The December Man (L’homme de décembre) won the 2007 Governor General’s Literary Award for Drama. Other plays include Beating Heart Cadaver (nominated for a Governor General’s Literary Award), The Piper, and All Other Destinations are Cancelled. She is also an award-winning filmmaker and her distinct films have played at festivals around the world. Her full-length opera The Enslavement and Liberation of Oksana G., written with Edmonton-born composer Aaron Gervais, will premiere in 2015/16.

Cory Sincennes is an Edmonton based designer. His set, costume, lighting, and video designs have been seen throughout Canada and Europe. Cory earned a degree in Architectural Studies from Carleton University before studying design at Ryerson Theatre School in Toronto. He also holds a MFA in Theatre Design from the University of Alberta. For more information on Cory’s projects visit: www.corysincennes.com.

Scott Peters is All Stages’ Technical Editor. He has worked in technical theatre and theatre design for 25 years in Alberta and beyond.
When the average person thinks about plays for young people, they don’t often think of revolutionary theatre. They should. More and more, in Canada and around the world, theatre for young audiences is pushing boundaries. Politically. Socially. Emotionally. Often going to places where adult theatre fears to tread.

And why not?

Young audiences don’t share the same fears adults do. In many ways, they aren’t as afraid to tackle complex issues. They are at a place in their lives and a stage in their development where they are open and interested in finding out more, in thinking things through and imagining what can be done about them. Young people are a brilliant mix of hope, fear, idealism, realism, optimism, and cynicism... with all these traits battling it out in new and emerging thoughts, opinions, and ideas. They wear masks like the rest of us, sure, but their instinct to play is still so close to the surface. Because of that, theatre engages them. Immediately. Powerfully. And when you break through, there is truly no better audience.

With this in mind, Canada’s top Theatres for Young Audiences (TYA) are jumping into the deep end of the pool in terms of the work they are presenting. A survey of professional TYA across English Canada this season reveals plays for elementary schools that explore issues as difficult and diverse as cyber-bullying and online safety (Wired – Green Thumb Theatre – Vancouver), displacement (The Patron Saint of Stanley Park – Halifax Theatre for Young People), learning disabilities and literacy (500 Words – Quest Theatre – Calgary), and child poverty in India (Sultans of the Street – Young People’s Theatre – Toronto). In the case of Concrete Theatre, where I am Artistic Co-Director, our offering for Kindergarten to Grade 6 this year is Apples and Oranges by Chris Bulough. The play examines ‘The Troubles’ in Ireland between Catholics and Protestants through the metaphor of an island where half the people worship oranges and half worship apples. Yes: tons of fun and it is performed in rhyme, but hardly simplistic fare.

In terms of work for teens, a quick glance across the country reveals an equally challenging palette of plays from this season and last. Many of the productions examine issues that regularly appear on the evening news as lead stories. Everything from poverty (Mass Park – Green Thumb Theatre – Vancouver), to bulimia (Dying To Be Thin – Manitoba Theatre for Young People – Winnipeg), to race, class, and sex (In This World – Roseneath Theatre – Toronto), to the challenges faced by a hijab wearing Muslim student (Jobber – Geordie Productions – Montreal) in a city who is struggling with the proposed Quebec Charter of Values, no less. And this is just English-speaking Canada. In French-speaking Canada, political work abounds for children.

But here’s the thing about theatre as a social catalyst. It’s not enough just to be ‘good’ for them!

Just like the adults in their lives, kids know good writing when they hear it and respond to beautiful art when they see it. The difference being that kids aren’t afraid to tell you when it’s working: “Can I hug you?” Or when it’s not: “This is the most boring play I’ve ever seen!”

In every way, young people are more honest and frank about what they like and don’t like. There is no polite small talk after the play. They will tell you point blank if the play sucked. Or share their secret wonder at how real your painted brick wall on scenic canvas looks.

So education must always be balanced with artistry. Happily, many of Canada’s top playwrights are taking on the challenge of writing for young people and digging into equally demanding topics. Over the last few years, we are seeing new plays for kids by George F. Walker, Anusree Roy, Hiro Kanagawa, and Greg MacArthur to name but a few. Good thing too... because, ultimately, if there is one message that I hear loudly and clearly from kids is that they don’t want to be spoken down to. As one little girl in Grade 4 asked me, before a public show of Concrete’s production of Trevor Anderson and Bryce Kulak’s musical Nami Namersson, The Viking Who Liked To Name Things, “Excuse me? Is this going to be a real play? Or just a fake play for kids?”

If we give them great work, and truly listen to them and care about what they share with us, young audiences will tell us everything we need to know. They will keep us honest and remind us that theatre began as a place where society reflected upon itself. Where it rehearsed change. Tried on transformation. Dreamt up rebellion. They will remind us that theatre can be a place where we walk in other people’s shoes. Where we are confronted by new ideas. Where we can discover ourselves.

And that is revolutionary. AS

Mieko Ouchi is an Edmonton based playwright, actor, and director. Her new play for young audiences I Am For You premiered in November with Concrete Theatre in Edmonton.
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