

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 Northan 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.

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.



Meg Braem.
Supplied.

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. **AS**

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 WANT TO DO IT ALL

Creating Spontaneous Action Theatre

BY REBECCA NORTHAN

I'm not sure if what I do is playwriting or play creation—or perhaps something else all together. 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! [Mump & Smoot] 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?



Jamie Northan and Rebecca Northan in a promotional still for Alberta Theatre Projects' upcoming *Legend Has It*.

Photo credit: Trudie Lee.

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. **AS**

Rebecca Northan is an actor, writer, director, producer, improviser, and currently the playwright in residence at Alberta Theatre Projects—which means she's often 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 workshoping *Legend Has It* for Alberta Theatre Projects' Enbridge playRites Festival 2014.