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Interview with Audrey Dwyer, Associate Artistic Director
of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre



Photo Credit: Cylla Von Tiedemann

Conducted by Trudee Romanek,
June 16, 2021

Audrey Dwyer is a multi-disciplinary artist with over twenty years of experience working as an actor, director, playwright, teacher, artistic director, facilitator and mentor.

She wrote and directed Calpurnia, which was produced by Nightwood Theatre and Sulong Theatre. She co-wrote The D Cut, a six-episode series produced by Shaftesbury Films, a multiple award-winning series now on Crave (Canada) and Shaftesbury's KindaTV Youtube channel. She is one of the winners of the CBC Creative Relief Fund to create a television pilot called The Gordons. She wrote the musical Come Home – The Legend of Daddy Hall for the Tarragon Theatre, which was produced in 2021. She wrote her first libretto called Backstage at Carnegie Hall, which will be produced in 2022. She wrote a radio play called The Ringtone for Imago Theatre. She recently worked with Caribbean Tales on a screenplay in development. She has also been commissioned by Nightswimming Theatre to write The Generations, an epic five-hour drama about the legacy of a Black family over many thousands of years.

Audrey has been working in New Play Development for over fifteen years. She has done dramaturgy with Obsidian Theatre, Nightwood Theatre, Factory Theatre, and Young People's Theatre, and she has also worked with Stratford and The Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre.

In 2008, she was the Associate Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre. In 2015, she won the Cayle Chernin Award for Theatre. From 2016 to 2017, Audrey was the Artistic Director of Cow Over Moon Children's Theatre. She was the Urjo Kareeda Artist in Residence at Tarragon Theatre (2018/19) and was also the Assistant Artistic Director during that time period. She graduated from The National Theatre School in 2001. She is an Artistic Associate at the National Theatre School of Canada, and she is the Associate Artistic Director of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre (RMTC).

Trudee Romanek (TR): Given how broad your experience in theatre is, is it possible for you to talk about some highlights for you in your career thus far?

Audrey Dwyer (AD): I graduated from the National Theatre School's acting program in 2001 and that was such a full and expansive and educational time for me. I had the opportunity to learn about many different kinds of theatre, as well as movement, dance, and singing. It was a very transformative time for me; a time when I learned about self-awareness and technique. I also think about the first professional show I did at the

Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, back in the 1998 season. It was *The Crucible*, directed by Martha Henry. Being part of that show was pretty exciting, and I had a lot of fun with the other young women in the cast. That's something I'll always remember.

I don't have any one show that was a highlight for me. Working in theatre means teamwork. Being a part of so many different rehearsal halls, developing the camaraderie and ways of working, the experience of spending time with people and getting to know them through the work is always a wonderful time. You get a group of people together

and you want to tell a story, whether it's on the page or it's devised, [and] there's always an abundance to discover about yourself and other people. You learn so much about the human condition and creativity and determination.

TR: I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about your own creative process as a playwright or as a librettist?

AD: As a librettist, sometimes I'm commissioned or hired to write a piece, and then sometimes I'm just going off my own imagination. With *Backstage at Carnegie Hall*, for example, I was hired to work with an outline based on what the composer, Tim Brady, was curious about. I was given permission to expand on that outline.

When I was commissioned to write *Come Home – The Legend of Daddy Hall*, it was because Richard Rose, AD at Tarragon, had found a pamphlet about John Hall and he was interested in having a play about this real-life legend, born in Ontario. So, my process involved doing research, but I got stuck because I wanted the action of the play to reflect exactly what I was reading. In this case, there were many different versions of John Hall's life. Different dates, different situations, different truths. I had to throw a number of drafts away and challenge myself to work differently. Plus, it was a stage play that had turned into an audio play due to COVID restrictions. I thought, maybe there could be music in it. So, I approached Spy Dénommé-Welch and Catherine Magowan of Unsettled Scores to see if they wanted to work on it. They encouraged me to bring the tunes I had in my head to the process. So, feeling very vulnerable, I would sing into my cell phone, and — being the generous artists they are — they rolled with it and we created in that way, which is

a way I'd never worked before. I also went back to my research and I gave myself permission to expand on the story. I added a granddaughter character. The whole time I was out of my comfort zone.

And then as a playwright, I know that if I feel anxious while I'm writing, then I can trust that the audience will also feel anxious. And by that, I mean if I get my characters into trouble, the audience will go on that journey. That's something that I try to keep in the back of my head as a playwright.

TR: I'm going to backtrack a bit to ask how long you've been in Winnipeg and what it's been like since you got there.

AD: I moved to Winnipeg in August 2019. I was born and raised here. And I am so excited to be back in my hometown. It's so great. I left in 1998 to go to NTS in Montreal and anytime I was able to come back and perform, that was time I really cherished. My husband and I had talked about going back. So, then Kelly [Thornton] got the AD position at RMTTC, and she shared with me that I was the first person she thought of and the only person on her list. Associate artistic direction is something that I've always really wanted to do. It's such a great position to have. And I was so happy to be able to come back and get to know “The 'Peg” through fresh eyes. The city has changed so much, and it's been wonderful to be back and get to know the artists and the audiences. Winnipeg is very savvy. The audiences here know their art. They've got the symphony, opera, independent theatre, ballet, modern dance, visual art, the music scene and more. There are tons of festivals. And people come out when it's minus fifty degrees. They've been doing it for years. We have some subscribers that have been in the same seats for thirty years.

The audiences have heard all the jokes, they've seen all the plots, you know? So, it's a challenge to bring new, exciting, visceral theatre to them, as well as entertaining some of our newer audience members who may not have seen any theatre.

TR: Since you've got patrons who've been coming for thirty years, do you feel that gives you the freedom to maybe go a little further, be a little more outside the box because you know they'll come along with you?

AD: Yeah, I really do. I feel like our audiences want new material. They want unpredictable material. This sounds so basic, but audiences come from families, workplaces, all different kinds of relationships — they watch the news, they watch film, they're there in the world — they experience a world of things that need to be on our stages. So, we're really excited to bring them different forms and big ideas.

TR: You mentioned that you'd wanted to be an Associate Artistic Director. Can you tell me the distinction between that position and Assistant Artistic Director?

AD: Generally speaking, the position of Associate Artistic Director is rooted in the unique needs of a specific company. So, it's not necessarily the same at each company. When I was Assistant Artistic Director at the Tarragon, on top of doing creative work — reading different drafts and tons of plays, attending artistic meetings, some assistant directing, and some writing — I was doing a lot more administrative tasks, like setting up workshops, connecting with agents, connecting with actors, because as Canada's premiere new play development centre, they're workshopping so

many plays. Part of my responsibilities was seeing if actors were available for workshops, getting their contracts together, making sure they were signed, being a connection between the theatre and the Canadian Actors' Equity Association. Now, RMTTC is a bigger organization, and so, of course, there are staff members who do all of that work. I wouldn't be able to read all the plays or attend all the meetings or have the many artist meetings I have if I was also doing that administration.

TR: Tell me about *Calpurnia* — the writing of it, the directing of it, having other people direct it.

AD: I directed the 2018 production at Buddies in Bad Times, and it was a real blast. Pretty exciting. The show hit its box-office marker — the certain amount it needed to make — before it opened. And the show sold out. People came, like, three times. It was wonderful, and I was able to get a lot of feedback about it.

Months after, I was approached by Sarah Stanley of the National Arts Centre to be part of a new initiative they were developing to give plays that had done really well another dramaturgical pass to see where there could be a deepening of the themes and the script. Sarah served as a dramaturg and we had a number of workshops over two years. So, the productions of it that are happening here in Winnipeg and at the NAC are still part of that dramaturgical process. So, I have my writer's cap on and that's my focus. And as someone who has worn a lot of hats, I'm happy to wear my writer's hat. It's a big responsibility when you're working on a play that you can already hear and you can already see. So, I'm excited to have Sarah direct it, because we've had so many dramaturgical discussions and workshops, and I've had tons of

notes and different things to think about, and I'm excited for that and not thinking about directing it. You can learn a lot from other people's perspectives. I'm really excited to see what she and all of the actors and designers are going to bring to it. I don't feel attached to it as a director. I'm like, show me what you have. It'll be so exciting and so fresh, you know?

TR: Yes, and interesting to see how much of it is on the page and how much of it is in your head, I guess?

AD: Exactly. It's one thing for me to write it and direct it — I have so much information — but what is on the page is my exact question. Have I written it well enough for it to be interpreted in ways that are consistent, and then other ways that are fresh and in ways that I couldn't have imagined?

TR: I know that RMTTC has on its web page instructions for submitting scripts. Is there anything you might like to add about your submission process?

AD: When I came in August 2019, Kelly and I wanted to meet with as many artists as possible, and we ended up meeting about 125 — playwrights, actors, designers. And I tell you this because we're very interested in hearing people's voices and their unique ways of telling stories. Since I arrived, we've been looking at our submission process and we're still considering better ways to meet with playwrights and connect with their work. So, we're kind of in transition, and even last week we were talking about the best way to deal with submissions, because we get national and international submissions. I love to

read new plays, but we're not able to read all of them at the pace that we'd like. So, we're really examining how to find ways to do it more efficiently. We take meetings with playwrights when we can. I encourage writers to write those big ideas with theatricality, imagination, politics.

I feel like it's really hard not to write for a budget, not to write thinking about cast size, or how much money this theatre could give the production. As a writer, I often consider how many people do I think can fit on that stage? Or what does this AD like, or where do I fit in their massive landscape of storytelling? But I just want to encourage people to write their big idea. What theatricality do you want to see on stage that you've never seen before? And what are the landscapes and the visuals, even, that you want to see on stage that can come through conflict or genre or style. Dream big.

Also, think about the chaotic ride that you want the audience to go on with you. And I say "chaotic" because we've all seen those plays where we're literally on the edge of our seat, or nudging our friend, or silently crying or laughing until our bellies ache. Think of the audience and what you want them to experience, because theatre is such an experiential event. Remember what it's like, after a show is done and you're walking out of the theatre just trying to put it all together, or those plays where you actually can't leave the theatre. You just have to sit there, still absorbing.

TR: I think we're all interested in hearing voices that we have not had the opportunity to hear before, and I wonder if you have advice for writers who, maybe, come from more marginalized communities, to help ensure that their voices do get heard and their scripts do get read.

AD: I would actually share this with everyone. Beyond the writing, get to know the companies based on their mandates and the histories of the people in those places. I think what's really exciting right now is that we've had so much transition in leadership, and I'm really excited to see what all these new ADs are going to do in their theatre homes. So, whether folks are marginalized or not, it's important to know who those leaders are and also know their creative history and reach out to them. Me, personally, I love getting to know artists, and one of the best ways for me to know them is through correspondence.

As a playwright, I'm also looking at ADs and going, "Okay, who are they? Do they share the same beliefs as me? Do these theatres share the same beliefs that I have?" I think there's so much on the playwright to do, between writing and sometimes producing their work, sending those letters and invitations. It's also on the artistic leadership to do the work too.

There are artists in Manitoba who reach me over the phone or via email and we talk. I think developing relationships is the key. There've been many people who've been in touch with me via email since I've arrived. And I feel like we're getting to know each other.

TR: So, are you comfortable with artists you have not extended a hand to, but who want to simply get to know you — are you comfortable with them emailing you directly?

AD: Yes. People are more than welcome. I usually try to write back within a week, but I feel like most people understand when people are busy.

TR: Is there anything else that is sort of a passion for you, that you feel a need to share?

AD: Well, I guess in terms of my work, I spent many years as an actor, and I made the decision to be a writer because I wanted to give people that looked like me more opportunities to perform. I was also feeling the need to get scared and try new things. So, I went back to my improvisational roots at Second City. I felt that improvisation helped to inform me of when audiences were attentive and when they were not. I feel that improv is such a great and humbling teacher when it comes to playwriting. So, I'd encourage people — even just among their friend group — to get together for a night and ask your friends for suggestions and do scenes. Come up with scenes on your feet. And no matter how anxious it makes you or embarrassed it makes you, go for it, because it really gets you outside of your head. You get rid of a lot of ideas. You end up becoming a stronger idea generator and, I think, a better storyteller. It really forces you to be present and messy, and it's that kind of messiness — characters just going from their gut — that we love to watch.



Trudee Romanek is an emerging playwright and award-winning author. In June, her WWII drama Bright Daybreak was presented at Stage One Lunchbox Theatre's New Canadian Works Festival in Calgary. She is a co-creator of this summer's Ghost Watchers: An Augmented Reality Theatrical Adventure for Theatre by the Bay, and her musical The Tales of Andergrimm is being produced as an outdoor, filmed production for schools. In July, she was the 'Something from Nothing' playwright for Theatre on the Ridge, working with young actors to create the one-act comedy, Half Baked.

Trudee also co-hosts Stage Whispers, a podcast about theatre in Central Ontario.

