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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Sarah Kitz,
Interim Artistic Director of The Great
Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC),
Ottawa, ON

Conducted by Laurie Fyffe,
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Photo Credit: Alejandro Santiago

Sarah Kitz

Sarah joins GCTC with a wide range of experience. GCTC audiences will remember Sarah from her role in *Behaviour* by Darrah Teitel. Since her years of involvement in The AMY (Artists Mentoring Youth) Project as Co-Director and Mentor, she continues to apply what she learned from that experience, making agreements with care, and facilitating content creation in an anti-oppression framework. Sarah is experienced at making work at different scales. She has worked as a Director and Assistant Director on festival stages including Stratford and Shaw, and at companies like Crow's Theatre, Tarragon, and Canadian Stage. Throughout her career she has been deeply engaged with indie theatre. She has received numerous awards, including the RBC Rising Star Emerging Director Prize from Crow's Theatre and the Women's Auxiliary Award at Stratford Festival. "In my work, I am drawn to companies and projects that fit well with my values, and so I'm excited to be taking on this role with GCTC," says Sarah. "As Interim Artistic Director for GCTC, I will prioritize the work of IBPOC, trans, and non-binary artists, and artists with disabilities, as well as local artists. It is imperative that Canadian theatre diversifies to encompass more experiences and forms, and that GCTC continues to support and uplift the community of artists where it is."

I met up with Sarah Kitz in the lower lobby of the Great Canadian Theatre Company's Irving Greenberg Theatre. Sarah has been hired as GCTC's Interim Artistic Director for the 2021-2022 Season. I began by asking her if there was a play she saw recently that excited her:

SARAH KITZ (SK): I've only been to one live performance since the pandemic and lockdown in March of 2020, and that was Cliff Cardinal's *As You Like It* at Crow's Theatre. [*As You Like It: A Radical Retelling by Cliff Cardinal ran Sept. 22 to Oct. 24, 2021 in the Guloien at Crow's Theatre, Toronto.*] It was sensational! And I was very happy to be back in a theatre!

LAURIE FYFFE (LF): *Are there favorite themes, issues, styles, or genres that currently appeal to you?*

SK: I'm interested in revolution; in all its incarnations. People breaking forms and structures. Whether that's the characters in the play, or the theatre creators. I'm interested in work that breaks through into a new world. I'm also interested in hearing from Black and Indigenous playwrights, writers from under-represented communities, women, and emerging artists.

LF: *What is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play?*

SK: I don't know what the answer is to that. What's important in a play is particular to the piece and to the reader. I respond to laughter, to joy, and I want to be surprised. I want to be challenged and provoked.

LF: *What part of Canada, or any landscape, do you feel shaped you as an artist?*

SK: I grew up in the big city. I have definitely had that urban experience. But, I always yearned to escape the city. When I was young my parents took my brother and I camping in Algonquin Park. Trees, water, and rocks provided a different cognitive space, a spiritual space. I breathe deeper in those spaces. And I find that recharges me. Years ago in Winnipeg, I was seduced by the prairies. I'd never been out on that land before. Really, there's so much of Canada to see. The prairies didn't form me, but that landscape moved me deeply. I've also been up in the Yukon, and when I was a young actor, I worked in Halifax. I was so happy to be by the ocean and experience that interlacing of the natural and urban space.

LF: *Where do you feel you are at in your career?*

SK: I was just saying to Hugh Neilson, the older I get, the less I know; the more there is to learn. You feel very certain when you're young. Youth is an open landscape of possibilities. I still feel very eager to keep learning and inquiring. Right now, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to have stepped into a leadership position. A role that requires being responsible to the staff, to patrons, to volunteers, and to the artists. I take that seriously, and joyously.

On the subject of how often GCTC programs new Canadian plays, Sarah and I reviewed the current season. Daisy, by Sean Devine, opened in March of 2020, and then promptly closed because of the pandemic. The play had been rehearsed and performed, and the set was still waiting on the main stage. Daisy, a co-production with Horseshoes & Hand Grenades Theatre, will kick off GCTC's 2021-2022 season. Next up is The Blissful State of Surrender by Sanita Fejzić, presented by the TACTICS Mainstage Series. In February GCTC will present The Runner by Christopher Morris, a Human Cargo production, followed by Heartlines by Sarah Waisvisz, presented by TACTICS and Calalou/Raft Theatre Projects. The final show of the season is Speaking Vibrations by Jo-Anne Bryan, Carmelle Cachero, King Kimbit, and Jordan Samonas, a Theatre Vibrations' production. The only show in the 2021-2022 season that is not by an Ottawa-based playwright or creator(s) is The Runner.

LF: GCTC doesn't run a new play development program, so it's great to see so many plays by local playwrights in the upcoming season. Are there any plans to establish a new play development structure in the future?

SK: While we don't have a playwrights' unit, new play festival, or specific development structure, we do accept new play submissions. Send me an email; introduce yourself and your play. I will respond, and if there is interest in the script, I'll ask you to send it to me. Oh, and we also support new play development through the Ontario Arts Council Grants to Theatre Creators. GCTC is an OAC recommender.

LF: Playwrights often grumble that it's hard enough to get first productions of a new play but even harder to get a second production; do you agree?

SK: Oh, it's true! Second productions are hard. And that's why GCTC has a focus on second and third productions. That's a vital area of play development. Often, a playwright

gets a debut, and that's it. So, for us, right now, it's about those second and third productions. But, the same goes for playwrights seeking a second production as for those with a new play; be mindful of our priorities. Send me an email. Tell me about yourself and your work. And remember, GCTC is focused on underserved communities and artists.

LF: What do great plays (at GCTC) have in common?

SK: I feel that has to do with the decision-making that has happened prior to my arrival. Eric programmed things to his taste, and so will I. But I think what ties all of these plays together is an invitation to the audience to be provoked.

LF: Do you like to read a play in its early stages or when it is further along?

SK: I want to know which draft I'm being sent. I don't appreciate that information being a mystery. Tell me the development history. It may not be a play we can workshop, because we

don't as a rule workshop plays. At the same time, I don't want to make that sound like a hard rule. Once I have the script, we can start talking. The script may be the beginning of a conversation between the playwright and myself. I wouldn't want the playwright to be discouraged against sending me an early draft. Some first drafts are compelling. Just because it's an early draft doesn't mean we can't talk about the play and explore possibilities if it's a good fit for GCTC. I'll add one thing about play submissions in general and that's that the people who are best at submitting their scripts and following up are white men. That's why I want to encourage BIPOC writers, women, trans and non-binary writers, and emerging artists to contact me about their plays.

LF: Zoom has opened up a world of podcasts and recorded online readings. Are you interested in videos or audio recordings of a play reading?

SK: I'd rather read a script myself. Let me imagine. If you have a recorded production, something of quality, perhaps, but I'm looking forward to reading plays!

LF: What is the process you go through when reading new scripts? Do you have one? Do you approach a new script in a specific way?

SK: No, I don't have a particular process. I take each script on its own terms.

LF: How soon after a playwright submits an email inquiry can they expect a response, and how long should they leave the script with you before expecting to hear back?

SK: We'll probably establish a timeline when I first respond to your email. It may depend on where we are in the season.

LF: Is there a particular time of the year when it would be best to submit an inquiry or script?

SK: People can send an inquiry any time. However, if you contact GCTC during the summer, your email may go unanswered for a while.

LF: Will you be attending The Fringe? Should people let you know about live readings or independent productions?

SK: Absolutely, that's the kind of event I'd like to hear about.

LF: What keeps you working in the theatre? Especially now that we have gone through such a difficult period for artists, what has kept you going? What makes you optimistic about the future of theatre?

SK: Love. Listening. The hunger for a new world. Wanting to use whatever platform and resources I have to open the door for other people. I believe that theatre is a rehearsal for a working society, and I want to see that every day in the administration, and on the stage.

LF: Anything you would like to add?

SK: Emerging from this pandemic, we're relearning what it means to be in a community. Theatre is about community. You can't do it alone. It is about that dynamic of people

making moral choices in front of one other, and in front of an audience. The audience has the duration of the play to unravel those choices and think about them. So time is an aspect of this togetherness as well. Theatre is an act of civic engagement. It's not locked the way a film is, and it doesn't have an audience of one like a novel. It requires us to be engaged together over a period of time. It doesn't rely on sound bytes

or absolutes; it's built on complexity and nuance that we have to deal with collectively. All theatre asks the question: how do we live together? That question has not lost its urgency.

LF: Thank you, Sarah! And best wishes for a very successful tenure as GCTC's interim Artistic Director!

The Great Canadian Theatre Company's Mandate:

"To foster, produce and promote excellent theatre that provokes examination of Canadian life and our place in the world." GCTC is Ottawa's largest professional, independent theatre. Under the leadership of Interim Artistic Director Sarah Kitz and Managing Director Hugh Neilson, GCTC offers a wide range of artistic programming: six mainstage plays every year; a variety of theatre-for-young-audiences; artist workshops; and even the occasional pop-up restaurant with nationally renowned chefs.

For more information go to: <https://www.gctc.ca>

Go to the Dropdown Menu under "Community." Click on "Artists" and scroll down to "Playwrights & Script Submissions Guidelines."

LAURIE FYFFE is a playwright, dramaturge, and Artistic Director of Evolution Theatre.
Her most recent play *Beowulf In Afghanistan* was presented online at the 2021 Ottawa
Fringe Festival.



Photo by Annette Hegel

