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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Andrea Donaldson,
AD of Nightwood Theatre

Conducted by Chelsey Fawcett,
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ANDREA DONALDSON

Andrea is Nightwood Theatre's Artistic Director. She has been invested in new play development primarily as a director for almost two decades. Directing highlights include: co-directing *Every Day She Rose* by Andrea Scott and Nick Green (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre), *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter (Soulpepper), *Beautiful Man* by Erin Shields (Factory Theatre), *Grace* by Jane Doe (Nightwood/Crow's Theatre), *Lo (Or Dear Mr. Wells)* by Rose Napoli (Nightwood/Crow's Theatre), *A Beautiful View* by Daniel MacIvor (Festival Players PEC), *The Taming of the Shrew* (SLSF), *Quiver* by Anna Chatterton (Nightwood/Buddies), *Sequence* by Arun Lakra (Tarragon), *Romeo & Juliet* (Ruff), *Janet Wilson Meets the Queen* by Beverley Cooper (GCTC), *Soliciting Temptation* by Erin Shields (Tarragon), *Within the Glass* by Anna Chatterton (Tarragon), *Mistatim* by Erin Shields (Red Sky – International Tour), and *Montparnasse* by Maev Beaty and Erin Shields (TPM). Andrea was Tarragon Theatre's Assistant/ Associate Artistic Director for four seasons, and ran Write from the Hip at Nightwood for five seasons. She has been honoured with Stratford's Jean Gascon Award for Direction, Best Director - International Youth Drama Month - Shenzhen, China, and has been nominated for the Pauline McGibbon Award and the John Hirsch Directing Award. Her projects have received over a dozen Dora Award nominations and two Dora Awards.

On February 13th, 2020, I spoke with Andrea Donaldson on the phone about how playwrights can get involved in Nightwood Theatre. Nightwood does an active amount of programming focusing on the creation of exceptional feminist theatre and making connections within the community.

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GETTING TO KNOW NIGHTWOOD THEATRE

Andrea has been in her role as the Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre (NT) for one year as of this May 2020. Here is what she has to say about playwriting at NT during this time:

"At Nightwood, we focus on women (our definition expressly includes trans women), placing them at the center of all we do. Everyone in the office, our creative team, and women-led projects generate feminist works."

There are new play development programs at NT, but the company does not exclusively produce new plays. Yet, this season, NT has four mainstage productions, all of which are new Canadian-made plays!

It is clear from our conversation that Andrea is passionate about creating opportunities for Canadian playwrights to have their voices heard through NT, and that she is an active advocate for women's representation and feminist narratives within the Canadian theatre ecology.

When Andrea became the AD of NT in May 2019, she inherited a fully planned season of events. She has been slowly introducing her own events into the season. New initiatives have been implemented under Andrea's direction, which focus on creating

opportunities for playwrights, and getting the community involved and connected to NT.

HOW SHOULD I GET INVOLVED?

NT's Annual Groundswell Festival, Write from the Hip Program, and Feminist Unconference

The *Annual Groundswell Festival* is the best way for a playwright to interact and connect with NT. Applying to the Write from the Hip (WFTH) program is another fantastic avenue. WFTH is a year-long script development program designed to support new writers toward the completion of a full-length play. The program culminates in public play readings presented as part of the Groundswell Festival. Readings are also given by resident playwrights who are ready to share their work or are interested in developing a piece further. As Donaldson reports, "This upcoming season, we have seven Groundswell playwrights!"

NT also features events that are designed to be financially accessible to the community, so they are either free, or significantly discounted. For example, in 2019, the Groundswell Festival involved free writing workshops for anyone who applied to Write from the Hip with esteemed playwright, Donna-Michelle St. Bernard. Donaldson believes this approach offers a way to include those who apply to Nightwood's

new play development program but are not accepted. It allows the company to keep the doors open to new people and provide support for their development in some way. As Donaldson notes, "We want to balance the resource stretch and casting as wide a net as possible."

Also part of the Groundswell Festival is NT's *Feminist Unconference*. This is a free, one-day event where hosts and attendees reflect on and decide what they want to talk about that day within the intersections of theatre and feminism. Donaldson confirms that the event will be happening next year, but it may become an event independent of the Groundswell Festival.

Donaldson wants to create community and moments of being together. As artists, there is an isolation factor at play that Donaldson hopes to address through ancillary events held by NT, which are designed to keep artists connecting. NT's newly-launched *Nightwood Community Choir* is a ten-week program with people meeting once a week with "pay-what-you-can" drop-in sessions.

"Singing is a way of drawing together lots of people. Teiya Kasahara became the leader of this program, and they are the perfect person to lead the community choir."

Under Teiya Kasahara's direction, the choir sources and sings iconic female-driven music with feminist messaging. There will be a public concert presentation at the end of the 10-week sessions (originally scheduled for March 31, 2020).

"We are still devising what that evening will look like, but it will have friends and family, and it will be a night of solidarity, and everyone is welcome to be part of the choir – all genders."

[NB: Due to the pandemic, the live concert was cancelled, but choir members are recording their parts individually to be mastered together by Teiya into a group recording for an online concert.]

The *Stomburgs Family Realization Fund* launched this year, and it involves a \$10,000 cash prize awarded to an Ontario-based woman artist in any role with 20+ years' experience in theatre. The award is for women who want to create a dream project of their own that includes theatre, music, and/or movement.

NT is also in the process of creating a commissioning relationship in which a donor will directly sponsor a specific piece of work, which will offer a new way of creating a playwright-donor relationship.

OAC RECOMMENDER GRANTS

"We have interns who are funded, and we also have people contact us with granting options – Canada Council, co-op placements, Metcalf-funded artists – and for Ontario-based artists, OAC Recommender Grants are also an option. We get about 100 submissions for those OAC Recommender Grants, and each year we have a different process for how we select the recipients. This year we decided based on the applicants and where we are at to grant \$1000 to different playwrights in order to spread the net wide."

"Next year I'm planning to give larger amounts to a smaller group of recipients."

When artists apply to NT through the OAC Recommender Grant, Donaldson reads all the play submissions herself, which provides a great introduction to the playwright for her as AD, or builds an existing relationship further.

For more information about these events and opportunities, check the Nightwood Theatre website (www.nightwoodtheatre.net).

I'm a playwright. I want to be produced by Nightwood. How should I reach out?

Donaldson has created a process for playwrights to get in touch and a clear policy for those applying to the WFTH program, which can be found on the NT website.

"There's six of us doing a lot of work. If I read everything that came across my desk, I would do nothing else. We used to have a company dramaturg, but no more. I feel like it's our job to know who is writing what... I'm constantly making sure we are doing what's best from a lot of angles. I accept submissions by having folks introduce themselves. Let me know who you are, and provide a synopsis or a slice of what you're writing. I can't read every full-length play that comes across my desk, but I can read 10 pages that give me a sense of if I'm interested, or if I'm interested in knowing more about the writer."

Donaldson explains the value of the submission process from her point of view:

"The submission process can be an act of introduction or a continued relationship. For me, getting a manageable bite of what someone's up to is so great. For artists based anywhere in the country, letting us know what you're up to is helpful. I'm always scouring websites to see what's going on. We want to know what's going on in the country."

Donaldson reveals that receiving 1-pagers or 10-page script samples is her antidote for managing the high volume. Even with this policy in place, Donaldson says she receives a plentiful amount, and currently has about 24 hours of straight reading before she will be caught up with NT's submissions.

How soon after a playwright submits a script do you want to get a follow-up call/email, and do you prefer a call or an email?

"In some ways, I don't want a follow-up. I want people to keep in touch, but the "did you read my thing?" is really hard. If I want to know more I will reach out, and I will do that as fast as I can."

Donaldson further states that being invited to shows or sending a different script sample at some point is a better follow-up approach.

"The healthy way is to think of it as an introduction, and it's nice to keep bumping up against the same name."

Donaldson encourages playwrights to connect with her. She is always looking for new work that fits Nightwood's mandate.

Do you have a comment about your contact with playwrights who want to get their plays produced at Nightwood? What works for you and what makes you crazy or turned-off?

"I'm pretty direct, so once I review the materials, I will get back and say yes, or I don't have any intentions with the piece. I don't love saying no, but I prefer to offer clarity. I'm not likely to be persuaded once I've made a decision. Better to find other partners in that case... I'm also really careful with not planting seeds of hope unless there's a producing chance."

LET'S TALK NUMBERS

Approximately how many new scripts come across your desk each year?

"That's hard for me to say because I'm new. Under 500. But definitely over 250 – 300."

Roughly how many are submitted by women playwrights?

"That fits under our mandate – 95%. About once a month I get a submission from someone else and remind them of our mandate."

We both agree that it's important for playwrights to know the mandates of the companies they are applying to!

LEARNING ABOUT THE AD

What do great plays at your theatre have in common?

"They are all written by women. I would say that there's always a sense of a politic within the work. I'm not interested in pedantic work, or preachy work, and I can say for me, that I'm interested in programming work that activates a discussion, leaves people with an enriching experience, and pushes people out of their comfort zones and fixed beliefs. And that somehow encompasses a feminist agenda, either overtly or covertly."

Donaldson went on to state that this agenda is also reflected in the operations of the company in terms of casting, and work-life balance for artists with commitments.

Typically, the set-up is a five-day work week for rehearsals that are four weeks in length.

Donaldson concludes that this allows people to manage their energy and caregiving responsibilities better. Donaldson invites change into NT's operational model by asking, "How can we be feminist in our operations, and in the fabric of how we work?"

Do you like to read a play in its early stages or when it is farther along? Why?

"It depends. I love making work from scratch. That's my career interest as a dramaturg-director. Working from the seed of an idea is exciting for me. Some people come with a synopsis, or a first draft; I value both in terms of process. If someone is reaching out to me, to introduce themselves, then it's not the greatest idea to show me things that are not

formed. If you're ready to introduce yourself to me, or other literary managers, do it when you have come to a place of personal completion."

Do you prefer an invite to a staged reading or a production rather than reading a new script?

"I have no preference. It's where it will fit into my calendar."

What is the process you go through reading new scripts?

For this question, Donaldson references NT's policy for how to submit writing samples and make an introduction for one's work.

NT being located in Toronto means there are artists producing work all the time, much of it being self-produced. Sometimes with this approach, inviting an artistic director to a show, the time available makes it impossible for the AD to accept every request.

The conversation then morphed into how expensive it is to produce work in Toronto, with Donaldson noting that a lack of production values (due to a limited budget) would not stop her from seeing a work.

So, if the playwright has no budget and thus the play is being read around a kitchen table, would you go to something like that?

"Yes, I would go to someone's house to hear a play read aloud if there was no budget for a production. If I was invited to come and hear a play read around a kitchen table, I would go. It's a valuable way to be introduced to a piece of work. Sometimes I'm invited to a show and I can't make it, so I ask for the archival

footage, or the script, and I'll have a peak at that instead."

Donaldson makes it clear that regardless of your production budget or financial resources, there are ways to get ADs like her familiar with your work. The entire NT team actively works to see theatre in the community and frequently talks about what they are seeing.

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

"That's a really hard question. I guess an awareness of where we are right now. Really valuable universal questions underlying an interesting context and form."

Are there favorite themes, issues, styles, or genres that currently appeal the most?

"I don't know. I'm not looking for specific issues. We have a subscribership that come. We try to provide a diverse range of styles of pieces that happen and issues that are being tackled. I would never program a season by theme."

What play did you read or see last that really excited you?

"Progress Festival and Rhubarb Festival. I saw four pieces at two different festivals... Shaista Latif's *How to Serve Tea* (at Progress) – that was an immersive, non-traditional theatre piece. It was tickling my fancy. Rhubarb had the super experimental and had no stated desire to become a cohesive thing, which was an active rebellion."

A week before, Donaldson saw *Suitcase* by Ahmad Meree at Theatre Passe Muraille.

"I felt like I was seeing a completely new style of work because I wasn't familiar with their work and aesthetic. It was really simple but visual and the playwright's voice was very distinct while touching on all these issues of displacement and war with unexpected humor and a clownishness in certain moments. It was refreshing to see something really different. Given that I consume so much culture, when I feel refreshed by something, that feels really refreshing."

SECOND PRODUCTIONS

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 think this is true? Why?

"I think it's really hard in Toronto to produce a play again in this city. I ran *Write from the Hip* before, and there were a number of those projects that have grown to have productions around Canada and are published... The tricky thing is the hustle on everyone's end. A lot of companies don't have the resources to produce the work, so a play that has demonstrated success can be a really attractive thing."

How might a playwright go about getting a second production with your company?

Donaldson says this goes back to NT's submission policy. If your production has been done before, and you want to give it more life, think about mentioning that in a one-page introduction, something like this example: "We had a great production in Vancouver. We want to do it for *Nightwood*. Here's the

attached info, and here's the specs and press, etc. Here's our full team, and here's what we want to be doing with it at *Nightwood*."

"The challenge is with touring projects; they're a lot more expensive, but it's not insurmountable. If we want it badly enough, we will make space for it. Some playwrights I know really have their hustle on and like doing that; getting inside of the moment their show is about to premiere, and getting people excited about other people premiering the work."

Donaldson goes on to say that if self-promotion is not something a playwright does, then think about getting someone to do it for you, so that you are somehow engaging in the hype and in the promotional process.

"When I think of the plays that continue along, it comes down to the playwright being interested and comfortable talking about that work with other people. You've created something incredible and it should be shared, and that's part of getting inside that piece of the process that is valuable."

Donaldson closes this question by emphasizing that in future seasons to come, she is interested in second productions so NT can represent the community.

AUDIENCES

What is the usual demographic of your audience? Age? Gender?

"That's something we're trying to figure out. We are a non-venued company so the analytics are hard to get at. From our social media, we gather that it points to a young to mid-60s audience, 60% women and 40% men. That feels fairly accurate."

What plays have been popular with them in the past?

"In trying to examine what makes a show successful, I'm reluctant to make that subscribe to box office numbers, but when we did *Mouthpiece*, that was a mega-hit and it toured. *Unholy* was remounted because of its popularity. *Lo (or, Dear Mr. Wells)* and *Calpurnia* had a lovely response, and other productions came to it once we premiered it. *The Penelopiad* was a hit a number of years ago."

It is clear with this response that Donaldson values the impact of a work from a qualitative perspective regardless of box office sales.

What keeps you working in the theatre?

"Oh! I find it to be a very regenerative career path. I'm an artist first and foremost. I certainly feel like the amount and kind of different plays and people I engage with feels really good, and I am grateful that I have an enriched life because of all the things that I encounter. I feel like we enrich people's lives."

CONCLUSIONS

- Visit the NT website for submission guidelines to send samples of your work.
- Attend the Groundswell Festival, meet people, and get to know the company, including the community by attending free events.
- After submitting, follow-up to keep growing the relationship, as opposed to asking for direct feedback about your submission.
- Invite Artistic Directors to roundtable readings if you can't produce a full production.

Chelsey is a director and playwright who is passionate about bringing Canadian works to the stage. Her plays have been produced in Calgary and Toronto. She is currently completing an MFA in directing at the University of Ottawa, and she is PGC's caucus representative for the Eastern Ontario region. She loves being part of the PGC!