

Angus Ferguson and Dancing Sky Theatre—Little Unicorn on the Prairie
By Kelley Jo Burke



(Photo with permission from Eric Eggertson)

I did a show a few years back at Dancing Sky Theatre about a long-term relationship where everybody stays in love with each other 'til the very end. We called it (among ourselves) *The Unicorn Show*, because we understood that finding someone you can stay in love with for your whole life is kind of like finding a unicorn. Rare. Exceptionally lucky. And bound to engender comment.

And oddly enough, everyone involved with the show was in fact in a unicorn relationship: 15 years together, 25, 35.... We felt like the long-term love wing of some postmodern museum. I gave everybody unicorns opening night. Which on reflection was overkill. Because we were already sitting in one.

Dancing Sky Theatre is a unicorn. It is part of the vibrant Saskatoon area theatre community—except it sits about forty minutes out of town, in the small village of Meacham, Saskatchewan. And it shouldn't exist. It just does.

(Just to be clear, this is not a dispassionate interview with an artistic director. This is a love letter. To a place. And a person. And a practice. And a way of living a life in the arts.)

Once a town with a dwindling population, parts of Meacham were bought up, twenty-five to thirty years ago, by a variety of artists, including potters and ceramicists, weavers, recording artists, and a newly coupled couple of theatre people, actor Louisa Ferguson and director Angus Ferguson. They made the decision to convert the local community space into a theatre (and they also snapped up the old prairie school—which they turned into a home for their family, and ultimately a studio for Louisa, who has shifted from theatre to increasingly lauded glass art). They made Dancing Sky's ceiling prairie blue and hung twinkle lights and got the kitchen space up and running, because if you ask people to drive forty-minutes out of town, you best offer dinner AND a show. And then by virtue of the fact that, as Lou says, "We just work harder than anything. We have this capacity to just keep going," they opened a theatre dedicated to presenting only Canadian work, using only Saskatchewan-based or -born actors and musicians (every Dancing Sky show has a live musician as a vital part of the development process and the productions).

"We produce between two and five productions a year. Since 1994 we have produced fifty-six main stage productions, all of them Canadian. Forty-one of these were world premieres of works that we helped to develop," Angus writes to me, as I ask him what to put in this profile.

Well, current wisdom is that *that*, sir, is a recipe for disaster. Especially outside of a very large urban centre. Especially in a part of the world where "artsy" is still very much a pejorative. Why did he set all Canadian, mostly Saskatchewan, mostly new work as his new theatre's mission?

"A very big question. Canadian work speaks better to Canadian audiences, local work speaks more powerfully to local audiences. The power of theatre is that it can be

immediate and local – not imported culture from L.A. or London – or even T.O. Work that speaks to rural audiences is hard to find – so we have to make it ourselves. I personally love the complete creative process from beginning to end – more satisfying, more creative, more complete. Challenges - more expensive, more risk.”

Yah, ‘cause, I’m not a rural writer—like, not at all. If Angus had any sense, or understood that unicorns don’t exist, he would not put someone like me up on a stage that he certainly markets to Saskatoon, but also reaches to, values, and builds relationships with the very small towns in the immediate area. (In fact someone quite close to him after watching a run of one of my plays looked him dead in the eye and said, “You’re going to lose audience on this one.” He just shrugged and said, “Yah.”) It is outside risky. But he just does it anyway.

Why stage an overtly nasty feminist? Why make a point of mentoring young theatre-makers, often female? Why not work exclusively with people that he knows will keep his improbable theatre afloat?

“I always pick the best artists that I can find – they are very often women.”

I asked Angus that if young women (or young to theatre-making women) in Saskatchewan who write plays wanted to start a conversation with him, how would he like to see that happen?

“I would like to find ways of getting better at this. They need to come to Dancing Sky productions to understand what we do. Then we need to start a conversation. We need to find new ways of making this happen.”

Angus was awarded the Saskatchewan Arts Award for Leadership in the Arts in 2014, and I think the impossible theatre, in the impossible place, which exists purely because Angus and Lou refused to know that it couldn’t, provides a perfect metaphor the space for creation that Angus’s leadership creates.

He quite simply adores artists. He has all the time in the world for you to get through your process. He furrows a brow and says, “yah...but that’s how you do that...you just don’t make sense until it’s out loud...those damn Burke rhythms,” and he’s right, and it feels safe as houses know that he knows you down to your boots. And while he is kind as the day is long, he has an absolute iron-clad bottom line and will just keep pushing to get it to a place where it works. And it has nothing to do with ego. And he has no skin in the game, other than to make good theatre... I have seen him deeply frustrated, but I have never seen him mean. Or pull rank. Or take umbrage.

He is mensch. He is a theatre unicorn. And he could have gone anywhere, and he could have been a heavy-hitter in a bigger town.

Thank heavens that wasn’t his priority. I’d have had to slash his tires. Every night. For twenty-five years. The commute would have killed me.