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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Ari Weinberg,
AD of Winnipeg Jewish Theatre

Conducted by AM Matte,
February 26, 2020



Ari Weinberg is currently in his fifth season as Artistic and Managing Director of Winnipeg Jewish Theatre.

His directing credits include *Narrow Bridge*, *After Jerusalem*, *Tribes*, *The Whipping Man*, *Another Way Home*, *Shiksa*, *Stars of David* (all at Winnipeg Jewish Theatre), *Frankenstein* (University of Winnipeg), *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Knaveish Hedgehogs at Winnipeg Fringe), and *Godspell* (Theatre Sheridan).

Ari has appeared in numerous productions as an actor, including in *Falsettos* (Winnipeg Jewish Theatre/Dry Cold Productions), *A Year with Frog and Toad*, *A Charlie Brown Double Bill* (Manitoba Theatre for Young People), *South Pacific* (Rainbow Stage/Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra), *Romeo and Juliet* (Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre), *Peter Pan* (Stratford Festival), *Hana's Suitcase* (Magnus Theatre), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Man of La Mancha* (Theatre by the Bay).

Ari is a proud graduate of Sheridan College's Music Theatre-Performance Program and he serves as the program's Internship Advisor.

AM Matte: What is the focus of the Winnipeg Jewish Theatre (WJT)?

Ari Weinberg: It is to look at plays that start a dialogue around Jewish identity and the Jewish experience. For me, it's the idea that the more specific a play tends to be, the more universal it can actually become, so what I'm interested in investigating in my tenure is to illuminate the Jewish experience and illuminate the human experience.

When I got here, coming from Toronto where there are theatre companies that exist for each and all identities, in the landscape of Winnipeg, that doesn't exist. So, for a theatre company that was looking at a particular group — whose stories are overcoming adversity — it became very clear to me to look for stories that examine the intersection of other cultures also overcoming adversity and struggling with all kinds of cultural identity issues. It's important to put that work on stage. So, it's Jewish stories, but Jewish stories in the context of a much larger picture, so that every show that we're putting on stage really is about something that matters.

AMM: What do great plays at your theatre have in common?

AW: For me, as an AD, every season is about balance. Season programming is a weird balancing act of trying to give something to the audience, to curate something for the audience. In terms of great plays, it's about finding pieces that complement each other and balance each other.

I always want to make sure that, every season, we have at least one or two plays by a woman playwright — I think in 2020 it's important to do everything we can to support equity and inclusion and diversity — and at least one Canadian play on stage — because we're a Canadian theatre company and we receive money from the Canada Council for the Arts. We should be putting Canadian Jewish works on stage. We want to make sure that it's not all dramas and that they don't all investigate the same thing.

Audience surveys said that we get a lot of Holocaust programming in many other facets of the community, maybe there's not a lot of Holocaust content that's necessary at the theatre, then. Not that they don't want to see any, but not a whole season of that. And most of the plays that I read tend to deal with Holocaust content.

When we're talking about great plays, I start with the idea of a theme, so I usually pick one play that is the cornerstone of the season, look at what it's talking about, and then go from there. For our upcoming season, I'm looking at plays that deal with generations and that investigate viewpoints from different generations.

AMM: What is the demographic of your audience? Age? Gender?

AW: It is mainly Jewish-identifying people, but it depends on the play. That's part of it. Our subscribers are mostly Jewish, but I'm amazed at how many patrons come up and talk to me

after a performance and tell me that they're not Jewish. So, I would roughly estimate that about ten percent of our subscribership is not Jewish. For our audience, it depends on the show. We have students and young people who come, so if this company is going to survive, I need to think about programming at least one show that has appeal beyond the Jewish community.

Winnipeg has a very vibrant theatre ecology and my goal is, if people who go to see plays at other theatre companies come once a season to see a show at WJT, I'm pretty happy about that. So, our audiences are quite diverse from show to show.

AMM: I didn't see a submission policy on your website, but I saw you support New Play Development. How does a playwright get your attention with a new play? Do you have a submission policy?

AW: What is interesting is that we used to have a playwriting piece up on the website, but I mostly only got submissions by American playwrights. Mostly men, if I'm being honest, and a lot of agent submissions. For a small theatre company with a pretty niche mandate, I was getting far more submissions than you would think. There would be weeks where I was getting upwards of twenty submissions. Up until a year ago, I was the sole employee of the organization; I just didn't have time [to read all the submissions].

In terms of submissions, I've got a pretty good finger on the pulse — we're part of the Jewish playwriting competition that happens every year, so we're reading those script submissions.

So, instead of having a play submissions page, my email address is on the website. You'd be amazed how many people still send me submissions, and that's part of the reason I've kept my email there; so that if people want to get ahold of me, they can, but they have to be a little bold about it.

Also, we're a small house. I was getting all these submissions with casts of a dozen people, casts of twenty people, stuff that just didn't serve WJT. Things we could never afford to produce. And the time to read those plays and assess them just took too much out of my week.

Starting next year, there are plans to roll out a new way of receiving submissions, because we are continuing to develop new Canadian Jewish works.

AMM:

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

AW: It depends. I'm less interested in where it's at in its process than what it's about. For me, ideas are what really intrigue me and what I want to investigate. For example, a play we're working on about transgender and Jewish identity. If you tell me, "This is what I'm working on," it gives me an opportunity to say, "Oh, I'm interested in that; when you have something to show me, send it my way." My interest is already piqued.

That being said, I do like it when things are written. I don't need a lot. If someone is going to be brave and just submit, then I want five to ten pages for me to read to get a sense of what

it is. Our funds are tight in terms of being able to give seed money or to develop works, but let's give an opportunity for [a playwright] to get dramaturgical support and investigate with next steps for development.

AMM: Roughly how many plays are submitted by women playwrights?

AW: Sadly, not a lot. And if I'm being honest with you, that's where the struggle comes in. Jewish American playwrights who are female and female-identifying: tons. Finding Canadian Jewish female playwrights? Trickier. I want to start looking for the female Jewish voice in Canada.

Like I said, I mostly get submissions from men, and I want to focus on female Jewish playwrights. I'd like more. I'm hoping to sustain us doing four shows a season; my dream for WJT is for us to become a hub of new Canadian plays. We're really starting to think about how we can do that, what that model looks like, and how we can serve the Jewish playwriting community of Canada better. And also people who are not Jewish who have written plays that have Jewish content; they don't have to be Jewish.

AMM: 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?

AW: When a person is bold — and I do genuinely appreciate getting those submissions — they will get an email back if they send it to me directly or the company info email. I have a

very extensive reading list. I will say so [in an email], and it will get reviewed, and if we are interested in pursuing it, we will be in touch.

I won't speak on behalf of all artistic directors, but I like to think that any artistic director wants the best plays for their audience. That's why it's not always about what's written, it's about an idea. If you have an idea that's worthwhile, that should be investigated, that's something I want. So, if you've got the thing, you have to be bold enough to reach out.

The other thing I can offer to people when they are submitting, is to include the cast size. Send me a short synopsis, not necessarily a full character breakdown, but something small, the general makeup of it, and five pages of the script. That's actually a better way to pique my interest. I am eager to look for exciting, new plays that serve the mandate of the company.

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

AW: That's a really awesome question. Here's the interesting thing. The way that our budget works, depending on the season, and if I'm being completely honest, flights within Canada are not getting any cheaper. When you're sending me a pitch, consider that we are called the Winnipeg Jewish theatre, and our mandate is to primarily serve the Winnipeg Jewish

community and also to serve Winnipeg's theatre community. We have a rich pool of artists to choose from in this city. And there are times when we have to look outside the community for a role and I take that into consideration when programming a season. I'm constantly trying to factor those equations in.

Part of it, particularly for new works, is that I'm looking at: do we have people here whom I think would serve the play. If it's a new work in development, I'll probably want to workshop it here, with actors that can grow with the piece from workshop to production. For second productions, I am usually looking at: is there a Winnipeg director who would be suited to the piece, are there actors here that I think would be a good fit for the piece, and those are, really, major factors. If I have to go to Toronto, or look all over the country through Skype auditions, it suddenly becomes very costly to put an actor up. Looking at the bottom line of the budget, it works out to be between \$2000 to \$3000 per actor. So that's why second productions are sometimes hard, because a lot of times, with a production that was written out east, the playwright is writing for actors in that community, whether they know it or not.

Part of it, for me, is that I want to give as many local actors an opportunity to go up on stage.

So, it's not necessarily about the playwright with the second production.

AMM: Are there plays that you've read or seen that have excited you?

AW: Essentially, our 20-21 season: *Old Stock - A Refugee Love Story* by Hannah Moscovitch, Ben Caplan and Christian Barry; *Actually* by Anna Ziegler; *Narrow Bridge* by Daniel Thau-Eleff; and *Becoming Dr. Ruth*, by Mark St. Germain.

Plays that aren't holocaust-centric or about New York Jews. That is the world that's exciting to me: what is beyond that.

Comedy. That is the thing that I find hardest to find. Jewish people love to laugh. And you would be surprised at how hard it is to find comedies. Jewish comedies.

AMM: Really?

AW: Yes. Often, they're clichéd. And often they're not written by Jewish people. Ones that avoid stereotype, that are genuine comedies. They're hard to find. Especially from a Canadian perspective.

The work of award-winning author and playwright AM Matte is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council. Notable theatrical productions include *Slipping Mind* in Ottawa and North Bay, as well as *Les murs ont des yeux* in Toronto, Barrie, and Penetanguishene. Publications include short stories in the literary magazines *Virages*, *Ancrages*, and *Luna Station Quarterly*, and in the collections *Where Pigeons Roost* and *Ce que l'on divulgue*.