

**Interview with Ashlie Corcoran, AD of the Arts Club Theatre  
By Leanna Brodie**

*In 2019, Ashlie Corcoran, former Artistic Director of Thousand Islands Playhouse and Theatre Smash, became the Artistic Director of the Arts Club Theatre, the third-largest theatre company in Canada. She spoke to me about her relationship with playwrights in her new community and in her new role in Vancouver, BC.*

On making a real connection with a theatre company:

**I think an important thing for playwrights to think about is: why that theatre? And that was really good advice given to me when Theatre Smash, my little company, was going to produce this play... We were co-producing it with fu-GEN Theatre Company, and we really wanted it to happen at Buddies in Bad Times, so I emailed Brendan Healy – who I had a relationship with already – and I pitched him this play. I didn't send him the whole play: I gave him a little synopsis and a little taste of the piece. And he wrote back and said: "That's so great... but why Buddies?" And I *had* thought about "why Buddies" before—that was why I was pursuing it—but I hadn't articulated it in the email. And I thought that was really great advice. Why do you want *that* theatre company to develop your work, why do you want that theatre company to produce your work...? As opposed to just wanting your work to be produced.**

On the importance of local or BC content versus having current, relevant themes, in terms of her priorities for the Arts Club (I referenced this year's production of Sarena Parmar's *The Orchard: After Chekhov*, set in the Okanagan region):

**I don't think, in art, that it's ever one box that you're clicking. And in programming, it's certainly never that. Also, in programming, there's something that's instinctual, and not analytical, I think. Sarena's play is a play that I did read when she was first starting to develop it, and I couldn't... I was the Artistic Director of the Thousand Islands Playhouse, and it was a very early draft, but I remember saying to her: "There's something interesting in this, let me know what happens with it." And at that point I never expected to be here, in this job... but it was just on my radar. And then when I was starting to programme for my first season, I was excited that it was a new script; I was excited that she was from BC; I was excited that the piece was dealing with the most pertinent issues in our society today; and I was excited that there was a very strong local... she's a local voice, there are local touchstones for the audience. And what I really learned in Vancouver was, when you put something about BC or Vancouver onstage here, people respond to it even more strongly than what I experienced in Toronto. Because I think—huge generalization, but—I think, in Toronto, people are sort of used to seeing themselves on TV or reading novels about Toronto. And so, Toronto onstage would be, "Oh, yes, of course Toronto's onstage." And here, I've really felt that the audience is electrified when something that they know so well, they see onstage.**

On the importance of realizing that the work you have taken to someone may stay with them for a long time before they can do anything with it:

**Yeah! Well, that example of Sarena is a great example. Like, that was... (laughs) I was at another theatre company at the time, when I read that play!**

On how often a playwright should keep in touch... Let's say that someone has already made contact, but has been told, "There isn't a place for the play this season, but you're on our radar."

**Well, I can't speak for anyone else but me... Everyone has a different amount that they want to be contacted... There's definitely that fine line between being in touch and feeling, "Oh good, we're still connected," and feeling, "Ugh, I'm going to have to say no *again!*" So, how do I feel...? I feel like I like people reaching out to me. I don't mind people reaching out to me.**

*Would you feel like, if there something that's shifted – like "oh, Centaur is doing this piece" – that there's a reason to contact you?*

**That's a great way to frame it. Or, "I've written a new draft..." "My thoughts about it have shifted..." "I know that Centaur is excited about doing it..." or "I've learned more about the Arts Club and what you're programming, and I see it maybe in *this* light."**

On the new works that Arts Club audiences have been most excited about:

**Well, it's still pretty early days for me, right? In this first season, the only new play was *The Orchard*.... And then next season we are premiering Marcus Youssef's play, *It's a Wonderful Holiday Christmas-ish Miracle*. And I was just starting our strategic business plan this week for where we want to be in five years: I was writing about how I want to see the amount of new work on our stage to have quite increased. And I'm already seeing—not in the season we're going into but the season afterwards—that there's a bunch of different things boiling and percolating up that we have an opportunity to program, I think. So, how the audience reacts... I think I'm going to learn more as the seasons progress because at this point it's only been that one play... and that's just because, as a new artistic leader, I'm excited about that developmental process, and it takes a while to develop new plays. So, I think there'll be a lot more new plays on our stages in subsequent years. I think we have nine plays that we're actively developing.**

On how she finds existing plays (or how they find their way to her):

**I've got a worldwide network and a Canada-wide network of people I trust, whether they be people who are in a non-programming perspective, like actors or playwrights, or even... One person I'm thinking of right now in England is someone who just loves going to the theatre, right? It doesn't have to be an artistic director or an agent, although I also have those people**

**(that I trust) across Canada and around the world too. Yeah, I just try to read as much as possible.**

On how she sees the role of the Associate Artistic Director (a new position at the company, held by Stephen Drover)

**In that title there's probably an insight into how I want our relationship to work, which is: very collaborative. And there was a Literary Manager position at the Arts Club, but it was a part-time Literary Manager position. And I wanted it to be a full-time position: and I wanted to look at both play development and this thing that we call "professional community engagement." So, how are we engaging with our local artists, not purely as an employer—which we are, of course, for some people—but also how can we throw open our doors and our resources, and share our expertise? And be a leader in creating the community here in Vancouver.**

**I thought a lot about the opportunity to engage with the local community before I showed up. And when I got here, I thought a lot about that potential position. I also thought about my experience in new play development at the Tarragon Theatre—where I was a *baby!*—and also taking that and starting a playwrights' unit at Thousand Islands Playhouse; and taking the kinds of play development activities that I have seen be really fruitful at other theatres... I thought about all those things; I wrote up a big job description... (laughs) and we started a search! At that point the job was actually called "Artistic Associate," I think. And we interviewed a whole whack of people—a lot of incredibly talented people here in Vancouver. And when the decision was made for it to be Stephen—which I thought was incredible because he has all this experience as a dramaturg, and also with Rumble [*Theatre, where Stephen Drover was the Artistic Director prior to accepting his position at the Arts Club*], with doing this kind of professional community engagement, working with emerging artists—we talked about changing the title and making it Associate Artistic Director, in part to show how important that department, wing, activities are at the Arts Club. So, it wasn't about his ego! But more about saying: "This work is really important; this is at the core of what we're doing; this is at the core of how we want to *be*, how we aspire to be leaders in our community."**

On how the creation of this new position reflects an openness to multiple ways of playmaking:

**The office actually used to say... "Literary Office," I think? Mine says, "Office of the Artistic Director," it doesn't have my name... and his said, "Literary Office," and we scratched that out, because even just calling it that means it's only one kind of theatre-making... and that being said, we also love the one-voice, pure-playwright process, and we are celebrating that through our emerging playwrights unit. It isn't like we're turning our back on that: it's just that we want to be open-minded to all kinds of creation of new work.**

On what she's looking for in a new play:

I think sometimes playwrights are trying to figure out—Stephen Drover and I talk about this a lot... When I say: “Learn about the Arts Club and figure out why your play fits well for the Arts Club,” I don’t mean, figure out a formula of what we’re doing and write to that. Write the play that you want to write, and then... We do eighteen shows a year, right? In three different venues. And we also have one that tours. Sometimes we do new work there, as well. *In a Blue Moon*, that was a co-pro before I arrived here... with Thousand Islands Playhouse! So, there’s a lot of breadth in our programming, and that’s something that I am firmly a champion for. I don’t believe that we should be saying, “The only kind of work we do is *this*, at the Arts Club.” What makes us special and unique is that we can do such a huge diversity... and so, there is not *one* thing that I’m looking for in a play, at all. But, knowing the play that you’ve written, as a playwright... knowing what *space* it might be good for, or why a *theme* may resonate with a Vancouver audience... those are good things to include in your pitch.

On how playwrights who are not familiar with Vancouver could nonetheless create a sense of excitement while discussing their play:

There are a million things that will resonate with a Vancouver audience. So maybe they approach it in a different way: “I know this really resonates with a particular demographic,” a particular age, or gender, or something.

On what keeps her working in theatre:

Because I love it?! Just like every other theatre artist! I think we all know we could be working elsewhere and making more money, or having more time off, or whatever that balance would be, but... my answer is not unique, I think it’s the same answer that *you* would say, or all the people who will be reading this: that there’s a power in communicating between a live performer and an audience member... in that space in between those two people where ideas ignite... I don’t think that that is an easy thing to find in many other places.

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Ashlie Corcoran’s bio: <https://artsclub.com/about/leadership#aslie-corcoran>

Arts Club play development and submissions page: <https://artsclub.com/about/new-play-development>