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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Brett Christopher,
Artistic Director of Thousand Islands
Playhouse in Gananoque, ON

Conducted by Genevieve Adam,
February 2023



Brett Christopher has been an active member of the Canadian theatre community since graduating from George Brown theatre school in 2001. Celebrated as both an actor and a director, he has worked with a variety of theatre companies across the country, large and small. He was the recipient of both the Masques and Mecca Awards for his performance of the solo show *I Am My Own Wife* at the Segal Centre in Montreal. His direction of *The Tempest* for Barrie's Theatre by the Bay was named one of the country's top productions by Robert Cushman of the *National Post*.

Brett has worked in an administrative capacity for a number of theatre organizations, including Buddies in Bad Times, Actors Repertory Company, and Theatre Kingston where he founded the Storefront Fringe Festival and The Kick & Push Festival.

For the last five years, he has held the position of Managing Artistic Director of the Thousand Islands Playhouse in Gananoque, Ontario.

Genevieve Adam (GA): What is the mandate or focus of the Thousand Islands Playhouse?

Brett Christopher (BC): The Thousand Islands Playhouse produces a broad repertoire of plays that includes large scale musicals, comedies, and contemporary dramatic works. In addition, the company acts as a creative community hub, providing classes, workshops, concerts, use of its venues, and kids events. We are always striving to deepen our relationship with the community in order to best serve and support those in our region.

GA: How often does the theatre premiere new Canadian plays?

BC: Generally speaking, we try to premiere a new Canadian play every three years. That can be something that we've developed internally (i.e. Mark Crawford's *Bed & Breakfast*, Marcia Johnson's *Serving Elizabeth*), something that we read that we're excited by, or something that we co-produce with another company. In the interim, we look to support Canadian playwrights by programming the second or third production of a new script (e.g. Ellie Moon's *Asking for It*, Marie Beath Badian's *Prairie Nurse*), or supporting tours with presentations (Emil Sher's *The Boy in the Moon*, Tracey Power's *Glory*).

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

BC: Strong dialogue, great laughs, interesting characters, and a beautiful heart.

GA: Regarding Process, how does a playwright get your attention with a new play? Do you have a submission policy?

BC: Generally, I ask someone to reach out to inquire about our interest in reading the script with a short pitch. Timing-wise, the best time to do this is in the winter as things are slower and there is time to dig into new works. Programming tends to crystallize from April – June for the following season and the final lineup is presented to the board in mid-August.

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

BC: Ideally, the script comes to me as a proposed production draft.

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

BC: I will receive 100-150 scripts a year, ranging from pitch paragraphs to published books. Unfortunately, I don't have time to read them all, so the initial reason for my interest is probably just luck of the timing of the submission.

GA: Roughly how many are submitted by women playwrights?

BC: I'm not quite sure but I would say approximately 75% of the submissions come from women.

GA: What is the process you go through reading new scripts?

BC: Initially, I'm looking for a good idea that would reasonably be produced on one of our stages (size of production, tone of the script, unique concept.) If interested, I'll read the first 20 pages or so, to get a sense of the writer's ability for dialogue, sense of theatricality, and

understanding of the arc of a scene. From there, I'll put together a shortlist of plays that I'll commit to reading the whole work. These will form the foundation of my thinking for future investment towards either developmental steps or full production.

GA: 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?

BC: No follow-ups. I received it.

GA: Do you prefer an invite to a staged reading or a production rather over reading a new script?

BC: Absolutely – seeing the work read aloud by actors or actually produced (even an archival video) makes my life much easier.

GA: Do you have a general comment about your contact with playwrights who want to get their play produced at your theatre? What works for you and what makes you a little crazy/turned off?

BC: Many pitches start with “this play would be perfect for your theatre...” or “This is a cheap play to produce!” – don't bother with that. I can quickly determine what it would cost to put on and what the audience reaction will be. Do the work of researching the plays that the company has produced in the past and then speak to what this either resembles or challenges in that past programming. This might be the moment that I want to invest in something that totally challenges the status quo of the company.

GA: 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?

BC: I think it's worth recognizing that theatres that focus on new work are higher funded by the Canada Council, etc. That means that they aren't as reliant on ticket revenue and the plays that they produce don't need to have broad commercial appeal. It's a chicken and egg scenario where the risk is in the hands of the producer. As a company that relies on box office revenue to cover 50% of its operating budget, sometimes we need to consider name-brand appeal when programming. Unfortunately, it's extremely rare for a new Canadian play to carry this sort of name brand appeal without a legacy of successful previous productions. Therefore, most companies are waiting for something to 'hit' before committing it to a season.

GA: Regrading content, what is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play?

BC: There is no single genre or style or theme that I am looking to program. Stories are as vast and varied as people in this country. Every one interesting, every one worthy of telling. However, the skill of the storyteller is truly what separates the wheat from the chaff. Any story can be compelling and resonant to an audience if it is well told.

GA: On a personal note, what keeps you working in the theatre?

BC: Every single day brings a new challenge, a new chance for excitement, something to overcome, something to be elated about. It is inherently so collaborative, and so present. I love driving to work with no idea what might happen that day.

Genevieve Adam is a graduate of the George Brown Theatre School in Toronto and holds an MFA from the East15 Acting School in the UK. Selected acting credits include *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* (CBS), *The Big Cigar* (AppleTV), *Mrs. America* (FX), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu), *Stag & Doe* (Capitol Theatre), *Romeo and Juliet* (Theatre By the Bay), *Annabel* (BBC4), *Measure for Measure* (Thought for Food) and *Recall* (Toronto Fringe) - for which she was nominated as Outstanding Actress in the 2017 MyEntWorld Critics' Pick Awards. Her first play, *Deceitful Above All Things*, premiered at SummerWorks in 2015 and won several accolades, including Outstanding New Play, Outstanding Production, and Best Emerging Artist. It was remounted at the Factory in association with The Storefront Theatre in February 2017. Subsequent plays include *Bedsport* (Newmarket National Play Festival), *New World* (Future Theatre Festival), *Anatomy of A Dancer* (Next Stage 2019), *The Boat Show* (Lost Souls' Collective), and *If The Shoe Fits*, which won second place in the Toronto Fringe 2019 New Writing Contest. Her most recent play, *Dark Heart*, was named one of the top theatrical productions of 2018 by the *Toronto Star*. Genevieve is part of the 2023 Creator's Units at the Capitol Theatre in Port Hope and the Guild Festival Theatre in Toronto. She is also the poet behind the whimsical #haikusofthepandemic series.

