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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Chelsea Haberlin,
AD of Newworld Theatre

Conducted by Louise Casemore,
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CHELSEA HABERLIN

Chelsea has lived most of her life on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, specifically the $xw\text{m}\text{ə}\theta\text{k}\text{w}\acute{a}\text{y}\text{əm}$ (Musqueam), $Skwxw\acute{u}7\text{mesh}$ (Squamish), and $S\acute{a}\acute{l}\acute{i}lw\acute{a}t\text{a}?$ /Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations and she is honoured to call this gorgeous place her home. She is a white woman of mixed Italian-Scottish-English-Swiss heritage. She is a mom and is married to theatre artist Sebastien Archibald.

Chelsea has been creating theatre in some form since she was a very little girl making plays in her basement. She is the Artistic Director of Newworld Theatre and Associate Artist with ITSAZOO Productions, a company she co-founded in 2006. As a director, she has worked with: ITSAZOO Productions, Newworld Theatre, Arts Club Theatre, Firehall Arts Centre, Theatre SKAM, Pacific Theatre, Delinquent Theatre, Studio 58, and many more. Chelsea is forever searching for new ways to surprise and engage an audience and is particularly passionate about meaningful collaboration, immersive environments, community engagement, and reconciliation.

Chelsea has an MFA in directing from UBC and a BFA from UVic and she is an adjunct professor at UBC. She is the recipient of the Sydney J Risk Award in directing, the Ray Michal Award for outstanding body of work by an emerging director, and a two-time winner and five-time Jessie Richardson Award nominee for Outstanding Direction. She is a member of the Advisory Committee for Balancing Act, and she sits on the boards of Vancouver Creative Space Society, Creekview Housing Coop (where she is grateful to live!), and Aenigma Theatre.

For years, I have been highly curious about the work of Vancouver's Newworld Theatre, given their track record for unique, contemporary, and community-minded theatre. And, as I do love a good meet-cute (and any excuse for a conversation about the space between playwrights and decision-makers), I thought the AD Interview Series would be an excellent way to get in touch with an artistic leader from one province over whom I'd felt a bit intimidated about connecting with unsolicited. I am very glad I conducted this interview, as it reinforces the idea that through access we gain understanding, and from understanding grows opportunity.

Louise Casemore (LC): Alright. So, for the purpose of this interview, I am going to pretend I am not a nerdy superfan for the organization you run, so to begin, what would you say is the mandate or focus of Newworld Theatre?

Chelsea Haberlin (CH): Newworld tells stories that explore identity and the complexities held within our identities. Historically we've always told stories that have not been seen on mainstages, so stories of folks who have been historically marginalized, or whose stories have not been given the attention we believe they deserve. We always think a lot about whose stories are being told and who does the telling; that's a really big part of our work.

LC: That's really interesting, and it sounds like the mandate covers both the content and the approach of the work when it comes to stories that aren't typically told in other spaces.

CH: One hundred percent! The process, and the way the story is told, is as vital as anything else to us, for sure.

LC: Understanding that right now is a pretty peculiar time for artists in general, in the bigger picture, in relationship to new plays or new works, can you tell me a bit about the model that Newworld takes when it comes to developing new work?

CH: It's an evolving model because I am a relatively new Artistic Director here. I have been in the role of Artistic Director for about a year and a half.

LC: (Laughing) You got in just in time for pandemic!

CH: I know, right? I have been involved with the organization for a long time and was Associate AD for a few years, but I have officially been in the Artistic Director role for a year and a half. The previous Artistic Director, Marcus Youssef, is a writer and a creator, and a very well-respected one, so for many years the company's work centered on his writing and his projects, as well as including the work of others, as Marcus is highly collaborative. But what I am interested in as the new AD is really making Newworld a home for a multiplicity of writers. I am not a writer myself. I'm a director, and I'm involved in many creation processes and feel comfortable in that space, but it's not my primary art. My art form is artistic direction and direction, and so the thing that I'm interested in as an AD is the possibility and potential in a project, and supporting the individual to get it there. So, I'm really envisioning Newworld as a place that many people can make work and have their work supported.

LC: Which is really exciting, and part of the reason why I wanted to connect with you specifically in this series, because I think Newworld represents an exciting example of a company that is transitioning away from a central creating artist, opening-up into a new model of work. And as we in the bigger ecology look at sustainability practices and those sorts of things, looking at how we maintain companies for a long time in a healthy way, it's a really exciting evolution, I think, to see a company evolving in such a generous way.

CH: Yeah. It's scary too because there is something safe about, "I am the creator and I'm going to make the plays," and there is something scary about engaging in a number of new commissions and projects and developing those new relationships that I hope will exist over a long period of time. So, it's scary, but also for me very exciting to see the possibility of many different people in this sort of model.

LC: As part of the transition, I assume that includes a healthy component of new work development, as opposed to pulling an Ibsen play off the shelf out of nowhere. I am curious about the Associate relationships that Newworld has had in the past. Can you tell me a little bit about the company's work with Associate productions and that kind of collaboration?

CH: Yeah, so one of the really important things for us is that our programming is what we like to call "responsive programming." We really like to pay attention to what's occurring around us and how our ideas are either flourishing and being responded to really strongly or not really taking off. So, I would say that for us, the Associate productions have always been part of the responsive model. It's typically people who

we have some sort of relationship with in the community, people coming to us and asking us to be involved in some way in the production. And it's super flexible. We say, "What do you need? What do you want?" And they say what they want and need, and we propose what we are able to offer. So, it's been quite informal, and I think it will remain informal, but what I am interested in is reaching new artists and letting them know that we do this. I feel like it's challenging in small indie theatre to let people know that the door is open, that you're there to support. And I remember when I was an emerging artist feeling like the doors were closed and that I couldn't get into the building, and I feel like I want people to know that we don't have formal application processes in place for Associate productions or for our commissions at this point, but I am very open to conversation. Pretty much anyone who sends me a script, we will have a conversation.

LC: That's a beautiful segue. One of the standard questions that folks are looking for inside these interviews is, "How does a playwright or an artist get your attention with a play?" What are the things that are most conducive to the way you like to work and find out about people if they don't have luxury of being able to invite you to a production in town?

CH: We are not a huge company, so I will always respond to an artist about a production. (Laughs) It's kind of simple, right? I hope that I am approachable, which isn't a great answer, but it's more of an invitation. The thing that I would hope is that if folks have a script or idea that they think fits Newworld, or if they are curious about Newworld, that they can engage in a conversation with me about that. And that's

the kind of the process that has evolved so far. My honest answer is that I have room for these conversations. I think that people think smaller or creation-based companies aren't somewhere they can take this kind of thing, and we are now. We are a place for that.

LC: That will be very exciting news to a whole host of playwrights who may read this.

CH: Cool! Good!

LC: Is there anything specific you might want to include about your interest in relationships with female, trans, nonbinary, and/or Two-Spirit artists?

CH: Because our mandate is really to explore identity, I am interested in telling stories and offering a stage to stories that haven't seen enough audiences, and I think that all of the individuals you just described are groups who haven't had enough stage time. I am really interested in having conversations, because one of the things at Newworld we talk a lot about is working across perceptions of difference, so I think there is a real opportunity for us to engage with any artist who have ever viewed themselves or been made to feel different or othered or outside. I am interested in Newworld being a place where those artists can tell the story that they want to tell. As I am a white, straight, cis woman, and I am very interested in telling stories that I identify with, and also that aren't my story. Both of those things are fascinating. So, I welcome a diversity of perspectives.

LC: A practical question about playwrights who get in touch: do you have a process or a system of communication when it comes to inquiries?

When scripts are submitted, some companies will have a policy indicating an email will be sent acknowledging receipt, or there is a message that playwrights will only hear back if the idea holds some interest for the company. Is there anything set up like that at Newworld?

CH: That's a really good question. We don't have anything formal like that set up at Newworld because, again, we are so small and we get so few [submissions], but now that you have offered that, I would like to set up something actually! That's a great provocation for me to be a little bit more concrete and formal in the way that I talk with folks. What I do now, is that I will always respond if something comes in to acknowledge receipt and then what happens is I say, "I will read this by this time," and then we can have a conversation. That timeline depends on what is going on with the company. So, no, there is nothing formal, but there should be, so that's a great invitation!

LC: Do you have preferences for how you like to take in material from playwrights? Such as a hard copy of a script, or video of a production, etc.?

CH: I've never been given options as to how material is given to me, as I am almost always sent an email, which I then read that way. So, would I even want anything else? I don't think I would want a hard copy. That's a lot of work for the playwright and that's expensive too, and to tell you the truth, with all the Zoom now and too many screens, I'm having a hard time watching theatre online. So, I do feel like a PDF script is great. If I was receiving 500 scripts a week I think I'd be a lot more specific, but right now I say however you want to get it to me is good!

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about your perspective when it comes to second productions, plays that have been done elsewhere, and what interest that holds or doesn't hold inside the work you do?

CH: Yeah, I am really interested in second productions, and I have actually been thinking about that and the ways that those can happen. Because the theatre community in Vancouver is very small, second productions within Vancouver are essentially not worth it from an audience perspective, but I have read a number of scripts from other cities that premiered that are really of interest. One of the productions that we are working on right now is *The Boy In The Moon* by Emil Sher. Crow's Theatre (in Toronto) actually has a fairly large and well received touring production of that show, and when I thought a lot about should we do it, there were many things about our production that were very Newworld, very community-engaged, very rooted in the Anti-Oppression practices that we bring into everything we do. So, I have been thinking that if we are going to do published plays or second production plays, that that's the way we would want to do it.

LC: To have some level of specificity in what Newworld would approach with the production?

CH: Exactly. And that tends to happen quite organically in our productions because of the questions that we ask of every piece and the way that we engage. And for me as an artist it's


always the question of how do we find a piece that's for us?

LC: I'm curious, with the work that excites you when it comes to programming and development, are there any themes or common threads that unite the work that catches your interest?

CH: I can tell you what is really on my mind a lot right now – what I am really interested in is outdoor performance that is connected to Newworld's mandate, or site-specific performance that is connected to Newworld's mandate. My history as a director is in those areas, and also in-your-face theatre, which is not something that you see very often, especially in Vancouver. So, theatre that is brave and bold and challenging, that addresses questions or identity and race and difference, but not in a way that is obvious; that pushes us a little further than we have been willing to go before, that complicates the often overly simplified issues. Those are things that I am finding I am looking for.

Another thing is that I am really interested in working with Indigenous artists. I have a couple of conversations happening with Indigenous artists and I am just really interested in more.

Those are the big ones for me right now. And I am loving working with women. It hasn't been intentional but I am finding myself really working so well with female identifying collaborators. (Laughs) It's so efficient!



Louise Casemore is an artist advocate, prairie nuisance, and two-time Sterling Award winning playwright. Based in Alberta, she is the recipient of the ATP/Enbridge Playwrights Award, a member of the Citadel Theatre Dramaturgy Lab, and a featured artist in NYC's "Necessary Exposure: The Female Playwright Project." Original works include *OCD*, *Functional*, *GEMINI* (Chinook Series, High Performance Rodeo), and the upcoming cabaret exorcism that is *Undressed* (Alberta Theatre Projects). Louise remains active in the larger community by way of policy writing, teaching, and research, for instance, driving Alberta Playwrights Network's national, long-range study of new play development, "Surveying The Landscape."

