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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Clare Preuss,
AD of Downstage Theatre

Conducted by Natalie Meisner,
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CLARE PREUSS

Clare is a multidisciplinary artist who has worked across Canada and in Germany, Lebanon, Switzerland, Uganda, and the USA. She has collaborated with Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, Banff Centre, Bayimba International Festival, BeMe Theatre, Blyth Festival, Buddies in Bad Times, Buffalo Infringement Festival, Cahoots Theatre, Canadian Stage, Driftwood Theatre, Factory Theatre, fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre, FRICTION GROUP, Gwaandak Theatre, Native Earth Performing Arts, New Harlem Productions, National Arts Centre, Nightwood Theatre, Paprika Festival, Ramshackle Theatre, Stratford Festival, SummerWorks, Sundown Theatre, Theatre Direct Canada, Theatre Monnot Beirut, Theatre Passe Muraille, Why Not Theatre, and Young People's Theatre, among others. Clare is a recipient of the Houselighters of the Citadel Theatre Award and has been nominated for the Pauline McGibbon Award, John Hirsch Director Award (OAC), John Hirsch Director Prize (CCA), and twice for the Gina Wilkinson Award.

Clare is the Artistic Director of Downstage in Calgary.

I had the good fortune in April to interview the wonderful Clare Preuss, who is now going into her second year of Artistic Directorship at the dynamic Downstage Theatre in Calgary, Alberta. This interview was conducted with Zoom. We took a moment to acknowledge the many challenges of the current moment and then got down to the business of an AD/Playwright dialogue.

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NATALIE MEISNER (NM): What is the mandate/focus of the theatre? Downstage Theatre is billed as, ‘Theatre that creates conversation around current social issues.’ What can you add to this, and how have you put your personal stamp on the vision since you took the wheel?

CLARE PREUSS (CP): These conversations can sometimes be difficult but they are ideal if people, no matter how tricky the conversation becomes, are feeling held. It is (here Preuss reaches in the air to demonstrate an embrace of a group) a circle more than a straight line. We want to include audiences in a dialogue. I think of a circle, rather than a straight line. We aren’t going to point at you or lecture you. I am interested in examining challenging social issues with generosity. While we converse about important and sometimes difficult issues, I believe we must always do so empathetically.

An aside: One important aspect of the company’s work is the way they are making community engaged work that directly responds to some of the most urgent problems facing our city. An example of this is the company’s recent Safe Site. This project explores access to public space, supervised consumption services, and adjacent communities.

CP: (*continuing*) Empathy while we converse about important, sometimes difficult, issues is key. We had people from all walks of life come to Safe Site. Judges, health care workers, community members who used the site, people passing by... The same was true for Sunny’s show [the fabulous Sunny Drake’s play, *Men Express Their Feelings*]. Some came for hockey, some came for race, some came for the queer element. The post-show conversation is about audience members talking to each other about the issues raised by the play. We invite people to put both feet on the floor and bring embodied practice and mindfulness to the conversation. That’s what theatre offers that other media do not: the opportunity to be with other human beings and breath with your whole body. It offers opportunities for openness to hear and to grow.

An aside: These embodied practices are also at the heart of Creative Stretch, Preuss’s weekly offering of yoga, meditation, journal writing, play, deep relaxation, and more. This event was initially offered live at the Calgary Public Library and now shifted to an online format at, which you can find HERE.

NM: How often does Downstage premiere and/or program new Canadian plays?

CP: Right now, we aim to premiere one new Canadian play per year, but we would like to build up from that.

NM: Approximately how many play submissions do you receive as AD?

CP: They come in at different speeds depending on the season, but on average, I would say about one per week.

NM: What is your submission process for new plays?

CP: First of all, we have the Simon Mallett New Work program. This program, while it isn't necessarily developing a project for a Downstage future season, offers support for work that bravely tackles social issues. There is also a standard submission process, but for this, please send a one-page synopsis first, and if we want to see the whole script, we will get back to you.

NM: Can you tell us a bit about your process when you're reading new scripts?

CP: I read very slowly, ponder, go back, piece it together. Live in it a bit. Ask myself, "Who is this play for?" Who are we following, who is the protagonist? Then I think about issues such as balance in a season. I might already have a comedy, for example, so I might need something different to flesh out a season. My preference is for hearing a script, actually.

NM: Ah, so do you prefer an invite to a staged reading or a production rather over a text copy of a new script?

CP: Yes! Or even a live recording of a staged reading. These are great timesavers for someone who reviews a lot of scripts, and they are also better at capturing the spirit of a piece.

An Aside: We both pause to note that any such recordings could not be shared publicly, and would need to be cleared with the actors and CAEA.

NM: A common concern for playwrights is that while it is hard enough to get a premiere... getting a second production can sometimes seem like an impossible dream. True or False? How might a playwright go about getting a second production with Downstage?

CP: The pressure to have a premiere is real. Here are the questions we have to ask ourselves when we decide to stage something: What makes it leading-edge for Calgary? What makes it poignant for Calgary now? Our mandate isn't necessarily to have the world premiere; it is to offer something relevant and front of mind to the Calgarian conversation. This is key because we are still under-represented on the Canadian stage. This was something we had in mind, for example, when selecting Sunny's show. The hockey theme made it even more relevant to the region. So, I ask myself, when deciding what to stage: What makes this relevant to the conversations we are having in YYC right now? I get a lot of scripts that I love, but they just aren't Downstage shows. My taste as an artist goes beyond the mandate of the theatre.

NM: An important note for all of us to remember when it comes to selection.

CP: Absolutely.

NM: Are there themes, issues, styles, or genres that you are most interested in exploring over the next while?

CP: As a human I am personally on a comedy kick right now. The challenge of something being life-changing, moving, and fucking hilarious is where I am at. I want something rip-roaringly funny that also has people weeping by the end. The balance of gut punch and laughter. Comedy opens us, lets us open up to the change. It is a physiological thing.

NM: Yes, I feel that too. Can you give us five words to describe Downstage's audiences?

CP: We skew toward younger audiences, but not exclusively. We have Student Ambassadors, we have queer folk and allies... Our audiences are people who care about political theatre and also come ready to engage in conversation afterwards. For example, for our Climate Change Theatre Action staged readings, over 80% stayed for the second act, which was a long table discussion. People were very keen to talk about the issues. Our audiences are on the leading edge of the conversation.

NM: Is there anything you want to tell us about how you are reaching out to your audiences and staying connected during the pandemic?

CP: We have taken Creative Stretch online. We are looking for ways to go forward with parts of The ShakeUp Festival. We are looking for ways

to honour commitments to the artists and also bring the work to audiences online in innovative ways. There will be more announcements on this as things take shape for the fall.

NM: I am always interested in theatre origin stories. Can you tell us what brought you to theatre in the first place?

CP: I've been dancing and making theatre for as long as I can remember. I spent many hours of my elementary school years curating, directing, and producing plays. I started dance classes at the age of 3. After years of tap, jazz, and ballet training, I shifted my focus to cheerleading, where I began choreographing our halftime dance routines. In grade 10, I started acting in high school musicals and, at the age of 16, I got my first paying gig at Great West Summer Theatre in Fort Macleod, Alberta. I acted with the company again the following summer, and then moved up to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta. The following year, I was accepted into the BFA Acting Program and graduated in 1999. I promptly moved to Toronto and began acting in theatre, film, TV, and commercials as well as devising new work [see her full bio below].

NM: For fun, tell us one thing about you that seems totally made-up, but is in fact true.

CP: My Mom was a nun. I am a bastard, and I grew up in a house with no hallways!



Natalie Meisner is a playwright, an award-winning multi-genre author, and the newly named Poet Laureate of Calgary. Her play *Boom Baby* (about the lives of workers in the oil patch) won both the Canadian National Playwriting Award and the Alberta Playwriting Award. *Double Pregnant: Two Lesbians Make a Family* topped nonfiction lists and was a finalist in the Atlantic Book Awards. *Speed dating for Sperm Donors* (Playwrights Canada Press) was a hit at Lunchbox and Neptune Theatres. Her children's book *My Mommy, My Mama, My Brother & Me* is available from Nimbus Publishing. *Baddy One Shoe* is Meisner's first book of poems and her ode to the renegades of the past and present who fight the powers that be with laughter. She is a wife and mom to two great boys, and a Professor in the Department of English at Mount Royal University where she works in the areas of creative writing, drama and gender/sexuality studies.

Visit Natalie Meisner's website at: www.nataliemeisner.com

