



PGC
WOMEN'S
CAUCUS
NEWSLETTER

Interview with Eda Holmes,
Artistic Director of the Centaur Theatre
in Montreal, QC

Conducted by Melissa Yuan-Innes
March 2023



Eda Holmes, according to the *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*, is “one of the busiest and most accomplished theatre directors in Canada,” and deemed “particularly notable,” is her work with new Canadian playwrights and women. Eda worked regularly as a director at the Shaw Festival where she was appointed Associate Director in 2009, and she continued to direct plays for Shaw through to 2016.

Some of Eda's directing highlights include *Helen's Necklace* by Carole Fréchette, *Alice's Affair* by Susan Coyne, and *The Optimists* and *The Pessimists* by Morwyn Brebner for Tarragon Theatre; Brebner's *Little Mercy's First Murder*, a Tarragon/Shaw co-production that won seven Dora Awards; *Lucy* for Canadian Stage; *The Fall* for GCTC; *Pina Bausch: A Tribute for the Harbourfront World Leaders Festival*; *Standing Female Nude* for Factory Theatre; *Side By Side By Sondheim* at Canadian Stage; and the English-language premiere of Michel-Marc Bouchard's *Tom at the Farm* for Buddies in Bad Times.

In 2017, Eda was appointed Artistic and Executive Director of the Centaur Theatre. She directed the premiere of Bouchard's *Embrasse* for Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in September 2021, and she directed the English premiere (under the title *Kisses Deep*) at the Centaur in January 2022.

Eda is also a regular guest teacher at the National Theatre School of Canada and McGill University.

Melissa Yuan-Innes (MYI): *What's the best way for a playwright to get your attention with a new play?*

Eda Holmes (EH): We don't have a specific submission process for the main theatre season at the Centaur; however, I will accept submissions if I know even a little bit about the playwright. "Cold calls" are difficult if you know nothing about the person and don't have a reference, but I just got a play from someone I knew very slightly at Tarragon many years ago, so I said, "Absolutely, I'll read your play." She also had a really nice synopsis, two lines about "This is the story of blah blah blah."

For Wildside, read the call, apply to the right thing, and make sure your project actually fits. Don't hesitate to reach out for clarifications.

MYI: *Super. And Wildside plays can get picked up for the main stage?*

EH: We have had Wildside projects do the main stage later. Wildside content is meant to be different, more adventurous, and originally it had a really strong connection to the Fringe, like a Winter Fringe. We try to find a way to push the aesthetic envelope a bit.

MYI: *That makes sense. So, if we don't already know you, how can we make a connection?*

EH: It's a matter of getting to know the nature of the theatre you're interested in. Go to the theatre. Know what kind of work they program and if your work lends itself to that institution or company. Here in Montreal, the opportunities for anglophone playwrights are limited. I give the most space I can to local playwrights. Alex Haber sent me three plays.

I knew her, I knew her husband. I ended up programming her play. I programmed Fanny Lacroix also.

It's the same with a place like the Shaw Festival. See the plays, what it is, what's going on, what makes a play successful. Make a few connections. It's all in the timing.

MYI: *Right. Do you see that happening with women playwrights?*

EH: I think women playwrights get rejected and get discouraged and see it as a kind of judgement. Men don't have that problem because they barely listen.

MYI: *Ha ha!*

EH: If you do get feedback that's useful, use it, but don't assume that anyone knows better than you what you're doing.

MYI: *I totally agree. How do we find calls for submission for Centaur?*

EH: Primarily on our website. Wildside gets a little social media push. Check back on our website.

MYI: *And subscribe to your newsletter?*

EH: You can subscribe to our newsletter, but that's primarily a sales tool. Check back with our website. There's Rose Plotek who curates and we should put a call out to PGC. I'd like to create opportunities in Montreal for pieces that have had some workshopping.

MYI: *Do you mean like a playwrighting unit? Can you explain what that is?*

EH: For a playwriting unit, my first experience was at Tarragon. It's a group of artists where the Tarragon is interested in their work for potential future productions. This group of writers, their point of view and writing, is what Tarragon might want to shepherd toward plays that will find their audience.

Look at Playwrights Workshop Montreal (PWM). They don't produce, but they look at the current crop of mid-career writers who have a new play, professionalizing them, and giving them a sense that they're not alone.

I'm met with PWM in March about a new project: cross-cultural classical adaptations. We're interested in cultural identities and ideas. That's something we can do at Centaur, like a new version of *Elektra* in another country.

MYI: *Interesting. If playwrights obtain a premiere, what about a second production with your company?*

EH: Absolutely. La Licorne takes plays from T.O. that weren't hugely successful and translates them. Artistic Director Philippe Lambert is very interesting. He saw that Jason Sherman did okay at Tarragon a few years ago. He said, this will talk to my audience in a different way with actors from here in French. Phillippe is somebody who's always looking for the newest. Sylvain Belanger from Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui looks for work from Quebec only.

So, get to know the artistic directors who are doing new work and the new work-focused theatres. At the Centaur, our mandate isn't new work. We do a variety. We don't have a

playwriting unit yet, but I hope to develop one in the coming years. This is different from Tarragon, which focuses on new plays and new Canadian plays. It's a matter of diving in and figuring in out what work is being done where.

MYI: *I noticed you have talk backs that might help us figure out what's of interest.*

EH: Yes, we have several things. A preshow conversation with a design team; a Sunday chat-up with the former editor-in-chief of the *Montreal Gazette*. We open-up a conversation about the play and how it speaks to people. If you're physically in town, make an appointment with the artistic director. If they don't have time, they probably have a literary manager or associate artist. Introduce yourself at a talkback. "I sent you..." Follow up!

MYI: *That's a brave thing to do. At your salon, do you get any odd responses?*

EH: We had an amazing, crazy argument about Hannah Moscovitch's *Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes*. An older woman was pissed off. We witnessed the generational divide in women's voices. We make monoliths about everybody. Women are not a monolith. You treat us as such at your peril. I learned a lot. I learned that the audience is way more sophisticated in what they're able to read from a production. It's really healthy for me as an artist. They're not all sitting back, saying entertain me. If I'm not entertaining myself, I'm going to lose them.

Tony Kushner said that boring an audience is the same as killing a toddler. It's your responsibility.

MYI: *Whoa. I'll have to look up that quote. When playwrights approach you, what are your turnoffs?*

EH: When people say, "You need this play." It's a false understanding of this audience. [Those playwrights] are not in Montreal. Do your homework, be specific. "It's important to me because ... " "This the reason I think it might be of interest. Is.."

MYI: *Excellent. What are the challenges you're seeing?*

EH: Post-pandemic, who's the audience? How do we find them, inspire them to come back and build a theatre? It's a challenge right now, especially in Montreal. English theatre is so much smaller. French theatre is doing better, but struggling, especially with new work.

In a cross-country survey, we see that anything that people know what it is, they come back. For new work, they're less ready to come back unless it's a playwright that's known. It's not a slam dunk because it won a Governor General's Award and is topical to the moment we're in.

MYI: *Speaking of topical, do you favour "issue" plays and difficult topics?*

EH: The thing about difficult topics is that we have to do a better job in general about difficult topics, more than what TV and film and documentary can do. It's so personal and so visceral. The art has to be really thought through, so there's a way into the story, and to not leave you so devastated that it causes you to not listen if they're too raw and don't make themselves available.

We go back to the Greeks all the time. They transform tragedy into art that opens your heart instead of closes your mind and pushes you back against your chair. We have a lot of work to do.

MYI: *How would you describe the Centaur audience?*

EH: It's in transition right now. The audience that's been coming for fifty-five years has since been decimated. We draw from West Island too. There's a small group of francophones that come to English theatre. We have a younger audience that are allophones, bilingual, younger professionals. We're rebuilding our board around that idea. Here in Montreal, that's the audience that goes to French theatre that's different from TV and pop culture. It's an evolutionary audience, with the majority aged 50-65. We haven't surveyed them since COVID. This is just from watching the room and talking. We probably won't do a survey for another year.

MYI: *How are you programming for that audience?*

EH: Next year, we're renovating the building. One year after, we have four pieces left over, including one indigenous project we're hoping to open the season with. It's a smaller season of artists connected to the city, recently or indirectly. I'll be able to start programming in 2025. That's when I want to start a playwriting unit, developing a play stream within the structure.

We've always done new plays, but that's never been official.

MYI: *We look forward to this programming. Is there anything you'd like to add?*

EH: I'm impressed by playwrights over the years, with their ability to be really present and take on the process of watching a play develop.

It's not a tragedy if the fifth draft doesn't work. Keep working on the play. Don't be afraid of working on a play. If you go too far, you can always go back to the draft before. Don't be afraid to push through when something isn't quite there.



Photo Credit: Andrée Lanthier

Melissa Yuan-Innes is an emergency physician and novelist now exploring the world of playwriting. Her debut Fringe play, *I Am The Most Unfeeling Doctor In The World (And Other True Tales From the Emergency Room)*, won Best of Fest at the Ottawa Fringe, was a Behind the Rideau Award finalist in 2019, and was selected for the Stage One Festival of New Canadian Work at Calgary's Lunchbox Theatre.

Terminally Ill, her immersive mystery inspired by her novel penned under the name Melissa Yi, will debut at the undercurrent's festival in 2024, thanks to funding from the Ottawa Community Foundation, the Ottawa Fringe, TACTICS, the City of Ottawa, and the Wuchien Michael Than Foundation.

Melissa's prose work has been a finalist for the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award for Best Thriller, the Crime Writers of Canada Award of Excellence (best crime story in Canada), and the Derringer Award (best crime story in the English language). She is now diving into playwriting.

