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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Evalyn Parry,
AD of Buddies in Bad Times

Conducted by Kai Taddei,
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Evalyn Parry is the artistic director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. An award-winning performance creator, she is a writer/performer, director, songwriter and collaborator whose trans-disciplinary work is inspired by intersections of social justice, history, and auto/biography. Recent creator / performer credits include *Kiinalik: These Sharp Tools* (Edinburgh International Festival, Dora Award for Best New Play); *Gertrude and Alice* (nominated for a 2018 Governor General's Literary Award); *SPIN* (a musical exploration of the feminist history of the bicycle); recent directing credits include Buddies' queer intergenerational production *The Youth/ Elders Project*; *Obaaberima* by Tawiah M'Carthy (Dora Award for Outstanding Production); upcoming she directs *Mine* by Jenna Harris. She is the recipient of the KM Hunter Award for Theatre, the Ken McDougall Award for Directing, and The Colleen Peterson Songwriting Award. She is committed to theatre that creates a space for challenging conversations, personal and social transformation.

K: I was hoping we could have an informal conversation – I was also reading through past *Womxn's Caucus* interviews – and I think a lot of the information is stuff that is touched on on Buddies' website, because the *Womxn's Caucus* is obviously primarily interested in script submissions.

So, Buddies' website says that bit about "if you want to send a script in, we don't accept unsolicited submissions, but you can send a bio and a little plot summary," so I was wondering if you could speak to that in terms of how often you get around to reading the full plays, what piques your interest from those little introductory summaries,

or any red flags that come your way in those little intros?

E: Well, I will say a couple things for context: I think since we put up that notice - which has been up probably for a couple years now - I don't think I've received one yet.

K: Really?

E: I have continued to receive unsolicited script submissions, but they're pretty much entirely from men. I don't think I've received any from a woman or trans playwright, either a script or the suggested bio and intro.

K: Wow.

E: I do get inquiries about presentations - for existing shows, where playwrights / creators aren't sending the script but they're sending a video of the production. But the biggest piece of context really in terms of this question of submissions is that most of the producing and co-producing we do at the moment is work that comes from Residency, so it's work that has started from the ground up at Buddies. So in terms of advice for the Womxn's Caucus, I do invite people to do what the website suggests; I am interested to hear summaries of scripts that might be of interest and I'll speak to that in a second - but really the primary way that we develop work is over the long term and from the ground up, and at the moment given our quite limited resources, that's where we focus. Rather than producing a script that comes from me reading a pile of scripts and deciding which one to produce, the material is coming from the artists we have working in various forms of development over time. So I'm interested in artists - if they identify as queer or trans-spectrum, female, lesbian - that have a show to pitch that they want to work on through

residency, which is a bespoke program that works differently with different people /projects. Sometimes it's solo playwrights, sometimes it's collectives - it really can be any format of creation-based work.

K: So, could you elaborate a little bit on how residencies develop? Because I'd imagine sometimes they come from artists who have gone through your ECU [Emerging Creators' Unit] and have a project that still needs support or mentorship, or projects coming out of Rhubarb since it's a new works festival... So, how, from your perspective, does a project go from one of those developmental programs to residency? Or how do creators circumvent those programs and go directly to residency?

E: Really by approaching myself and/or Mel [Hague], who's the Residence Program Director with a pitch. A couple years ago we had a call for submissions for residency... we've only done that once in the four years I've been AD, and we kind of did it to see what was out there, to shake the bushes a bit and see what would come, and we selected several things out of that call, and at this point we still have a lot of work [in development]. We don't have room for something incoming this season because of the amount of work that's still in progress, so we haven't put out any call; however I would say: if you're someone I don't know, it's about introducing yourself to me and requesting a meeting, and if it's somebody I do know, same thing, really.

There are not many projects coming to me from queer female and trans-identified folks, or from 2-Spirit Indigenous folx and queer folx of colour. Queer womxn, whether cis or trans, QTBIPOC and 2-Spirit, indigi-queer folk are big priorities for us. And not to be discouraging, but I think Buddies

appears a lot more prolific than we are as producers, because so much work happens here, but a lot of it is not produced by us. A lot of it is guest companies: work produced by folks with sympatico mandates and priorities and values, and so we're a platform for a lot of work but we're not necessarily producers on a lot of what happens here, so it can be deceptive.

K: And as far as those – and I totally hear you in that your resources are pretty maxed out right now, and that's exciting honestly! Sounds like you have a lot of exciting projects in development, so that's great to hear – so, as far as those projects that are in residence go, could you talk a little bit about what that actually means? Does it look like working dramaturgically with Mel for a set period of time, or... how specific to each project it is?

E: Well, it is specific to each project. Sometimes a project comes in with a team that includes a dramaturg or a director/dramaturg, someone who isn't the writer but working closely with the writer. So I would say a recent example would be *Shove It Down My Throat*, Johnnie Walker's show that was co-produced here last year with Pandemic Theatre. Pandemic as a partner, they had Jivesh Parasram and Tom Arthur Davis. Jiv as the dramaturg and Tom as the director, so Mel was still quite involved as a dramaturg in that but there was a real team around it that came with the project when it came into residency. Johnnie had assembled folks around him that he wanted to work with. On the flip side, recently Bilal Baig has been developing a show that started in the ECU several years ago, and Bilal has done what Mel has termed the "dressing room residency."

K: The dressing room residency?

E: Yeah, so playwrights hang out in the dressing

room as a writing space. Because we have so little space so often... like, Tarragon theatre when you're writer-in-residence, you get an office, but if you're doing it at Buddies, you get a dressing room.

It was a new invention this year because we have several people that are really just looking for concentrated writing time and requested that, so it really worked great, because Mel created a schedule where people were signed up for a week or two weeks to be in the dressing room for certain hours, and then, for the playwright, it gives that sense of "I'm going to the office," that they have a space.

I remember walking in several times to different playwrights' processes where you know, the mirrors are all full of post-it notes, their script is all spread out over the dressing tables... and then they have access to Mel and she'll come in and consult with them several times a week and often read the play aloud with them, or have a discussion one day, or be available for some back-and-forth that often breaks the loneliness and gives them a chance to talk through questions or whatever. So that's something that's happening at the moment.

And then next year... we keep trying out new models, based on what resources we have, so this coming-up year we have dedicated a lot more resources towards residency and we're spending the month of May, we have dedicated the whole mainspace and cabaret to residencies, so for that month we're giving people physical space and access to technical resources and sort of dividing it up on the basis of who's ready for what and needs what, but with an eye to the fact that some projects really need support and time with design. Maybe it's not about the script at this point; the next step for the script might be really considering how design is working so they need to work in the

space. Part of May is going to be public readings and showings and we're calling it "open studios" because we want to be responsive to these projects, so some of them might be more intimate showings, some of them might be more open invitation. When we get a little bit closer we'll be able to know what these projects will benefit most from in terms of a public-facing activity.

K: Cool! Exciting that that's a new thing that's happening!

E: Yeah, it is exciting, and really interesting. We're having a year where we're producing less work but investing resources in the development, and we have all this exciting stuff in process, and you know ... space is such a hot commodity. I feel really great that we're making this a development year.

K: I'm excited to see all these little baby projects! Or – infant projects.

E: Yeah, you know some of them are babies, some of them are fully-grown teenagers, some are close to completion, and some are pretty nascent, and everything in between.

K: As far as folks who are interested in being involved in the future – playwrights who are interested in being involved in the future in things like this, how open are you to sitting down and having a cup of coffee? You've said that's sort of what you're looking for from folks: for them to introduce themselves and have an initial meeting, so are you the person for playwrights to connect to at Buddies if they wanted to say: "Here's me! And here's my work!" Or would that person be Mel?

E: At this point, Mel. Mel is sort of my triage. She's the contact, the first line to connect. She remains the person coordinating communication with all of

the projects, and I'm involved to a greater or lesser extent. depending on the project or creator.

K: And if playwrights are having work staged in Toronto...

E: Oh, they should definitely invite me! I get lots of invitations and I try to see as much as I can. I'm notoriously bad at responding to my emails, and I certainly really recommend inviting me as early as possible. As much notice as possible maximizes the chance that I will make it. Yep, I like to be invited to things, and try to make it out when I can!

K: You've spoken a little about how the work you're developing tends to be less text-based, how you tend to be working more so with concepts, and always with a queer focus and a focus on queer folks who are the most marginalized within the community – do you have any other tidbits more generally for folks who are text-based in their work, about whether they might consider adapting it for a devised or collaborative setting, or...? Any qualities you're actively seeking from artists and their work, other than "please be queer?"

E: Yeah. I would say I'm certainly interested in work that is in some way pushing the boundaries, pushing at convention in terms of formal conventions. I think one of the most important qualities that Buddies continues to champion is the new, and the forward-looking. That's in terms of subject matter, and that's in terms of form, and that's in terms of artists challenging themselves to do something outside of their own usual [comfort zone]. So, I think we have a strong track record in the last little while in introducing younger, more emerging artists to the stage; we're also very interested in queer and senior artists, especially

folks who are in some way breaking their own mold or pushing their own boundaries or trying something new. And so we're always looking for that double definition of "queer," not only in terms of sexual or gender identity but also in terms of being strange, weird, outside-the-box and pushing at convention.

K: My only other question – and I'm sorry if this one is too broad – is if you have any general advice for queer womxn and gender non-conforming folks. Because it seems in conversations I've had lately with company dramaturgs – there was this really great festival called Ergo Pink Festival that I had a play reading in, and as part of the festival there was a panel on the business of playwriting, and company dramaturgs from Factory and Obsidian and Tarragon were there, and Rebecca [Burton] was there, and one of the things that came up was they really all echoed what you said earlier in terms of script submissions and the artists pitching themselves being men. And I'm assuming typically cisgender men. And so, do you have any sort of general advice to folks who might be feeling too shy or socially anxious to just reach out and ask upfront for a coffee? Or for folks who might have barriers to doing that?

E: Yeah, that's a hard one. The biggest piece of advice I have, and I know for myself, I've shied away from this piece of advice, but being in the seat that I now occupy has really shifted my perspective: send an email and if you don't hear back, send another email. Because I literally am swamped with email all the time – so the people that follow up are the people that generally hear back from me. It doesn't quite answer the beginning of your question about reaching out to begin with, but that second or third email can make all the difference... don't be afraid to follow up. It's not obnoxious. It increases the chance that I'll get back to you, 100%. I can't

really stress it enough.

K: Yeah, and I think you've really hit the nail on the head there, because I think especially for people socialized female – I mean, I've heard a lot of them say, "Oh, you know, I don't wanna be a pain in the ass," or "I don't wanna be annoying."

E: I've totally felt it myself many times. You don't want to be intrusive, but... I mean, everybody in this day and age is all swamped with emails regardless. We're all kind of saturated. And especially in a job like this where I'm hearing from a lot of people all the time on all kinds of things, a second or a third follow-up makes the difference between hearing back from me or not, unfortunately. I know there are people who are way better at replying than I am, but...!

K: I don't think there are many. And if there are, they have superhuman powers. And for those follow-ups, just because some people like specificity, do you like a one-sentence email just saying, "hey, just following up on __," to remind you?

E: Yeah, that's fine. And also an email that I've gotten that I appreciate is when they copy the original email in it, and just re-send it with a new note that says: "Just wanting to follow-up on this," so that all the info is there and I can go, right, I meant to get back to this person.

K: Makes sense. I think it's always nice and reassuring to hear [that reaching out is okay]!

E: One of the interesting things about this job is that I'm an artist, too, and I've been on the other side of that divide and that sense of "I don't know how to break into the fortress!" Also, I would say another thing that is really important is coming

to stuff and familiarizing yourself with what we do. That's also important, so that you're pitching something that you have an understanding, as an artist, of the context you're pitching to. I've met with folks before where it's obvious that they read the mandate, but they don't actually have a sense of what's happening on our stages. I find it an easier place to have a conversation when folks have a reference point for what's happening here.

K: Makes sense.

E: Also, it's important to say that there are these other points of access: there's the 2-Spirit cabaret for 2-Spirit Indigenous artists, a ten, fifteen-minute platform, a place to showcase yourself, to see and be seen; the Emerging Creators' Unit; and QueerCab, which is an emerging artists showcase, and for Ontario artists there's the Recommenders Grant for Theatre Creators (RGTC) from the Ontario Arts Council and there's the Pride Festival. Pride is the outlier in all of those in that it's more of a festival that... it's not works in progress or cabaret or brand new work in the same way as Rhubarb is, it's a bit more of a platform. But it is a place where you could self-produce a one person show for a night. It's kind of a platform for self-producing, or I guess co-producing, because Buddies produces the festival but individual artists make the art inside the festival. So those are all ways that folks can be seen, have their work read – those submissions are all read.

K: And for Pride – I'm not seeing anything on your website about that, about submissions. Are you hoping for people to come one year and suss it out and connect to you directly?

E: That is a good point, and you've actually reminded me that we need to note some things on the website about that. It hasn't really been a

submission-based thing in the same way as all the other submission-based festivals and programs. But if folks feel they have something that would work well in the context of Pride, they could have a look at our website to see what past Prides have looked like – it's all kind of one-nighters, whatever they are. One night stand-alone shows. Some of them are comedy, some of them are cabaret, lots of them have multiple artists on them... there's a wide variety that's not limited to theatre. It's very much in the spirit of a community celebration of arts and celebration, so there's music and stand-up and things that don't fall quite so much fall under "theatre" in a strict sense.

K: Awesome, so past Prides are up there on your website?

E: Yeah, under probably "Pride" or you can look in our company history. I'll try and put something else up on the website that speaks to that.

K: As far as the RGTC grants go, because it does seem like one of the avenues that might make more sense for playwrights who do tend to work in a text-based [way], do you have any advice as far as what you're looking for from OAC grants and those applications?

E: Clarity. Something with a strong point of view. A strong proposal paired with a strong work plan; something that tells us about the way that you work and how you're going to work. And maybe I say that because we tend to get a fair amount of projects that aren't simply a single playwright being like, I'm going to sit and write this play, we often get things that involve collaborators or have research, so being very clear about the how. About your process. That's very helpful as a point of assessment. We're certainly looking always to

support marginalized voices inside the community. We're looking also for strength of ideas, originality, something we haven't heard before, somebody we haven't heard from before, a perspective that hasn't been explored, a way of exploring something that seems groundbreaking or new. And clarity that shows us that the person can accomplish what they say they're going to do. They have a plan.

K: But you are open – you say you don't typically get these applications – but you're open to playwrights saying, "I have this concept, I want to write it!"

E: Yes. I don't want to discourage playwrights from submitting their work. RGTC applications are a great place for me to read script samples.

K: Great. Those are all my questions. Is there anything else you wanted to say to the Womxn's Caucus more broadly or any areas you feel like I've missed that you want to talk about?

E: Don't think so!

K: Thank you so much for taking time to chat with me!