

PGC  
WOMEN'S  
CAUCUS  
NEWSLETTER

Interview with Haysam Kadri,  
Interim Artistic Director of Alberta  
Theatre Projects in Calgary, AB

Conducted by Madeleine Brown  
January 2025



Haysam Kadri is an actor, director, and theatre instructor. He is the current Artistic Director of Alberta Theatre Projects (APT) and the former Artistic Director of The Shakespeare Company. Haysam has made it a priority to establish a solid foundation for classical work in Alberta by entertaining audiences through producing and performing classics, developing and cultivating the talents of emerging artists, and finally, focusing on student education via performances, workshops, and classes. This season, Haysam is set to direct Rajiv Joesph's *King James* (in association with Theatre Aquarius), as part of Alberta Theatre Projects' 50th Anniversary season. Other select directing credits for theatre include: *Heist*; *Clue*; *Nero Wolfe: Might as Well be Dead* (Vertigo Theatre); *In Wonderland* (ATP); *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Arts Club, Manitoba Theatre Centre); *The Shoplifters*; *Romeo and Juliet* (Theatre Calgary); *A Thousand Splendid Suns*; *Homes: A Refugee Story* (The Grand Theatre); *Three Musketeers*; *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* (The Shakespeare Company, The Rose Brampton); *As You Like It* (National Theatre School); *Prairie Boys Winter*; *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*; *Dracula* (Mount Royal University) ; and *Metamorphoses* (University of Calgary).

*Madeleine Brown (MB):* In your own words, what is Alberta Theatre Projects' mandate or focus?

*Haysam Kadri (HK):* Bringing edgy contemporary work to our community. We offer an eclectic range of stories. This organization has a 50-year history, and the canon of works has such an amazing range.

*MB:* How often, on average, does the theatre premiere new Canadian plays?

*HK:* Quite often. Not in the last couple of years because, in a lot of ways, we're coming out of the pandemic and we're in recovery mode. But, ATP at one point was known as the hub for new Canadian works. I'd say, on average every year there was a new Canadian play being premiered here for a long time. That's kind of changed. I think that now a lot of theatre companies across the country have their own mandates focused on at least one or maybe two Canadian plays in development. So, it's not something we hang our hat on anymore, but it's something that as part of coming into the Artistic Director role, 18 months in, I want to bring back: a very comprehensive development program for new Canadian plays and playwrights.

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

*HK:* When an audience member can walk in and walk out a different person. When they see themselves through characters they never thought they would identify with. That, to me, is really exciting.

*MB:* How does a playwright get your attention

with a new play? Is there a formal submission process?

*HK:* There is a formal submission process because we get inundated with a lot of requests. Traditionally, we don't accept unsolicited scripts. I do try to read as many plays as I can.

If it's something that I feel will fill part of a diverse range of storytelling, I'll read it and then go from there. The title helps to start with. You know, just to grab attention, a bit of a synopsis, and to go, "Oh, that's interesting."

I start with instinct and feel when it comes to putting a season together. Sometimes you forgot that that play existed or that person was writing a play, and then they'll send you a random email and you'll be like, "Oh my, how serendipitous is this?"

*MB:* Do you like to read a play in the early stages or further along and why or why not?

*HK:* It depends. If it's someone that I haven't commissioned or ATP wasn't part of its genesis, then I'd probably like to see it in a polished state. But if there's something I'm looking at going, "Oh my gosh, this would be an amazing story," I'm going to invest in the early stages of it and watch the seed grow. So, yeah, I'd say that's the sweet spot when it comes to reading plays.

*MB:* Do you have a sense of how many scripts come across your desk in a year?

*HK:* I would say there's probably about hundred plus, whether they are sent to me by e-mail or by mail.

*MB:* Do you know how many are submitted by women?

*HK:* Yeah, a lot of women are submitting plays, which is great. I would say that there's more new plays being written by women than men. I'd say about 60:40.

*MB:* Do you have a process for when you're reading a new script?

*HK:* Yes. Because I probably have ADHD, I have to read plays a couple of times. I'm not that person who is like, "I got everything on the first go." I admit it. I process stuff differently. I just make sure that I don't do a one-off, especially if there's something there. I'm going to read it again before I put pen to paper on what I think, if it makes sense for a season. And I have associates and friends that help me. They'll help me narrow it down so I can focus on certain things, especially when I'm clear about what I'm looking for.

*MB:* How soon, in your opinion, after a playwright submits a script, do you think it's appropriate for them to follow-up and whether it's best to do so by phone or e-mail?

*HK:* If it's an unsolicited script, I can't guarantee I'll get to that script within six months. If it's a solicited script, two to three weeks. Email is always best.

*MB:* Do you prefer an invitation to a stage reading or a production over reading a new script?

*HK:* 100%. The words lift off the page and the

way that I process information and receive information, I'm much more audio and visual. I'll get more if I hear somebody's interpretation of the character.

*MB:* Do you have a general comment about your contact with playwrights who want to get their work produced at your theatre? Do you find that people are respectful?

*HK:* They're all very respectful. I haven't had anybody step on toes or assume that their work should be premiered. They all have a generosity of spirit, so I try to reply as respectfully and professionally as possible as well.

The playwright is the first character of every play and the audience is the last character of every play. If we don't have that person put pen to paper, or in this case, type, there's no storytelling. I immensely respect playwrights and the craft of playwriting. I recognize how integral playwrights are to what we do. You can't just assume, "This is just a great play." What did it take to get that story on paper, right? It took a lot. Our job is to serve the story, which is there to serve the audience. Like, you've got this amazing play that sings, that resonates, twists and turns, that brings inspiration to the director and the actors. I mean, it's an amazing playground.

*MB:* It's hard to get a first production. It's even harder to get a second production. Do you think that's true? And why or why not?

*HK:* I do think it's true. I think that there's a deficiency in development in our country. I think we're thinking that we pop out plays

really fast. There needs to be a more concerted effort to spend more time, energy, and money on the development of a play. So that it's not like, "You got to write this play in a year and a half."

And then there's too many "one and done's." It goes up once and then it goes to the playwrighting graveyard. So, I would love to find ways in which to do more comprehensive development of plays, and give more resources, energy, time, and money to playwrights to let it simmer, to let it cook properly, and then to have a proper premiere and go across the country.

MB: How might a playwright go about getting a second production with your company?

HK: I always check-in with my artistic director colleagues across the country: "Did you read this play?" And if they are on the same page, then I'm thinking, "Oh good." So, that's part of it, too: seeing how it's undeniable when a play catches fire across the country because you start to see how companies are picking it up, and it resonates with audiences, and people come in because of word of mouth and all those kinds of things. And so, if it's been produced before, then you have to take notice.

MB: My guess is that it doesn't, but does the Enbridge Playwrights Award still exist?

HK: No, it doesn't.

MB: What's the single most important thing you're looking for in a new play?

HK: I always say this: there's so many things

you're allowed to do to an audience. I truly believe that the audience shouldn't feel safe. They want to be shocked. You're allowed to offend an audience member. You're allowed to make them laugh. You're allowed to make them cry. You're allowed to bust their gut. You're allowed to do so many things. What you're not allowed to do is to bore them and put them asleep. So, because there's so many different ways in which to affect an audience, like I said before, I want them to see themselves through a character they never thought they would identify with. Plays are moments, a series of moments, and if there's one big moment in the show that surprises me, then I'm like, "Wow. That's amazing!" That play is worth reading, workshopping, producing... I really can't put my finger on one thing because there's so many different ways in which one can affect an audience.

MB: Do you have any themes, issues, styles or genres that are appealing to you the most right now?

HK: I don't have any specific genres. I mean, I've done a couple Faustian plays in the last two years, like *The Seafarer* and *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon*, but that's not something that I'm leaning into. No, I look at the diversity of storytelling as a starting point [for season programming]. I like to see extraordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances. Those are my favourite types of plays. I like when kitchen sink dramas turn bizarre. There's a range of things that interest me.

MB: What is the demographic of your audience?



*HK:* Most of our audience is female-identifying, 65% to 70%, and from probably about 35- to 75-years-old. We're trying to get the younger demographic in. We're trying to get the 18 to 35's, but it's just the plain economics of disposable income. We're noticing that audience members are a little more selective about what they want to go see, as opposed to buying subscriptions. Although we've had the best subscriptions sales in 16 years, so maybe that trend is being bucked. I think it's because we have a smaller season with four shows. We used to do way more than four shows and we're going to build back up. But four shows is easier to commit to than six or seven shows for some people, so that's part of it as well. *King James* is very specifically for a younger demographic. Whereas shows like *The Seafarer* are for a little older audience. And we have a ton of student matinees for *Charlotte's Web*. So, it's all working to hopefully build a ritual for people to see live theatre as part of their yearly routines.

*MB:* Wonderful. What plays have been popular with your audiences in the past?

*HK:* Alberta stories and playwrights. W.O. Mitchell. *The Birds and the Bees* by Mark Crawford was a big hit, comedy-wise. The *Syringa Tree* and *Mary's Wedding* were darlings in the history of the company. And then shows about curling, apparently, are pretty hot here, too. *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon* was a huge hit.

I like to intersect the story with community groups or a large subset of a certain demographic and try to target those people, like we did with *Black Bonspiel*, which we did

during the Scotties Tournament of Hearts. So, you had 45 to 50,000 people whose eyes were on curling in the city, and right on top of that at the exact same time, I programmed a play about curling. We had a lot of people at the intersection of sport and theatre come to watch the show. It was exciting. You see people that don't normally come to the theatre saying, "Oh, there's a show about curling. I'm going to come see that show."

*MB:* Is there anything else you want to add or anything that we didn't cover around playwrights, submissions, or anything like that that you think is valuable to share?

*HK:* When I came into the organization, we had to do a bit of restructuring, so I've had to put the development of plays on hold. It's something that burns in me though, and that I'm really, really looking forward to going full force on bringing back. Right now, you know, a lot of theatre companies are trying to recalibrate and figure out how to bring their audience back after the pandemic. But it sounds like Netflix is running its course a bit. People are itching to see three-dimensional humans tell stories as opposed to watching it on TV. So, we're noticing that more audiences are coming back and they're coming back in droves. [We have] about 30% new audience. It's been amazing.

I recognize that this organization has a long history of development of playwrights and playwriting. It's not lost on me that that's something that I want and need to bring back when we have our full feet on the ground here. There's no skipping steps.

Madeleine Brown is a playwright and actor. Recent productions include *Margaret Reid* (Here For Now Theatre) and *Give 'em Hell* (Theatre Direct/4th Line Theatre/Prairie Fire, Please). She was a recipient of the Ellen Ross Stuart “Opening Doors” Award and a member of Driftwood Theatre’s Beyond the Bard Playwrights Unit and 4th Line Theatre’s Interdisciplinary Residency Program. She is Theatre Direct’s Next Draft Producer and a volunteer with L’Arche Toronto Sol Express and Loran Scholars Foundation. Outside of theatre, she performs stand-up around Toronto, including as co-producer and co-host of *Ladies First Open Mic* and *Ladies First Comedy SHEbang!* (@LadiesFirstTO). Madeleine is a graduate of U of T Mississauga/Sheridan College, the Second City Training Centre, and CB Pro. Check out her website for more info at: [thatmadeleinebrown.com](http://thatmadeleinebrown.com)

