

PGC  
WOMEN'S  
CAUCUS  
NEWSLETTER

Interview with Herbie Barnes,  
Artistic Director of Young People's  
Theatre in Toronto, ON

Conducted by Stacy Gardner  
September 2024



An Anishinaabe theatre artist from Aundeck Omni Kaning First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Herbie Barnes is an actor, director, and playwright. He was raised in Toronto. His theatre career began in 1989 with Debajehmujig Theatre Group, touring Ontario with the first run of Drew Hayden Taylor's *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock*. Since then, he has collaborated with some of North America's largest theatre companies and was nominated for a John Hirsch Director's Award. His new play, *Bent Boy*, was workshopped at YPT and shortlisted for PGC's Sharon Enkin Plays for Young People Award in 2020.

Herbie has a long and storied association with YPT where, as a young audience member, he had his first theatre experience. "My first taste of what would be a life-long passion for theatre started in the old streetcar barn on Front Street," said Herbie of YPT's 123-year-old heritage theatre. Years later, he began his professional association with YPT when he appeared in *The Secret of Shhh* in 1993. He has been making an impact at YPT ever since, both on stage and in classrooms as a playwright, performer, director and artist educator.

**Stacy Gardner (SG):** It's been quite the journey for you with Young People's Theatre (YPT). I saw on the website that you've been involved since 1991.

**Herbie Barnes (HB):** Yeah! I did my first show here back in '91, a long time ago, when I was just 21. It was *Secret of Shhh*, and that was my intro to this world. Since then, I've kind of seen it all here at YPT!

**SG:** So much history. What's changed the most since you've been involved?

**HB:** Well, the biggest shift lately has been how we've focused on bringing generations together. Last year, we did *It's a Wonderful Life*, and my whole idea behind it was to get three generations into the theatre—grandparents, parents, and kids—all together. I wanted them to walk out of the theatre and have those magical conversations like, "What did you think of the play?" And it's just taken off. We realized there was this whole population of seniors feeling isolated, especially during the pandemic, and we wanted to open our doors wider. Now we're working on intergenerational programming to get all ages back in the theatre.

**SG:** That's beautiful. And I love that the work you do always seems to carry this sense of hope. What's the mandate or focus of the theatre, in your words?

**HB:** The main focus of our theatre has two parts: education and storytelling. When it comes to the plays we put on, we always look for hope. That's a major part of our mandate—there's always hope at the end of the story.

**[HB Cont'd:]** No matter what, we're not here for the tragic endings that leave you feeling heavy. Even when things get tough in the story, there's always hope for a better future, and that's what we want our audiences to take away. We're in the business of creating magic, giving people—especially young people—a chance to see that there's a better world tomorrow.

**SG:** I love that. That theme of hope resonates. Speaking of hope, how do you choose the plays you bring to the stage? Is there something you look for in a new play?

**HB:** It's all about the story. A good story with hope at the end is essential. I want to see characters that change, that go on an adventure and learn something along the way. And I'm always looking for stories with honest points of view. Sometimes I'll get my students to write something they're really passionate about, and then I challenge them to write a monologue for someone who believes the complete opposite. That's where the real magic happens—when two opposing ideas have to sit in a room together and figure it out.

**SG:** That sounds like a brilliant exercise. How often does YPT premiere new Canadian plays?

**HB:** We aim to premiere at least one new play every year. We're constantly developing new work, and during the pandemic, we built up a backlog of plays that we're slowly bringing to the stage. We've also expanded internationally. We've started receiving scripts from places as far away as Africa, which is exciting because we can now open our theatre to voices from all over the world, not just Canada.

SG: How do you find new plays, or how does a playwright get your attention? Do you have a submission policy?

HB: Our process is really open. Playwrights can reach out to me or Stephen Colella, who heads up new play development. We read everything that comes across our desk—sometimes we get about 250 new plays a year. Stephen and I will pass scripts back and forth, and we'll always be honest with each other. If something's not working, we'll say, "You don't need to read this one." We're always on the lookout for new voices, and we want to encourage as many as we can.

SG: I'm sure that's music to the ears of many writers. What do great plays at your theatre have in common?

HB: Great plays at YPT have stories that take the audience somewhere. They offer hope and create an adventure for the audience, where characters evolve and change. We're also looking for honest points of view. I love when a story shows different perspectives in a way that's genuine.

SG: Do you prefer to read a play in its early stages or when it's farther along?

HB: I personally like reading a play that's in its development stages. We're not a company that commissions a play and says, "You've got a year to write this." There's less pressure that way. We'd rather work with a playwright to figure out the right direction, and we'll take the time to get it there. It's not a rush to the finish line; it's about getting the story right.

SG: How soon after a playwright submits a script do you think it's appropriate to get a follow-up? Do you prefer a phone call or email?

HB: I definitely prefer email over phone calls. My days are packed, and it's just easier to manage communications through email. A follow-up after a reasonable amount of time is fine, but with the number of submissions we get, it can take a while for us to respond.

SG: Do you prefer an invitation to a staged reading or a production rather than just reading a new script?

HB: If I can sit in a room and hear actors interpret a play, I'd prefer that over just reading a script. It's one thing to read the words on the page, but seeing it brought to life by actors gives a whole different perspective. If a playwright invites me to a staged reading, I can hear how the dialogue flows and how the characters interact, which is a huge plus.

SG: Do you find that it's harder to get a second production of a new play than the first?

HB: Oh, absolutely. That first production gets all the buzz and excitement, but after that, it's tough. Canada's theatre scene doesn't really have the "star system" like they do in the States. Here, every play has to justify itself over and over again. It's not like you can just slap "Neil Simon" on something and have it sell. Even for me, getting my work redone is a harder sell.

SG: That makes sense. What is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play?

**HB:** A good story with hope at the end. I want to be taken on a journey where the characters grow, and the story leaves you with something positive. It's also important to have honest, well-developed points of view. I want the story to feel real and relatable, even if it's exploring something difficult.

**SG:** Are there any themes, issues, styles, or genres that appeal to you the most right now?

**HB:** I'm really interested in plays that present different points of view. I want to see characters who represent various perspectives on an issue and have them interact in a way that feels organic. It's not about preaching one side over the other but rather exploring both sides and letting the audience think for themselves.

**SG:** What play or plays did you read or see in the last year that really excited you?

**HB:** I'm really excited about *Water Wars*, which is being developed at our theatre. It's a fantastic story that I'm eager to see come to life. I've also seen some great productions like *Salesman in China* at the Stratford Festival, which was brilliant. And then there are plays like *Something Rotten*, which is just so much fun!

**SG:** What about audiences? What's the demographic like for YPT? Who's filling those seats?

**HB:** Well, we're really focused on everyone! Our programming ranges from shows for babies as young as four months to seniors in their 90s. That's the beauty of our theatre—we're truly for all ages. But even though we do a lot of young people's theatre, our actors are usually adults.

**[HB Cont'd:]** Bringing children on stage involves a lot of extra logistics, like tutors and union regulations, so we tend to work with adult performers.

**SG:** You've clearly got a lot on your plate. So, what keeps you coming back to the theatre?

**HB:** (Laughs) It's definitely not the money! No, it's the magic we create—the way we tell stories that make people feel connected. There's nothing like seeing a kid or even an adult get lost in a play and really believe what's happening on stage. I lost my father when I was 25, but I keep telling stories about him, and in that way, he's never really gone. That's what theatre does—it keeps history alive. We share the same breath and heartbeat in those moments together. As long as that's happening, I'll keep coming back.


**SG:** That's such a beautiful sentiment. You know, one of the things that really stands out about you is this emphasis on legacy. You have a 7th generation philosophy—can you talk a little more about that?

**HB:** Yeah, it's something that's really important to me. As a First Nations person, we always talk about the seventh generation—thinking seven generations ahead and seven generations behind. Everything I do, especially in theatre, is with the awareness of how it'll affect my great-great-great-grandchildren. I want to make sure the path I'm setting is a good one for those who come after me. It's about honouring the people who came before and laying down a solid foundation for the future.

**SG:** That's so powerful, Herbie. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share?

HB: Just that we're in the business of creating better humans. That's what it's all about. Theatre has the power to educate and inform, to make people more compassionate, and to bring us all together in a way nothing else can. That's why I do this. It's about making people better, one story at a time. That's why I keep showing up.

SG: I think that says it all. Thank you so much, Herbie, for your time and for sharing your wisdom with us.



Stacy Gardner is a storyteller who plays with various mediums to get to the heart of the matter. She adapted her CBC-radio-play, *Worms for Sale*, into a play, and Toronto's Alumnae Theatre produced it as part of their New Ideas Festival. Stacy's one-woman play, *After the Sirens*, was staged at the St. John's Short Play Festival in Newfoundland, where she lives. Since March 2023, Stacy has made two short films; the first, a documentary she co-wrote and directed about the painter, Ginok Song, called *The Gaze*, which can be seen on CBC Gems' *Reel East Coast*. Stacy's current film, *73 Seconds*, written and directed by her, premiered at the Atlantic International Film Festival in Halifax this past September (2024), and then played at the St. John's International Women's Film Festival (October 2024). Its next known screening will be at Silver Wave Film Festival in New Brunswick (November 2024). Stacy is also a published poet, who facilitates cozy writing workshops from her home, where she is currently daydreaming about her next project. Website: [www.stacygardner.ca](http://www.stacygardner.ca)

