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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Jillian Keiley, AD,  
National Arts Centre English Theatre,  
Ottawa, ON

Conducted by Margo MacDonald,  
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Jillian Keiley is an award-winning director from St. John's, Newfoundland and founder of Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland. Jillian has directed and taught across Canada and internationally. She received her BFA in Theatre from York University and was awarded Honorary Doctorates of Letters from both Memorial University and York University. She was the winner of the Siminovitch Prize for Directing in 2004 and the Canada Council's John Hirsch Prize in 1997. Jillian assumed her role as NAC English Theatre Artistic Director in August 2012, and her productions at the NAC have included *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Twelfth Night*, *Metamorphoses: Based on the Myths of Ovid*, *Tartuffe*, *Oil and Water*, and *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. More recently, she directed *Bakkhai*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *As You Like It* for the Stratford Festival, and her productions of *Tartuffe* (NAC) and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Artistic Fraud) toured through Newfoundland and Labrador. *Tempting Providence*, her collaboration with Robert Chafé for Theatre Newfoundland Labrador, toured internationally for ten years. Currently, she is directing *The Never-ending Story* for the Stratford Festival and her production of *Between Breaths* for Artistic Fraud is touring Newfoundland and Labrador, and will arrive at the NAC in May.

Jillian Keiley, the Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre English Theatre, is one of the busiest people in Canadian theatre. She takes some time out between meetings and rehearsals to talk to me by phone from Stratford, Ontario where she is currently directing *The Never-ending Story* for the Stratford Festival. Jill's got a soft

Newfoundland accent, a great laugh, and is extremely easy to talk to. Our fifteen-minute chat stretches to forty-five as we veer off topic and back again. By the end, I'm super impressed with her philosophy and have been given great information on how and just what gets programmed at the NAC.

It's clear from your body of work that women's stories and voices are important to you. How does the gender of the playwright or creator affect your response to the work, do you think?

"Probably the main thing is that there are certain assumptions which, if made by men would make me go, 'Wait, listen...' Especially now, we're all very sensitive to judgements and assumptions that are made by men. When the playwright is a woman, it allows us the freedom to laugh at ourselves in a way that we can't when the playwright is a man. Also, I think guys are being really careful about how they write women now, whereas women are freer to explore all sides."

What excites you out there in theatre today? What work is speaking to you the most?

"I'm thrilled by the shift where people are turning back to using or finding a new theatricality. There are not so many living-room plays now, and those that are being written are exciting in a way that challenges the status quo, telling new stories within that familiar context. It's funny—I look at all the Netflix shows people are excited about now and I think, "But that's theatre!" There's deeply theatrical work being done there now, and people are really responding to it.

"I'm also interested in using aspects of dramaturgy and design to take smaller shows and see how we can make them big enough for the NAC stages."

How do you decide what shows will appear on the NAC stages as part of the season?

Jill explains that when it comes to plays, the National Arts Centre has three things they do:

- produce their own work
- present work by other companies
- and occasionally co-produce or invest in the further development of work

Jill has thirty-five people across the country who go out and see shows on her behalf. They then literally fill in a Google form (and, she points out, this is a bit different than the system used by Canada Council for the Arts assessors in that, if the show is obviously not right for the NAC, they don't need to fill in the rest of the form). Two of the questions are, literally, "Should Jill hop on a plane right away?" and "Can Jill get a good sense of the show from watching a video of it?" (She makes sure to note that she is very good at watching theatre on video by now, that she knows how to do it.)

When Jill first took over the job of AD of English Theatre at the NAC, she was constantly travelling back and forth across the country, trying to see everything in person, but it was an impossible pace to keep up. Now she'll only travel to see pieces they've been following or are seriously considering.

Her advisors take their roles very seriously, with about 220 shows being vetted each year. The advisors will take into consideration not only if the show will work well on the NAC stages, but also what the current strategic priorities are. (At the moment those priorities include work by underrepresented groups, including work by women, and work that comes from underrepresented parts of the country.) A short-list is then made and Jill watches all of the shows that make it onto the short-list, either in person or on video.

Playwrights should note that under Jill's tenure as AD, the NAC will not, as a rule, do premieres. Shows that arrive on the NAC stages will have been worked and worked and will use experienced (rather than first-time) directors. They produce primarily Canadian work and only rarely will they present international work.

She firmly believes the NAC should be a showcase for Canada's best work.

"If someone walks into the NAC from elsewhere in the world, they should be able to see the best of what Canada has to offer. It's a responsibility I take very seriously."

**If a playwright wanted to be sure you knew about their work, what would be the best way for them to do that?**

"Contact me, definitely, absolutely."

(Be aware, though, that she's really only interested in work that already has or is about to be produced. Also, she says, she wants everything digitally, nothing on paper. She's on the move all the time and so paper is no good to her.)

Jill and her team actually have a very comprehensive system they use to keep tabs on what work is being done out there in Canada. They keep a list of every single theatre company in Canada, even the small ones. Every year around March-May they go to the websites of every single company to see what they're up to. In particular, they make a list of any new Canadian work being produced that season and/or any significant productions or reimaginings of older works. They then go through this list and assign a viewer advisor to each one.

"If it's a new Canadian work, it will most likely be seen."

In addition, she takes a month every summer and watches videos of productions—2 or 3 a day, for a whole month. She advises playwrights to get a good video shot of their produced work and to put it up on Vimeo or some other reliable video sharing site.

**Any advice or inspiration for Canada's women playwrights?**

"Funny thing," she says, "it's usually only the guys who will really pursue me and follow up on whether I've had a chance to look at their work yet. Women don't tend to, they'll submit and then not follow up. So, that's the first piece of advice—though I hesitate to say it because I'm already so backlogged!—but follow up, be a little relentless."

Her other piece of advice is to not be scattershot about where you're submitting your work. Take the time to learn about the various ADs and theatres and what they're programming. Look at who the AD is, what they're doing, and what they are prioritizing. If you can get a show across to her which is something that helps serve her mandate, and which will fit well on her stages, "that's extremely helpful."

"It's never a burden to me to hold auditions, it's never a burden for me to watch plays. If it's something that helps me solve my problem of how to fill these stages, great! It might take me three years before I can look at it (she has a backlog of about 400 videos to watch), but great!"