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NEWSLETTER

**Interview with Joanna Falck,
Dramaturg and Literary Manager**

Conducted by Marcia Johnson,
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JOANNA FALCK

Joanna Falck has been a dramaturg for nearly 20 years, working across the country with playwrights and organizations developing new work. Most recently she was the Literary Manager at the Tarragon Theatre. Previously, she spent 10 seasons as Literary Manager at the Shaw Festival Theatre (2007-2016), and was the Tarragon Theatre's first Literary Manger (2003-2007). As a freelance dramaturg, she has worked across Canada with various companies including Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, fuGen Asian Canadian Theatre, Nightwood Theatre, Theatre Panik, Tapestry New Opera Works, Studio 180, Arts Club Theatre Company, Banff Playwrights' Colony, Native Earth Performing Arts, Cabaret Company/Buddies in Bad Times, and Canadian Stage Company. She has taught at York University and the University of Alberta, and was a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. She has been a member of the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) since 1996, and served on the Executive Board of both the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, and on the founding Board of LMDA Canada. She also served on the Steering Committee for the Equity in Theatre initiative and the Theatre Committee for the Toronto Arts Council. She is currently working freelance. If you're looking for a dramaturg, you can contact her at: joannafalck@gmail.com.

I met Joanna Falck in the early 2000s at Tarragon and have followed her career ever since. It occurred to me that I knew nothing about her work before her first tenure at Tarragon. I asked her to fill me in.

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SOME BACKGROUND:

Joanna started with an undergrad degree in acting at the University of Toronto.

“I thought that I wanted to be an actor but I also did an English degree.” She laughs while recalling that the acting program made her realize that she didn’t like acting anymore. *“I just realized it wasn’t for me. But, in that program, we had a person who was a dramaturg; the production dramaturg of our fourth-year shows. I had no idea what that person was doing. No one ever said: ‘By the way, this is the dramaturg. This is why he’s here.’ He sort of sat in the corner with the director.”*

They were doing a commedia dell’arte play and this dramaturg would occasionally correct their grammar or pronunciation. That was her introduction to Gerd Hauck (a professor at University of Toronto at the time) and the world of dramaturgy. Hauck served as production dramaturg for the two shows she was in.

Born and raised in Toronto, Joanna decided that it was time to go to another city; to experience a different theatrical culture. Toronto theatre had seemed very large and overwhelming to her. Then she read a *Toronto Life* article about Brad Fraser. He talked about Edmonton as being a really vibrant theatre city. This prompted her to apply to the University of Alberta to do her Masters.

Joanna admits to not knowing what she was going to do with that degree until she met DD Kugler. Kugler had been dramaturg at Necessary Angel and had relocated to Edmonton to run Northern Light Theatre. He taught a class on new play development dramaturgy.

The way that Kugler taught the class was by taking them to events such as ATP’s Blitz Weekend. *“Up until then I’d never met a living playwright in my whole career.”*

Joanna began to understand that dramaturgy could be a real career; something that she’d never heard of before.

The class became somewhat notorious because it consisted of six women. Eventually people got to know that they were all learning about dramaturgy, and that they were looking for work. At the same time, there were students in the MFA directing program. Joanna ended up dramaturging Jennifer Tarver’s *The Seagull* and Kathryn Bracht’s production of Sally Clark’s *Life Without Instruction*. After that, playwrights started asking her to read their plays.

LMDA had a conference in Toronto that Joanna attended where she got to meet people whom she had been reading about over the years, such as Mark Bly, who ran the Yale Dramaturgy program, and Oskar Eustis, who is now the AD of The Public Theatre in New York City. *“The rock stars of dramaturgy.”*

When she told people that she really wanted to be a dramaturg, almost all of them told her that she would never get a job, especially in Canada, and especially since Joanna wasn't a director-dramaturg or playwright-dramaturg ("*I was just a plain old dramaturg*").

Kugler told her that those people saw her as competition and wanted to get her out of the running.

There was talk about unionizing and, in Canada, about professionalizing dramaturgy. She became more determined to be a dramaturg. She started working in Edmonton but found it difficult to get paid.

"I'd work on these little festivals where literally everyone would get paid a hundred dollars but me."

In her words, she was "*full of the vim and vigour of youth*" and was determined to get paid, so she eventually got that hundred dollars too, but then there was the fight to get her name in programs. Fortunately, the confidence of youth was on her side. She was very happy to challenge authority; to have fights with people who thought that she was asking for too much.

Finally, after turning down yet another job where she wouldn't be paid, she gave up on the idea of being a professional dramaturg and returned to Toronto to do her PhD at U of T. She was on her way to becoming an academic, a professor.

Then she received an email from Richard Rose, who had just taken over as AD at Tarragon. She assumed it was an ad, but it was a query for a literary assistant/coordinator.

She had never met Rose. The closest connection she had to the theatre was that of a subscriber at his previous theatre, Necessary Angel. She greatly admired the shows *Tamara* and *Newhouse*.

They had a fun two-hour conversation about theatre in his office. Her thinking was that she probably wouldn't get the job but at least she could use the interview for her dissertation. She was completely shocked when she was hired. She was there part-time during his first season with the title Literary Coordinator while still teaching and working on her PhD. It was a huge learning curve.

The biggest part of her job was reading unsolicited scripts and responding to the many playwrights who sent them. Eventually, she told Richard that she couldn't do the job part-time anymore. Either she pursued her academic career or he had to hire her full time which, of course, he did. Joanna left academia when she was ABD (All But Dissertation), much to the chagrin of her parents.

She stayed in the job for four years before the Shaw Festival reached out to her about a position. Jackie Maxwell had just taken over as AD and Joanna was very excited that she was programming Canadian work. She met with Jackie and it seemed like a unique opportunity to work in a big theatre on big plays. At Tarragon, she had grown used to working on four-handers, five-handers at most.

She was at Shaw for ten years; learning a lot about theatre and about audiences. In Toronto, she'd hear talk about audiences wanting shorter plays with no intermission; no long speeches, etc. People have short attention spans, and so forth. She didn't observe that at

Shaw. *"As long as it's well done, people would sit through four-hour, five-hour long plays. Whenever we did marathons, they immediately sold out. People wanted those experiences."*

After ten years, it seemed time to move on, especially once Jackie announced she was leaving. Joanna and Richard Rose had stayed in touch. The Literary Manager position was open again and he invited her to come back.

Marcia Johnson (MJ): From what you've seen working at those two major theatres, what is the focus of the theatre generally? Is narrative, story-driven theatre still in favour?

Shaw is still very much interested in that kind of play. But, when writers would ask where they could send their work in Toronto, she honestly wasn't sure because, for a time, theatres were doing less play development, or plays were being developed but not produced. So many theatres now have just been taken over by new ADs, so it's hard to know what the future of Toronto theatre is. A lot of theatres are focusing on play development. Pre-pandemic, playwrights would come to her with a "Tarragon play." She was interested to know what that is: mostly narrative driven, literary, mostly naturalistic and realistic. She agrees, but she warns people not to pander or be condescending in their playwrighting.

Joanna Falck (JF): *"I think that's a mistake: whenever you look down on, or condescend to*

whatever you think to be 'conservative' or 'white.' I learned at Shaw that just because you're old doesn't mean that you're conservative or can't hear a swear word or people talking about sex. They've lived lives. They've had sex. They've sworn, probably. I think it's a mistake to think that way. It doesn't serve a play and you can feel it when you see the it on stage."

MJ: What do great plays have in common?

"I crave something really challenging or strange. I want to be sure that I'm not judging something by it being 'the weirdest version of that story I've ever seen.' As far as what do great plays have in common: ...either a thing that I've never thought of, a world that I know nothing about, or a version of a world I thought I knew but didn't; from a point of view that I've never seen... I'm particularly drawn to humour... Humour is kind of like a surprise or a twist where the thing you think you're going to see doesn't end up being the thing that you see. And, dare I say, entertaining. That has become kind of a dirty word but what if I had a great time and I learned something?"

MJ: Do you personally like to read a play in its early stages or when it is farther along? Why?

JF: *"As a dramaturg, I'm not a collaborator. In other words, I'm not going to tell you what the story should be."* She's happy to read early drafts but isn't drawn to incomplete drafts. She doesn't want to give the impression that she's the expert who will tell writers how to finish their play. *"I'm trying to get you to tell me what you want to do, and then I will hopefully help you get to that or reach that."*

MJ: When is it okay to follow up after sending in your script? Should you follow up?

JF: "Of course, you should follow up. I say this all the time to women particularly. Male playwrights don't worry about following up, for the most part. They call me. They want to have a meeting with me. They take up my time. They send me things even if it says on the website, 'do not send me anything.' They mostly don't worry about things like: 'Oh, I hope I'm not bothering her' or 'Ooh, I'm so sorry.' And I say to women all the time: 'That is my job. Whatever... company dramaturg, associate, literary manager, whatever: that's my job. You're not bothering me. Don't apologize for asking me to do my job.'"

"And, in my job, I should say: 'Thank you for sending me your script. 'We don't accept unsolicited scripts,' or 'I will read your play and I can't talk to you until December. Follow up with me in December if you haven't heard from me then. Don't be afraid to remind me of you and your work.' I actually do that sometimes, as a test, but male playwrights are always 'out the gate' 'in my face.' And not in a gross way, but they expect me to give them time, and women often don't and are often apologetic. I have to reach out to them and say, 'Let's talk.'"

MJ: What's your advice for sending scripts and following up with people who aren't you?

JF: "I would say send them the play. If they don't acknowledge it, then follow up in two weeks and say that you just want to make sure that they got the play. 'I understand you're busy. Would it be

okay if I followed up with a phone call or an email in three months?' You can be specific. Three months is a somewhat reasonable time. If a theatre accepts unsolicited scripts, I think they often say six months but I think you're allowed to check in in three months. Most people in my job are not actively ignoring you and your work, but things happen, people get busy. So, I'm happy to be reminded. I don't always have a great answer and I'm embarrassed so, if you don't hear back from people... you have to remember the person on the other end is also a human who feels guilt and shame and embarrassment about not being on top of their stuff. So, make it easy for them to not feel that it's a job. They're not doing you a favour by reading your play and you're not bugging them. Also, if you don't get a grant from an organization, you are allowed to follow up and ask for feedback."

MJ: Do you prefer receiving a script or going to a staged reading?

JF: Going to the reading. 100%. I would much rather see it in action than read it because that's how it's meant to be seen. This was posted on Tarragon's website.

MJ: If a dramaturg or AD goes to that reading, and the direction and casting isn't ideal, will they be able to let the words rise above that?

JF: "Yes. You're also allowed to follow up thanking them for attending and that, for example, they didn't get a lot of time to rehearse and that you'd love to talk to them about it."

MJ: What turns you off when playwrights approach you?

JF: “Really, what turns me off is when I sit down with a writer and then they stare at me blankly... When people come wholly unprepared. I admittedly am shocked every time. If you’re meeting with someone for the first time at a theatre and you’ve not seen any of their work, you’ve not looked at their website, you don’t know what’s happening there, and you are basically asking that person to tell you about it. I get very irritated and I’m very reluctant to meet with that person again.”

MJ: Is there one last thing that you want to share with the Women’s Caucus?

JF: “I want to re-emphasize – I’ve been saying this my whole career – that I feel like women continue to be too apologetic in their approach to theatre.

I’m only now, I think, really realizing that playwrights feel quite powerless; that they ‘should feel grateful’ for whatever they’re given. I will say to writers: ‘What do you want from us?’ ‘What do you want from a process?’ What do you want from a workshop?’ I get kind of a scared, blank ‘Uh, whatever you guys want’ response.”

“I say it would be helpful to us if you knew yourself well enough to be able to tell me because so often writers discover their process through bad experiences. ‘I don’t ever want that to happen again.’ ‘I don’t ever want to be in this position.’ The more you’re able to articulate your process, I actually think it’s to the theatre’s benefit. It doesn’t make you a jerk or a diva or expecting too much. If you’re professional, you need to articulate what you want, what you need, what works for you, and not in a demanding kind of way. ‘This is what I need as a writer in order to do good work.’

Marcia Johnson has been a theatre artist in Toronto for over thirty years. In October 2020, she directed her piece, *A Magical Place*, over Zoom for the NAC National Transformations Project, commissioned by the Stratford Festival. *Serving Elizabeth* premiered in February 2020 at Western Canada Theatre and will have a run at Thousand Islands Playhouse once the Covid-19 crisis is over. Other plays include *Binti’s Journey*, an adaptation of the teen fiction novel, *The Heaven Shop* by Deborah Ellis (Theatre Direct Canada/Manitoba Theatre for Young People/Black Theatre Workshop); *Courting Johanna* (Blyth Festival), based on Alice Munro’s “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage,” and *Late*, an original piece produced by Obsidian Theatre. The short opera *My Mother’s Ring* for which she wrote the libretto with composer Stephen A. Taylor was nominated for a 2009 Dora Mavor Moore Award in Toronto. Their second collaboration, *Paradises Lost*, based on the Ursula K. Le Guin novella, had excerpted concert performances at Reed College (Third Angle Ensemble) in Portland, Oregon and at The Gershwin Hotel in New York. *Paradises Lost* had its premiere at University of Illinois. CBC Radio Drama writing credits include *Wifely Duty* and *The Revival Meeting* (Sounds Like Canada); *Say Ginger Ale* (The Round Up) and *Perfect on Paper* (Sunday Showcase and Monday Night Playhouse). Marcia is a core member of *Got Your Back Canada*, a juror and dramaturg for *Ergo Pink Fest*, and she sits on the senior advisory board of *Women Playwrights International*.