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**Interview with Marjorie Chan,  
AD of Theatre Passe Muraille**

Conducted by Kai Taddei,  
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**MARJORIE CHAN 陳以珪**

Marjorie was born in Toronto to Hong Kong immigrants who arrived in the late 60s. As a theatre and opera artist, she works variously as writer, director and dramaturge as well as in the intersection of these forms and roles. Her work has been seen and performed in the United States, Scotland, Hong Kong, Russia and across Canada. Her full-length works as a playwright include the plays *The Madness of the Square*, *a nanking winter*, *Tails From the City*, as well as the libretti for the operas, *Sanctuary Song*, *The Lesson of Da Ji*, *M'dea Undone* and most recently, *The Monkiest King*. Some of the companies Marjorie has directed for include: Gateway Theatre, Cahoots Theatre, Native Earth Performing Arts, Theatre Passe Muraille, Obsidian Theatre and Theatre du Pif (Hong Kong). Marjorie has been nominated for 9 Dora Awards and is the recipient of four (3 for libretti, 1 for performance). She has also received the K.M. Hunter Artist's Award in Theatre, the Entertainment World Award for Best New Work, a Harold Award, as well as the George Luscombe Award for Mentorship. Other notable nominations include the John Hirsch Directors' Award, the Governor General's Literary Award for her playwriting debut, *China Doll*, and the Canadian Citizen Award for her work with *Crossing Gibraltar* – Cahoots Theatre's program for newcomers. She has been artist-in-residence with Factory Theatre, Banff Playwrights' Lab, Tapestry Opera, Cahoots Theatre, The Theatre Centre (with 6th Man Collective), Theatre Direct Canada, SUNY (Geneseo, New York) and Theatre du Pif (Hong Kong). Upcoming projects include the world premiere of her new play, *Lady Sunrise* (Factory Theatre) and the remount of *The Ward Cabaret* (Harbourfront Centre). She is the current Artistic Director of Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto.

*I met up with Marjorie on a bright Wednesday morning in early November at Theatre Passe Muraille's office space. Tragically, my phone decided to crash just as soon as I had finished interviewing Marjorie, and so I lost the audio file! What follows is a summary of our conversation.*

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The office at Theatre Passe Muraille (TPM) was a-bustle with laughter and conversation when I arrived Wednesday morning to chat with the company's new Artistic Director, Marjorie Chan, who took over from former Artistic Director Andy McKim this past July. The office space was wide open, with folks puttering about in various corners, and tables pushed together in the centre of the room to form a makeshift collaboration table where Marjorie and I settled for our interview. She put me at ease right away with her warmth and laughter, and made sure I was hydrated after my chilly bike ride over.

We started out by discussing what avenues TPM has available for playwrights to introduce themselves to the company:

"Before we open the floodgates," Marjorie told me, "we want to figure out what the best way to accept submissions is. Maybe we have one month every year wherein we accept scripts, and we read everything submitted in that month. We're not sure yet!"

Since they're still trying to figure out what kind of policy will best serve everyone, TPM does not yet have a submission policy on their website. Open-ended policies for unsolicited

scripts, Marjorie pointed out, tend not to serve either the playwright *or* the theatre, since more often than not unread scripts pile up while artistic directors and staff are busy dealing with the more pressing demands of shows in production or pre-production.

While the conversation about unsolicited script submissions is ongoing, TPM is accepting applications until December 2nd for Recommender Grants through the OAC; a great way for playwrights to introduce themselves and their work to Marjorie.

TPM will also be introducing "Meet Marjorie" soon – a replacement for Andy McKim's "Pitch Andy" program, through which artists were invited to meet with Andy for 10 to 15 minutes and pitch him a project. Marjorie is hoping that "Meet Marjorie" will be more informal than "Pitch Andy." (Plus, she likes the alliteration.)

"He wanted me to keep 'pitch' in the name," she said, laughing. "But I said 'no!'"

By changing the focus of "Meet Marjorie" from a pitch to a conversation, Marjorie hopes to create a different entry point for discussions that does not place her at the top of a hierarchical structure.

“The ‘Meet Marjorie’ sessions will take place for a few days in the spring,” Marjorie said, “with 10 – 15 minutes for each meeting.”

Marjorie has also made it clear that accessibility is absolutely her priority when it comes to supporting the communities that TPM serves. In an interview with *Intermission Magazine*, she quoted disabled artist and activist Annie Segarra’s hashtag #thefutureisaccessible as her “driving aspiration of the next 50 years at TPM.”

“Someone asked me [when I took over artistic leadership of TPM] what my ‘elevator pitch’ for the company was,” Marjorie said, “and I said: I need a million dollars to buy an elevator so the theatre is more accessible. That’s my elevator pitch.”

When I asked what advice Marjorie has for playwrights creating new works with accessibility in mind, she referenced TPM’s recent presentation of *The Election*, produced by Common Boots Theatre in association with Nightwood Theatre and Theatre Direct.

“The playwrights, Yolanda Bonnell and Natasha Greenblatt, integrated audio descriptions right into the script,” Marjorie pointed out. “It was based in collective creation to begin with, and all the performers were playing so many different characters that the audio descriptions were actually super helpful each time a character was introduced. Natasha [Greenblatt] said she can’t imagine the script without the integrated audio description.”

Marjorie went on to explain that while playwrights might feel like things such as ASL interpretation, integrated audio description, closed captioning, and so forth pose an undesirable challenge because they might require changing and adapting pre-existing texts, if artists start thinking about accessibility from day one, all of these considerations become an organic and even inspiring piece of the creative process.

“You have to think about which communities you want to serve with your work,” Marjorie said. “Because maybe your piece is accessible to the Deaf and Hard Of Hearing community, but not the Low Vision and Blind communities. We have whole conversations about this question when different accessibility needs conflict with each other.”

She used TPM’s upcoming spring production of *Ephemeral Artifacts* as an example of a production that poses a creative challenge in terms of accessibility for Deaf communities. *Ephemeral Artifacts* is a tap dance show. The company is brainstorming how best to create performances that capture the wonderful particularities of dance as a medium for storytelling.

Another show in the season that poses similar challenges is *Suitcase/Adrenaline*, which will be performed in Arabic with English subtitles.

“But what about people who have barriers to reading those subtitles?” Marjorie said. “Maybe English is their second or third or fourth language, or maybe they can’t read quickly enough to keep up.”

“I’ve suggested that maybe we have translators, interpreters, whispering in their ear,” Marjorie said, “like the UN!” Theatre Passe Muraille has applied for funding to run “accessibility workshop weeks” significantly in advance of rehearsals for shows. These workshop weeks would provide artists with everything they need – space, technical support, etcetera – to think specifically about which communities they want to be able to reach, and how they’re going to do it.

Marjorie pointed out that 46% of Toronto’s population was born outside the country.

“Our art needs to reflect that,” she said. “A block south of us [here at TPM] is a shelter for under-housed people, and then down the street from that is a fancy furniture store. There’s a park another block from here that skateboarders use *and* old grannies doing Tai Chi – well. I don’t know if they’re old. Or grannies! But you see what I’m saying.”

So, to Marjorie, ‘relevant’ art means art that addresses all facets of society – from TPM’s local community, to the city of Toronto as a whole, to the global community.

Currently, TPM has one playwright-in-residence, Tamyka Bullen, but Marjorie says they’ll be seeking more artists-in-residence in the future.

For now, she encourages playwrights to apply to for the OAC Recommender Grant, keep an eye on the website for when “Meet Marjorie” goes live, and invite her to see your work if it’s being read or staged!

“Playwrights as a group can also start to try and arrange accessibility options when they are negotiating their contracts,” Marjorie suggested. “Perhaps if we all started to do that as a whole, more companies would take on accessibility.”