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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Micheline Chévrier,
AD of Imago Theatre

Conducted by Alexis Diamond,
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For over thirty-five years, Micheline has worked across Canada and abroad as a director, artistic director and dramaturg. As a director, she has worked at such theatres as The Shaw Festival, the National Arts Centre, Theatre Calgary, the Citadel, the Globe Theatre, Prairie Theatre Exchange, Manitoba Theatre Centre, Canadian Stage, Young People's Theatre, Théâtre français de Toronto, the Centaur Theatre, Segal Centre, Geordie Productions, Imago Theatre, Theatre New Brunswick and BeMe Productions (Barcelona and Munich). Micheline was the Artistic Director of the Great Canadian Theatre Company from 1995 to 2000 and is currently the Artistic and Executive Director at Imago Theatre in Montreal.

Her directorial credits include works by Chekhov, Shaw, Coward, as well as several Canadian and Quebecois playwrights such as Carole Fréchette, Colleen Murphy, Wendy Lill, Michel Marc Bouchard, Jean-Marc Dalpé, David Young and Ann-Marie Macdonald, just to name a few.

Micheline has been nominated for and received several awards for Direction, including a Betty Mitchell Award (Calgary), a Capital Critics' Awards (Ottawa), a Dora Mavor Moore Award (Toronto), and two METAs (Montreal).

She has also taught across the country and received the Sims Family Award for Excellence in Teaching from the National Theatre School.

General:

- What is mandate/focus of your theatre?

Imago Theatre's focus is to put forward the woman's perspective, giving a privileged place to often marginalized, unheard, or unseen stories or voices. Every play we produce has at the core an urgent conversation and deals with current or

persistent issues that address not only the local (Montreal) but also the global community.

Imago mission

- How often does your theatre premiere a new Canadian play?

(Laughs ruefully) Not very often.

We are premiering one this year, in a co-production with Geordie Theatre: *Persephone Bound*. While not an Imago creation, Imago has been part of the show's development. It just takes a lot of time and resources to develop a play properly. Every play needs different types of support, so it is hard to plan for that financially and logistically. We are getting better at it now that Imago has an actual staff. Our new goal is to premiere one new work every three years, but it really depends on resources. Imago has a lot of plays in residence, but that doesn't necessarily guarantee a production with us. Sometimes Imago is the right place to foster the work, but not necessarily the best company to present it. It really depends on what the project needs.

- What do great plays at your theatre have in common?

They explore form—that's what we're looking for, diversity in terms of form. The plays offer a female or women's perspective on the world. They all have a prickly subject at their centre, something not easy to discuss, uncomfortable, even frightening.

Process:

- How does a playwright get your attention with a new play? Do you have a submission policy?

We do, it's on our website (bottom of page). We ask that people send a synopsis of the play and a little biographical information. If we feel the project might be of some interest or a possible match with us, then I will respond by requesting the script. We already have several local writers with whom we are working, and the priority is given to them, as opposed to people from out of town.

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

It depends. Sometimes, if the project elicits some interest, it is nice to get in on the early stages, so that the dramaturgy and the evolution of the piece can be collaborative, particularly if it is a local creator who is seeking dramaturgy or mentorship. More often, I am more inclined to look at a script that is closer to what the playwright considers to be its final version. The best thing to do is to contact me by email, and then we can take it from there.

- Approximately how many new scripts come across your desk each year?

Imago receives 20 submissions a year. If I request the script, we definitely read it, but it can be slow for me to respond if I haven't requested it.

- Roughly how many are submitted by women playwrights?

90%. Once in a blue moon, there is a writer of the male persuasion who doesn't look at the mandate before submitting, so I remind them to please read the mandate first.

- What is the process you go through when reading new scripts?

At Imago, every script is read by at least two people. A discussion always follows about whether or not this work is something for us to consider.

- Do you have a general comment about your contact with playwrights who want to get their play produced at your theatre? What works for you and what makes you a little crazy/turned off?

A turnoff is people not reading the company's mandate or being familiar with its productions. But that rarely happens now. People can usually

contextualize their work within our mission, which is good. I don't like being told, "My play is a perfect match with your company." I don't think it is the playwright's place to determine that, but it is certainly the playwright's place to relate the play to their understanding of Imago's mandate and mission. It is a question of understanding what kind of partnership we might have together, the possibility of a fruitful exchange.

- How soon after a playwright submits a script do you want to get a follow-up call/ email and do you prefer a call or an email?

I prefer an email. You can ask me when you might hear back from me. If I reply, "I won't be able to look at this until... January," for example, you can follow up if you haven't received a response by then.

- Playwrights often grumble that it's hard enough to get first productions of a new play but even harder to get a second production. Do you think this is true? Why?

Yes, it is true! I think a new play often gets produced because someone has responded very personally and viscerally to the topic or to the play itself. There's something that speaks to me, so I get on board. Now, that play may not speak to anyone else, so it might be years before it gets a second production. Then there are plays that do get done, and capture the imagination of quite a few people at once, but those plays are very rare. The truth is, contemporary plays that get done more than once are rare. We also have to remember that plays are timely. Some plays don't stand the test of time, especially contemporary works, because they are so immediate, so connected to the moment in which they are written and produced. But sometimes, plays are prescient. That was the case

with *Persephone Bound*, which started before the #MeToo movement, and then became especially timely when the conversation around consent went viral.

Content:

- What is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play?

Superlative writing. I love language, I love words, I love the power of words and the fact that they contain physicality, emotion, image, spirituality... I still respond heavily to text, but text in which I can see the physical world of the play. Not talking heads.

- What play did you read last year that really excited you?

Sadly, it's not Canadian. I read an American play called *Fairview* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. I found it imaginative, relevant, theatrical, with beautiful characters and language so crisp, clean, strong, it carries rhythm, humour, danger. That play really excited me.

Audience:

- What is the demographic of your audience? Age? Gender?

It's changed recently, in the last couple of years actually, due to our Pay-what-you-decide policy. Making theatre completely financially accessible has really changed our demographic. Our audience is predominantly adult, and young -- university age into the forties. The gender is open.

- What plays have been popular in the past?

Other People's Children by Hannah Moscovitch. It was insane, the best selling show in Imago's

history; *If We Were Birds* by Erin Shields, which grew exponentially through the run; *Pig Girl* by Colleen Murphy. All of these plays have really strong writing, sense of character, danger.

- How do you feel about the 10-day run for Anglo independent theatre in Montreal?

I wish we could run longer, but I don't know if we have the audience to justify it. I would love to be able to sell out the second week of a run once the word got out in the first week. Right now that doesn't happen. But I'm not sure that long runs necessarily add value otherwise. In my experience at GCTC, it was the family dramas (like *Les Belles Soeurs* and *The Attic*, *The Pearls*, and *Three Fine Girls* by Ann-Marie MacDonald [et. al]) that could have been extended, because audiences responded so well. These types of plays capture people's imagination.

- What keeps you working in the theatre?

I know that the people who come to see the work we do are actually affected by it. I won't go so far as to say transformed, but I've seen first-hand through post-performance talkbacks and private conversations that people are quite changed by what they have witnessed. For example, *Elsewhere* was important, transformative, because it allowed people to talk about something that moved, worried, concerned them terribly, and it was amazing to have a forum through the art. Colleen Murphy says that theatre provides a safe place to talk about dangerous stuff, and that's what keeps me doing it.