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Interview with Nina Lee Aquino,
AD of Factory Theatre

Conducted by Sangeeta Wylie,
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NINA LEE AQUINO

With a string of firsts in Asian Canadian theatre, Nina Lee Aquino was the founding Artistic Director of fu-GEN Asian Canadian theatre company, she organized the first Asian Canadian theatre conference, edited the first (2-volume) Asian Canadian play anthology, and co-edited the first (award-winning) book on Asian Canadian theatre. She became Artistic Director of Cahoots Theatre, she currently holds the same position at Factory Theatre, and she is the President of the Board of Directors at the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT). Awards for her work include the Ken McDougall Award 2004, the Canada Council John Hirsch Prize 2008, the Toronto Arts Foundation's Margo Bindhart and Rita Davies Cultural Leadership Award 2018, and three Dora Mavor Moore Awards for Outstanding Direction.

It was a pleasure to interview Nina Lee Aquino, Artistic Director of Factory Theatre in Toronto. Nina has fought hard for greater representation and inclusivity of BIPOC artists and female artists, helping to redefine what "Canadian" means. Our interview took place over Zoom about eight months into the pandemic. We had a wide-ranging conversation, moving from adapting theatre-making during pandemic times and Factory's initiatives, to dreams for playwrights and BIPOC inclusion.

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Sangeeta Wylie (SW): Factory Theatre is dedicated to developing, producing and presenting exclusively Canadian work. In light of your 50th anniversary, paying homage to the history and the people who have built it, what is Factory's focus now? What stories do you want to tell?

Nina Lee Aquino (NLA): I'm an observer by nature. And being an observer, I am able to respond to what is relevant in the here-and-now, and use that as a jumping point to talk about the future. Factory's focus will always depend on how our artists are responding to what is happening around us and in the world. I'm looking forward to witnessing how COVID and Black Lives Matter, and everything that's been happening in the past year, are going to seep into our future work. That's why I love the idea that the experience, and the identity, and the definition of what being Canadian is, is so fluid.

What I do hope is that the boundaries of how these stories are told keep changing. When you go from one province to another or even one city to another, the containers in which the stories are told are very different. In Toronto, for the most part, I find that realism and naturalism are still the biggest trends, and I want to change that, mainly because BIPOC stories have already broken away from that.

We don't tell stories that are deeply rooted in naturalism or realism anymore; we go outside of that. And how we choose to present them also breaks those naturalistic boundaries, and that's the tension I frequently find with our white audience members and even our reviewers. Often when we get outside of that box, we get ridiculed for it. They say, "I didn't understand it," and I'm like, "Well, tough." As we hopefully evolve and expand our understanding, it's about becoming aware that it's not always going to be about you. Also, the piece, god forbid, may not really be written for you. I hope that the embracing of that concept, and the savouring of that, and the not-understanding-a-work-right-away, will be more and more welcome; that it becomes about receiving what we're offering, sitting with that, and maybe doing some Googling to understand it a bit better. Because it's not like we understand Shakespeare right away, right? We study it for a frickin' reason. Why are BIPOC stories any different?

SW: We're living in challenging times. How are we to adapt our roles?

NLA: I don't know if I have labels for it, but I think Factory is trying to do it. Despite these challenging times, I was still able to plan a season and I'm able to employ artists to do what they do best, which is to create. It's just about being able to roll with the punches and

adapt to the medium. The fact of the matter is we cannot have audiences in our theatres, so, for me, that simply means that we can't tell stories how we normally tell them. So, how do we find a way to continue delivering stories to our audiences, loyal and new? We use what is available to us and just figure out a way. I just don't want to get bogged down by labels or lost in questions like, "What are we doing?" "Is this a Zoom play?" "Is it a hybrid of film?" I just want to tell a story using the tools that are available to us. As artists, we are rule-breakers anyway, so let's break a couple of rules here, and see what happens. If there's any season where I can really experiment and take big risks, it's this one. Let's just play and see what we got. It could work. And it could not work. But the essence of theatre-making for me is that there's a storytelling process. I'm in virtual rehearsals, and we're interacting the best we can behind screens. Yes, it's not the same, but it's still about creating something, whatever people choose to call it. Observing, responding, listening, being able to be open-minded and willing to jump into uncertainty, have always been things that have led me to where I am today. It's very useful. It has come in handy, especially now in the past eight months. But it's really no different from when I started fu-GEN, to where I am now.

SW: How often do you premiere new Canadian plays?

NLA: When we present six shows in a season, usually two or three of them are world premieres. And then one will be a reimaged Canadian classic. The rest will be Toronto premieres. We bring something from outside of Toronto into Toronto. That's kind of the

balance that I always try to achieve. The prime directive of Factory Theatre and why it was founded was to bring Canadian work to our stages.

SW: Is there a single most important thing that you're looking for in a new play?

NLA: No, I always love being surprised. Like my taste in music, it's eclectic. It could really range from funny musicals about love, to really dark, political plays. There are always works that I'm drawn to, but being an artistic director, I've really had to train myself to believe that just because it's not my personal cup of tea, doesn't mean it doesn't belong in my artistic cabinet. It's not about me; it's about the communities that I serve. So, even though I may not be drawn personally to a certain playwright's work, tracking their career, their trajectory, and seeing how their work affects certain communities is important. I can't just rely on my favourites. But do I have a personal kind of checklist? Absolutely. I think that strong writing, a powerful vision, and relevance are my three big ones. Even then, in those three, I could come across a play that has the potential to have a powerful theatrical vision, and it's super-duper relevant, but the writing's so-so. I can still do something about that. That's where our new play development resources come in handy. However, I can come across a play with super-duper strong writing but not so much on the powerful theatrical vision, and I don't find it relevant at all. I can be wowed by the writing but if it is about nothing, then I can't in good conscience consider it. So there's trade-offs, and just being able to be open and not bind myself in these strict criteria boxes.

SW: What is your process for reading new scripts?

NLA: Good old-fashioned reading it. Me and our Company Dramaturg, Matt McGeachy, have a wonderful partnership. And when the two of us are reading new scripts, it's key that Matt knows that he has to put on my pair of eyes when he's reading the script in addition to his own. And the discussion is key for us. It's also a crucial part of our process to give anything we read time to digest. There's the immediate response, taking note of that, and then there's the after-three-days response, and then being able to talk through it. Reading is the first stage, but scripts are meant to be performed, and that's where I'm looking with my director eyes for the powerful theatrical vision: is this theatrical or is this a TV show? There are scripts that come across like that, and those are the things that I'm like, "Hmm."

SW: Do you prefer an invite to a staged reading or production over reading a new script?

NLA: Always. Our dramaturg loves reading to begin with, so he'll still read the script, but often for me, if I can experience it in some way, shape, or form, I will. It's only just in these weird COVID times that it's hard to navigate that. It's hard for me to judge when I'm watching a staged reading or production presented online, and then trying to imagine the piece presented on a stage in front of an in-person audience -- it's just that added layer of obstacle. Zoom

does nobody any favours unless it's really written specifically for Zoom or for a virtual platform. So, now I'm really careful. If it's worth waiting for, then I'll take that opportunity to wait, or I will just ask for the script to read because the virtual platform is really challenging to assess anything.

SW: What play have you read or seen lately that excited you?

NLA: The one that I'm working on right now, David Yee's play, is the one that I'm really excited about, and I feel very grateful to be working on something I'm super thrilled about. The past eight months, it's been challenging all around, but to be able to sit and kind of lose myself in this play has been a positive point. I have to say it's been a morally-fatiguing couple of months for me, both trying to run a theatre company in these times, but also serving as the President of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres. It's just left me with no more energy to read anything creative, to be honest. Just trying to be on the heels of this crisis that our sector is facing has been the priority for me.

SW: Can you tell us more about your new play development and creation groups, and how a playwright might get involved with these?

NLA: This could probably change because we're learning more and more, but I love the OAC Recommenders Grants for Theatre Creators (RGTCs) because they serve as our "general auditions" for creators. Anybody can

apply, whether you're emerging or established. You have an idea or a proposal, and you articulate that as succinctly as you can in the application. It's not a very long application, it's quite simple and it gives me and Matt a great idea of what everybody's up to. I wish we had all the money in the world to fund everything that we're interested in, but it does allow us to give funds to some really exciting ones. This is how our creation groups are formed - selecting from our batch of RGTC applications. The fun part for me and Matt is identifying who the standouts are. There are proposals that we love, and there are proposals that we have lukewarm feelings for, but we'll feel super excited about the playwright or the creator. In terms of how we assess, we put the applications in various categories based on the style or genre of the proposed work, how much funding a potential application would need, etc. We try to be as multi-faceted in reviewing the proposals as much as possible. Many applicants also self-identify which stage of their playwriting career they're in, which is also a great thing to know. Anyone can apply for the RGTCs, so applicants can range from emerging writers, to mid-career, to established. By self-identifying which level of their career they're in, it makes it easier for us as an artist-driven institution to better assist selected playwrights with their works based on their experience level.

Before COVID, I also really did my due diligence to watch plays from all over Toronto and not just your standard plays at Canadian Stage or Soulpepper. I watch

over 30 shows at the Fringe, I try to watch almost all the plays at SummerWorks. That's the way of recruitment for me. It's field work, it's looking for potential, not just in the things that are on stage, but new writers in particular. It's a great strategy because I get to experience their work, identifying that I may not like the play itself, but I love the promise of that writer. When I see something that I like, whether it's the project itself or the people involved, then I reach out to have coffee with them and start that relationship.

And then you have your good ol' fashioned writers emailing me, me or Matt, or both of us. When we read the script, if there's interest in either, we respond back and say, "Come, let's sit and chat and see what we can do." It's really important in general that it starts with the relationship. Plays come and go -- your first play might not be a good fit for Factory - - but our philosophy is that there's no real rejection at Factory. There might be cases where your play is not the best fit for this theatre (we have limitations in terms of audience and all of that stuff), but that doesn't mean I'm rejecting you, the creator... It doesn't mean that our relationship should stop. Often I will say, "Okay, no to this, but what else do you got?" Or it might lead to a commission instead. That's happened to several of our creators who we've formed really amazing relationships with. That's actually how Marjorie Chan's *Lady Sunrise* happened. We were developing another play by her and it was becoming clear that the path of that particular piece was going to need an extended period of time for more exploration, but then Marjorie says, "I have this other play, do you want to have a read of

this?" And then, boom, that was it. *Lady Sunrise* was the one. We put the other work on pause because I still want to give that a chance, but *Lady Sunrise* on the other hand was ready to go. I said, "Let's do it. Now."

We're such a creator-driven company at Factory, and I'm not one for messing with the natural trajectory of a piece. That's why I will say "no" to something. Because I want the piece to keep its authenticity, its ingenuity, rather than trying to change the piece to fit Factory. I just don't believe in that. If this piece needs to go in a certain direction and as a result can no longer be produced at Factory, so be it. We're never scared of that -- it's always people-over-projects, and the relationship that is so much more important. It's not about the first play that you produce. It's going to be the third or the fifth or the tenth in the future. It's all about long term thinking. Our residencies are headed that way, hopefully, when we come out of COVID times. That's really where we realized that these relationships are super important; that they need to keep growing and being nurtured. The playwrights themselves need to be nurtured. The residencies that we're hoping to keep evolving, as Factory keeps growing, are not all about focusing on one play; it really is focusing on the playwright. We have new initiatives coming down the pipeline that are really going to be about paying the playwright to 'just write.' The idea of playwrights being on payroll is the end goal for me before I leave Factory. To be able to pay a living wage to a writer-in-residence at Factory, so that they could just

write is the dream.

SW: What do great plays at your theatre have in common?

NLA: I hope, relevance. From the sweetest story to the real political beasts that have been on our stages, my hope is that all of them have resonated relevance somehow; that they all feel important to tell.

SW: You don't accept unsolicited scripts. Do you have anything to add to that? Is there a way that an emerging playwright can get your attention?

NLA: Emerging writers know this, because more often than not, they email me, and they want to have coffee with me, and I say, "Yes." I tell them about RGTCs; that's why we get a ton of submissions for them. The unsolicited rule is really just to be fair and transparent. But that's going to be changing soon enough, as we're planning on opening a period of time in the season where anybody can submit and I am hoping that will happen in the spring. But for the rest of the year, it's just about being honest about our physical and mental capacity. In order for us to be respectful of people's time, we have to control the number of submissions so that somehow it doesn't get lost in the pile because it's only two pairs of eyes reading huge piles of scripts. We instituted that when I started because I wanted to stop the madness of it all! And I wanted to be fair, and I wanted to be honest and transparent in terms of our policy to respond to all of them meaningfully.

SW: When it comes to contact with playwrights, what works for you, and what makes you a little turned off or crazy?

NLA: I never look for perfection. The promise of what the story could be is often what excites me. But I will say that if you're going to pitch yourself or pitch a project, know who you're pitching to. That is advice I give to emerging artists: do the research, don't just "spray and pray." If your email to me is generic, it doesn't do you any favours. It also says to me that you're not paying attention to the community. It's one thing to know your potential place and where you belong in our community; it's another thing not to show any interest or care about the work that your artistic peers or colleagues do in the community. I want to know that you're also an active audience member. Don't pitch something to me and be so sure that this is such a great fit for Factory when you haven't seen a single show of ours. What do you have to offer, and why Factory? What is it about Factory that has led you to us? The more specific, the better. Specificity is everything. It's what's going to make you interesting, and ultimately, unforgettable.

SW: Once you have a script, how should the playwright follow up? Do you prefer a call or an email?

NLA: Email is always good. Usually Matt and I will respond, "Yes, we received that safe and sound, we'll get back to you in a couple of weeks." We always encourage

people to give us two months. If you haven't heard from us, feel free to remind us about it. For the pieces that we're not interested in, we still try and respond and say, "Yeah, sorry, read it; just not for Factory." Again, being really careful to say the play is not for Factory but that doesn't mean the playwright is not for Factory. We never really discourage anyone to not submit again. We will say that the script is not for Factory, or we'll reach out and say, "Can you please apply for our RGTCs?" Or, we take the playwright out for coffee and chat and begin an in-person conversation.

SW: How might a playwright get a second production? Is it just reaching out or is it something that you seek out?

NLA: I think it could be a bit of both. That's why we have the presentations component in our season. We always have three slots for that. Before the pandemic, I traveled a lot to see the shows because it's important to me to be able to see them live. Emailing me is good, and the first step is always sending me the script. If there's an archival video, that's even better because it allows me to visually see the possibilities in our own spaces.

SW: What is the demographic of your audience?

NLA: It is mostly women between the ages of 25 to 45, diverse, Toronto and GTA based. This demographic has shifted throughout the seasons that I've been at Factory, and it's definitely shifted to younger ages, for sure. And it's very much reflected in our

subscription, for example, which hasn't really been a big hit because young people don't like subscribing. But our ticket sales have grown. That's really where it's unpredictable, but that's where it's increased. It's very reflective of the kinds of audiences that come to Factory.

SW: What plays have been popular with your audiences in the past?

NLA: Oh, it ranges. *Banana Boys* by Leon Aureus. No matter when I put it on and what season, it's always a hit. I don't know why. When I did it at fu-GEN, it was a big hit. When I did it in the 2015/16 Naked Season, it was still a big hit. And that's 13, 14 years later! So, there's something about that piece, regardless of what reviewers think, that really hits home to everybody, not just Asian Canadian audiences. *BANG BANG*, of course, by Kat Sandler was another one. Ravi Jain's version of *Salt-Water Moon*. *Prairie Nurse* by Marie Beath Badian was a big hit. Marjorie Chan's *Lady Sunrise*, which, by the way, if we were going to end and cancel a season due to COVID, I'm glad that *Lady Sunrise* was the one to end the season because it ended on such a high note.

SW: How does shifting to digital platforms affect your curating of new work, at least in the near future?

NLA: Oh yeah, it changes everything. If we were to do another virtual season for 2021/22 everything that I had planned in real life for 2021/22 goes down the drain,

right? Also, it's not fair. When the playwright writes for the stage, it should be for the stage, unless the playwright comes to me and says they can adapt the piece for an online presentation (that's what Daniel McIvor did with *House*). So, it changes everything. It changes my season planning, and our entire staff has to be ready for that. Because the health and safety protocols, and really the entire pandemic situation, shifts had to happen every couple of months... We don't know where we're gonna be in 2021. I mean, if Broadway is shut until June of 2021, Ontario will usually follow suit. Am I running different scenarios in my head for next season? Absolutely. Am I hoping that it's all going to be in-person? Yeah. But it's unrealistic. There's a big chance that it can't be in-person just yet.

SW: What keeps you working in the theatre?

NLA: Hmm, good question. Because I ask myself that everyday -- most especially on bad days! Why? Why am I doing this? David Yee told me this once, when he was talking about whether he likes acting or writing more. And he goes, "Well, if you take away acting, and I still have writing, I think I'll survive. I'll be sad, but I'll survive. But if you take away writing, then I'm dead, because writing is like oxygen." I think that's what it is for me: theatre and working in theatre in the capacities that I'm working in. Fuck, there are horrible, horrible days, but there are also some nice days, and then there are days in between. But I think overall, when you've found your purpose and your calling is so clear, and what you have to do is clear and

what you have to offer is something of value, you wake up and you just do it. It's alchemy. It's a little bit of science and logic, and it's a little bit of magic.

SW: What excites you about the future?

NLA: I think there are two things that I'm really keen to watch out for -- I don't really know if I'm excited about it -- but I'm definitely going to be watching out for it. The first is a recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and specifically how the theatre sector is going to recover. I'm ready to go into recovery mode. I'm dreading the planning of it, because it's just such a huge undertaking, but, yeah, I'm really looking forward to that.

In addition to that, I'm also looking forward to seeing how all the meaningful (or seemingly meaningful) dialogue and conversations, advocacy, and "listening" that the leaders in our organizations have committed to manifests. I'm really eager to see what that amounts to. Because right now, in this pandemic, it is quite easy to say the

beautiful things that you need to say. It's easy to say, "Yeah, we're gonna reflect and pause and learn and process." What I'm keen to see is how that is put into action when we go back to "normal." What are your seasons going to look like (for realz this time)? Who are the people you're going to get to tell those stories? And how are those stories going to be told this time around? I'm anxiously waiting to see what the results of those promises, listening sessions, community consultations, etc. are. Because I want to believe in the sincerity of the conversations that came out of those pledges. But you talk the talk, you gotta walk the walk, right? And a lot of our artists, especially our marginalized artists, our BIPOC artists, gave up a lot during these past eight months, having to revisit trauma to tell important stories to illustrate to our white colleagues what it's like to be in our shoes. A lot of blood, tears, and trauma were shed in order to share and impart knowledge and expertise to our peers and leaders in the Canadian theatre community. I hope that those stories were told for something. That's what I'm interested in and looking forward to.

Sangeeta Wylie is an emerging playwright, and actor in film, television and theatre. She has several theatre, film, television, and commercial acting credits. Her play, inspired by a true story of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, is her first full-length play, with productions planned in 2021. Sangeeta sits on the Board of Directors for the Cultch Theatre, she plays classical piano, and she holds degrees in Chemistry with a Music Minor, and Dentistry.