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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Nina Lee Aquino,  
Artistic Director of the NAC English  
Theatre in Ottawa, ON

Conducted by Laurie Fyffe  
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Nina Lee Aquino is a Filipino Canadian director and dramaturg. She is the founding Artistic Director of fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company, former Artistic Director of Cahoots Theatre, Factory Theatre, and is the current the Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre (NAC) English Theatre.

Awards for her work include the Ken McDougall Award, the John Hirsch Prize, the Toronto Theatre Critics Awards for Best Director, Toronto Arts Foundation's Margo Bindhart and Rita Davies Cultural Leadership Award, and three Dora Awards for Outstanding Direction.

Nina is also credited with a string of firsts in Asian Canadian theatre: she organized the first Asian Canadian theatre conference; she edited the first (2-volume) Asian Canadian play anthology, and she co-edited the first (award-winning) book on Asian Canadian theatre.

She is an honorary member of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research, an Adjunct Professor at York University's Department of Theatre, and the current President of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres.

*Nina Lee Aquino is crossing the NAC lobby toward me at a brisk pace, exuding energy, a notable presence the minute she arrives in your midst. But Nina Lee Aquino is also a very busy Artistic Director. Recently returned from Factory Theatre in Toronto where she directed Marie Beath Badian's *The Waltz* (the sequel to Badian's successful *Prairie Nurse*), a show now garnering excellent reviews and full houses, Nina is heading off this week to Montreal for the Biennale CINARS conference and festival whose mission is to promote and support the export of Canadian performing arts.*

*Before getting down to the nitty-gritty of how a playwright might approach the National Arts Centre (NAC) English Theatre with a script or project, I wanted to get a sense of how this new Artistic Director plans to impact one of Canada's most prestigious but admittedly uniquely mandated theatre companies in the country.*

*For those not familiar with the National Arts Centre, it is a crown corporation with an annual budget of seventy million, nearly half of which comes from government funding. The NAC is governed by the National Arts Centre Act, which defines its mandate as: "To operate and maintain the Centre, to develop the performing arts in the National Capital Region and to assist the Canada Council for the Arts in the development of the performing arts elsewhere in Canada. The National Arts Centre is Canada's bilingual, multi-disciplinary home for the performing arts. The NAC presents, creates, produces, and co-produces performing arts programming in various streams—the NAC Orchestra, Dance, English Theatre, French Theatre, Indigenous Theatre, and Popular Music and Variety - and nurtures the next generation of audiences and artists from across Canada."*

*The NAC is located in the National Capital Region on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation.*

*So, what does Nina Lee Aquino's appointment mean for playwrights nationally and locally? My launch point for this interview is a posting by Nina on the NAC website:*

*"I see my appointment as a continuation of the rich legacy of Artistic Directors who came before me and presented stories about the complexity of contemporary Canada."*



LAURIE FYFFE (LF): I know this is huge, but when I think of the complexities of Canadian life right now, I think of the speed of change. It seems as if we are rushing with extraordinary swiftness from disruption to disruption, dismantling norms we have relied on. But being an artist, I'm reminded that disruption can also be a good thing. What are the complexities and disruptions you feel theatre can address?

NINA LEE AQUINO (NLA): I am coming in as a disrupter. That will never change about my work. Since the beginning of fu-GEN to now at the NAC, everything I do is a political statement. I am a deeply political person; it's a fact of who I am. But what I want most is for the work to speak for itself. The kind of work I will curate and nurture is work that I'm excited about and that terrifies me. What I'm looking forward to at the NAC is the size of the net I can cast. That's the real test for me, and it's all about exploring the complexities of the Canadian experience. What does nationhood mean now, versus what it was when Peter Hinton was AD of the NAC, or during Jillian Keiley's tenure? Even before their time, back then, the talk was very much about unifying. But I'm from a generation that doesn't believe in that so much anymore; we want to shake up that status quo. We're leaning into difference and our uniqueness and breaking the reverence for universality. Universality doesn't really exist! And questioning that assumption is an act of disruption. That's what I want to explore further: what theatre has to say about nationhood, and what nationhood means now in Canada.

LF: (*quoting Aquino's website statement*) "I'm looking forward to nurturing and serving a multitude of Canadian stories; embracing new, future-facing theatrical forms; harnessing the creative potential that new technology has to offer and remaining fearless in reimagining our classics and deconstructing our traditional ways of storytelling."

For me, this is a statement of affirmation and great hope. Could you talk a little about what new technologies offer theatre and theatre artists? And does new technology have the potential to take us away from the aliveness of theatre as an art form?

NLA: There is space for everything, and just as much as someone is passionate about the liveness of theatre, the next generation might feel differently. Each generation needs to do theatre on their own terms. When it comes to content, I'm never worried about it. We have constant content. There is a wealth of lived experiences to draw from. But it's the containers of that content that are evolving, and that will continue to evolve.

LF: Much of this evolution, I suppose, is the result of the pandemic.

NLA: The pandemic forced us to experiment and to push the containers of theatre. In the past, people were reticent about Brecht. They resisted site-specific theatre. But that resistance means we're doing something right! We must charge ahead. Why not challenge the capacity of humans to adapt to change? Sometimes it

NLA (*cont'd*): feels like we don't have that capacity, but we do. And in theatre, we challenge change. Theatre is constantly introducing and re-introducing how we tell our stories. I love being able to see theatre all across Canada breaking the rules of structure, of storytelling, and I've come to know the theatre that is breaking those rules; let's keep breaking them. As long as creativity and the safety of the artist are paramount, go for it. My hope is that the audience gets used to it. Whether it's virtual presentations, or using cameras, we're still in the early stages of hybrid and virtual work. It's too early to question its validity. We've got so much to do yet, so many possibilities to explore. We've only just begun.

LF: How will you identify the plays, projects, or artists you want to work with going forward?

NLA: The channels and policies through which that will happen are being designed right now. As much as possible, I want my interaction with artists to be meaningful and considered. I came to that realization at Factory. Factory Theatre's size and scope taught me to take the time to develop clear channels for playwrights and projects. I learned a lot about artistic policy at Factory. So, now I want to take the time to develop those artistic policies further and with care. I'm doing that right now. I will always be a playwright's director. My goal is to be accessible to artists, especially creators, across this country and locally. I am a dramaturge myself; the body of my work has been about relationships with playwrights.

LF: So, your specific plans are taking shape right now?

NLA: Yes. There will be programs, residences, commissioning, and I will focus on emerging creators. Many of the things people came to expect from Factory, I want to carry those over, but looking through a national lens, and casting that bigger net.

LF: And playwrights will be able to send you their work directly?

NLA: Absolutely. My goal is to create clear channels for artists. I want to build procedures and mechanisms that connect and nurture both the work and the artist's development. Coming from the place I began, I know it can be a fight to be heard.

LF: Are there any particular programs or models you have in mind?

NLA: I'm working now with my team at the NAC. I'm inspired by the OAC's Recommender Grants to Theatre Creators.

LF: Yes, that program is a great avenue for an emerging, or established, playwright to introduce their work to dramaturges and artistic directors.

NLA: It's an excellent process. But whatever we put out there for artists, it will be a living thing, something we can (and will continue to) fine-tune as we get feedback. I want to establish all kinds of relationships with playwrights, designers, and directors. I believe that if you centre the relationship between artistic director and creator then the best work will get to the place it needs to be. I may reject a play, but I don't say no to the playwright. And not all

NLA (*cont'd*): ... plays belong at the NAC, nor should they. A play has its creative home. There's no formula; it's a little bit of math, of science, and a whole lot of gut instinct.

LF: Some guessing too, I imagine.

NLA: Yes, it can be a guess. It's a risk every time we say yes to a work by a living, breathing playwright. But I'm fueled by a love of the artist because they will the work into being.

LF: I find myself circling back to what 'national' means in the context of programming theatre.

NLA: My prime directive is to answer the question around Canada's place in the world – and the worlds' place in Canada. And that's 'worlds' in the plural, those imaginary worlds. I look at the North Star, not literally but in all its dimensions. One thing my artistic policies will do is put people over projects. Again, it's going to be about centering those relationships with artists. It's you, me, and your heart. I set up the conditions that will inspire you toward the creative work you're meant to do. That's my job.

LF: Thank you, Nina.



### References, Resources, and Links:

The quotation about the NAC is from the Government of Canada's website, describing the National Arts Centre Corporation: <https://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/recgen/cpc-pac/2022/vol2/pch/rsdap-sopad-eng.html>

Nina Lee Aquino quotations comes from The National Arts Centre website: <https://nac-cna.ca/en/about>

A detailed bio of Nina Lee Aquino plus pod-cast interviews and a clip of her speaking on site at the NAC can be found here: <https://nac-cna.ca/en/bio/nina-lee-aquino>

Check out the NAC Stage Advice podcast series with former AD and host Jillian Keiley interviewing various theatre artists from Canada and around the world, including Nina Lee Aquino: <https://nac-cna.ca/en/podcasts/show/stage-advice>

Information about the CINARS Festival, Montreal can be found at: <https://cinars.org/en/cinars/about>

If you're not familiar with the Ontario Arts Council's Recommender Grants for Theatre Creators, go to: <https://www.arts.on.ca/grants/recommender-grants-for-theatre-creators>



Laurie Fyffe: Laurie play, *Exciting Cause*, based on case history files from the 19th Century Rockwood Asylum, will run as part of the TACTICS 2023 Season from April 21 to May 5 at the Arts Court Theatre.

*Beowulf In Afghanistan* (Ottawa Fringe, 2021) is being workshopped through the Great Canadian Theatre Company's Tributary Project: <https://www.gctc.ca/blog-news/tributary-project>.



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