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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Rena Cohen,
Artistic Director, Realwheels Theatre
Vancouver, BC

Conducted by Debbie Patterson,
Artistic Director, Sick + Twisted Theatre
Winnipeg, MB

June 5, 2019



Rena began her career as a theatre director, teacher and critic. She holds an MFA in Theatre (Directing) and has a strong artistic history, as well as a reputation for innovative, strategic arts administration.

Realwheels is a professional theatre company based in Vancouver with a mission to create and produce world-class performances that deepen the audience's understanding of the disability experience.

You've just premiered a new work: "*Act of Faith*". Can you talk about the genesis of the project?

We had been working for several seasons with an individual who lives with paraplegia. She was a wheelchair dancer and a choreographer in our community engagement projects – she had been using a wheelchair for 13 years. And suddenly, over the course of about 6 to 8 weeks, she experienced this healing. A very sudden healing. She began standing,

and then walking, running and jumping and ultimately fulfilling her lifelong dream of volunteering in an orphanage in Uganda for kids with disabilities. If it hadn't happened in reality within our community, one might characterize it as an urban myth. So as you can imagine, it evoked some strong responses.

I was very interested in the discrete perspectives of the different communities impacted by this event,

and how they weighed in on it. Within the disability community, there was a mixed response; there were people who thought it was great and she was living her truth. Others felt very angry, and that she had co-opted an identity, that she had been falsifying or manufacturing her disability. For 13 years. She received a lot of hate mail. Some people felt very betrayed.

Then there was also the medical community. We thought there would be tremendous interest from medical practitioners but there wasn't. And their perspective was also varied. Some regarded it as a misdiagnosis; others believed she had been lying. Neither rationale necessarily explains how she came to be using a wheelchair for 13 years. Others said they see miracles in the medical world all the time. And they just accepted it and moved on.

Then there was the religious community to which this young woman belonged. And of course, there was some crossover between these communities. So there were people in the religious community who are also people with disabilities who felt happy for her, but felt compelled to ask: "Why did God not heal me? Did I not pray hard enough?" But for others within that community, it was a very simple story of proof of Jesus love and the power of prayer. So we were very interested in the different perspectives.

So the idea to do a show about this story came from you, but how did Janet Munsil become attached to the project?

This happened back in 2014. I had been a fan of Janet Munsil's for many years, she's an extraordinary writer! And I thought she was a great match for this story and for the kind of work that excites us at Realwheels. So with a little bit of coaxing, Janet agreed to take on the project. We undertook quite

an extensive development process. We had a number of workshops: An initial reading of her first draft and subsequent workshops with our dramaturge, Jennifer Boyes-Manseau.

Janet did a lot of research into other stories and other facets of similar stories. The play is not biographical: Our community's story inspired the play, it was foundational to the development of the play, but it didn't form the narrative. It allowed the playwright to explore big ideas around identity and belief systems, and how a sudden change in identity impacts all our relationships.

Because the woman who experienced the original event was a wheelchair dancer and choreographer with our Wheel Voices Project, I felt that it would be valuable to integrate wheelchair dance into our storytelling vocabulary. In part because it felt natural because that was her practice, and also because I love wheelchair dance. I love integrated dance. It's a very beautiful form and I thought it would be an interesting way of introducing theatre audiences to the aesthetic. And I was interested in the challenge of integrating it into what is otherwise an "straight play" in a way that would feel seamless and emanate out of the story rather than feeling imposed.

So we had a number of workshops to explore wheelchair movement so we could develop a vocabulary for how the wheelchair dance could contribute to the storytelling.

Has Realwheels developed many other new works?

Initially our founding artistic Director James Sanders, created two new works - *Skydive* and *Spine* - in collaboration with two able-bodied artists: Bob Frazer and Kevin Kerr. Then the company turned to community engaged work, which continues to be a

really vital and important part of what we do. We also developed a play called *Re-calculating* by Lucas Foss and Liesl Lafferty, which was originally intended as information transfer / disability awareness in educational settings and we developed it into a theatrical production. Plus, we've mounted plays from the international and existing Canadian repertoire.

How do you make your programming choices?

We always harken back to our mandate of plays that deepen our understanding of the lived experience of disability, so we look for work that fulfills our mission. We are interested in theatre that challenges our world views. We like to tell unique and outrageous stories. We like to embrace innovation. We like big ideas. The mandate gives us a lot of artistic freedom. We've explored it through casting, through narrative; it gives us a lot of freedom. Our vision is full inclusion and integration of disability both on – and off – Canadian stages; a barrier-free, diverse performing arts world that reflects the real world and all of its people.

We know that 22% of Canadians self-identify as living with a disability. And obviously we are not seeing that percentage reflected on our stages. We are very sensitive to the fact that there has been systemic exclusion of disability, and a lack of representation on our stages. And that reflects and also contributes to the exclusion of people with disabilities that takes place in the public sphere. We work to challenge the stereotypical experience of people who use wheelchairs, for example, as invisible to society and invisible to culture. We are addressing the void of disability arts practices in our cultural landscape. We do professional work, we do community engaged work offering training and experience in the performing arts for people in the disability community. Sometimes those are process oriented

and sometimes those culminate project in a big production. All of our work is guided and informed by individuals, artists in our community who live with disability.

We are also an integrated company. I remember speaking to Gregg Mozgala who founded The Apothetae who said that as a person with a disability, he doesn't live in a world that's populated only by individuals with disabilities so why would he want his company to. You would love this guy! Look him up!

Do you accept unsolicited manuscripts or pitches from playwrights?

Absolutely! Our disability community doesn't have a ton of experience writing plays. So we are specifically interested in plays written by playwrights with disabilities. We started a Playwriting Circle, it's been meeting twice a week from January of this year. After our 2017 Comedy on Wheels project which had a 20 member community cast, a number of participants really wanted to continue writing, and it took a while to solidify how we would do it. Next week we'll have a shared public reading of their work: we're really excited about it.

We're also about to launch a Playwright-in-Residence. We're going to invite submissions for theatre-based projects at various stages of development from emerging to mid-career playwrights with disabilities. All playwrights will receive consideration without regard to demographics. We would love it to be across Canada, but I'm not sure the prize will enable somebody from the East Coast to be in residence in a fully meaningful way. We'll have a selection committee who will select the winning proposal. I'm hoping that will be able to offer to encouragement awards as well. And then the winning playwright will receive a

flexible package of support customizable to whatever their needs are: Professional actors, meetings with a dramaturge, workshop space, office space, disability accommodation, financial compensation of course. We're excited to structure a very flexible, iterative process so we can ask "how do you want to pursue the story? How do you want to generate your work?" And have the playwright also participate in our program, become involved in our community activities.

So those are two new initiatives: one running since January and one that will launch very shortly.

We welcome proposals. Ideally folks should reach out by email or, that's probably the best way. We are interested in the perspective of disability. We get pitched shows offered from the perspective of the caregiver, and we recognize the value of those stories, but these are not the stories we are seeking to fulfill our mandate.

It sounds like you have a lot going on.

We've included advocacy in our strategic plan as well as our artistic projects. We are very committed to mitigating the barriers that prevent access to the performing arts. And that's for artists with disabilities, for backstage workers, as well as for patrons with disabilities.

So we've been taking on several other projects that are ancillary to producing art. But they are necessary because they're addressing the barriers that prevent us from fulfilling our mandate. We completed a cultural infrastructure project. We worked with a multi-disability audit team, an architect, and a theatre designer and we audited a number of cultural venues in Vancouver with a view to accessibility, again, not only for patrons but also for performing artists and backstage workers with disabilities. We've developed a template, an audit tool now being used

by venues across Canada to conduct their own disability audits. I still recommend, where possible, for venues to engage a disability audit team. Our experience is even if you have an individual who is an expert on accessibility, you need that lived experience of a manual wheelchair user and a power wheelchair user and someone who is blind, and someone who lives with sight loss, and someone who is Deaf and/or lives with hearing loss. If you have a range of lived experiences it adds such a richness to the accessibility audit and the information that surfaces as a result.

We've also developed a curriculum customized to train actors with disabilities. So we are hoping to be able to launch a three-year pilot program and really test it. We have partners at National Theatre School, Studio 58, and also with Arts Club, and Touchstone Theatre so this may potentially really impact systemic change. We are excited about that. That's a massive project. So those are things that we are doing in addition to creating and producing artistic work.

There is so much to do!

You know that game, whack a mole? That's how I feel sometimes. There's a lot to do. And we are making some inroads here and there. But disability has been the sleeping monster that's just starting to awaken. And we need to see more artists with disabilities on the landscape. I mean, people need to be seen. We need to have people with lived experience in the room. Fully fully integrated in all of our cultural platforms.

Do you get overwhelmed by the amount of work to do?

Oh well... I'll tell you one other thing: we received the digital technology grant through the Canada Council and we're partnering with the Centre for Digital Media here in Vancouver.

We will be harnessing digital technology to explore how individuals with disabilities who may be shut ins and unable to be in the studio with us, can still participate creatively,, to contribute and collaborate artistically.

Fundamentally we are theatre company. We create artistic performances. But there are all these barriers that prevent full inclusion. We can't create and produce these performances without also addressing these issues in a meaningful and active way - they go hand-in-hand. It's a whole other level of activity and responsibility that is necessary for us to undertake. But I'm very privileged to do this work.



Debbie Patterson is a Winnipeg playwright, director, and actor. She is an alumnus of the National Theatre School of Canada, a former Artistic Director of the Popular Theatre Alliance of Manitoba and a founding member of Shakespeare in the Ruins (SIR). Her most recent play, *Sargent & Victor & Me*, was hailed as “an exquisitely, achingly beautiful piece” by Joff Schmidt, CBC Manitoba. Her play, *Molotov Circus*, was nominated for the Harry Rintoul Award and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. She has written several adaptations of Robert Munsch stories for Prairie Theatre Exchange, which have gone on to be produced at Festival Antigonish, Carousel Theatre, Neptune Theatre, Quest Theatre, Bumpershoot Theatre, and others.