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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Rob Kempson,
Artistic Director of The Capitol
Theatre in Port Hope, ON

Conducted by Briana Brown,
February 2024



Rob Kempson

Rob is a director, writer, and educator who has fifteen years of experience in the non-profit professional arts sector. He is the Artistic Director at the Capitol Theatre in Port Hope (Ontario) and the Co-Artistic Producer of ARC Stage in Toronto. He has served in various artistic leadership positions, including as Associate Artistic Director at the Thousand Islands Playhouse (Gananoque, ON) and as Associate Artistic Producer at Theatre Passe Muraille (Toronto, ON). He was also the founding Artistic Director of timeshare performance, a multi-award-winning Toronto-based collective, and he has worked across the country as a freelance director and playwright. Rob has been a member of the Stratford Festival Playwrights' Retreat, the Storefront Theatre Playwrights' Unit, and he has been a Resident Artist Educator at Young People's Theatre and the RBC Intern Director for The Musical Stage Co. In 2021, Rob was one of two Intern Directors at the Shaw Festival.

Rob Kempson has been at the helm of the Capitol Theatre for just over two years, and he has already developed a clear understanding of and dedication to the Port Hope community and its audiences. As a playwright fortunate to be included in his upcoming summer season with a premiere of my new comedy Christmastown under his direction, I thought it would be interesting to share a bit about that programming journey with the Women's Caucus, and to ask Rob more about the ins and outs of his programming choices, his thoughts on building artistic relationships, and his commitment to Canadian playwrights.

NB: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Briana Brown (BB): *What is the focus of the Capitol Theatre in Port Hope in terms of programming?*

Rob Kempson (RK): Balance. We are always looking to appeal to a broad range of people because our location demands that we are accessible to a number of different kinds of folks who come to the theatre. So, when I'm programming, I'm constantly thinking about creating balance; making sure that there really is something for everyone. We're trying to serve as many different demographics and audiences as I know there are here to serve.

BB: *If I have a play that I think might be a good fit for Port Hope, what should I consider?*

RK: I think our programming leans towards what could be described as "hilarious and heartfelt," which I think is a really great world to live in. We're not going to be seeking something that's high drama or sad unless it's poignant. And the reason why we're not seeking those kinds of things is because we're convincing people to come inside from the

beach. So we want to give them an experience that sends them out to the beach in a way that's still light and enjoyable. That doesn't mean we don't tackle challenging things here. But it can't be a play that is only challenging

BB: *What are some of the demographics you mentioned earlier?*

RK: I always describe there being five Port Hopes, and I think that's pretty unique to this region. There is a difference between a local community of people versus a tourism community. It is important to ensure that both sides are served. Within the local community, we have a lot of young families raising children here. So, that's a demographic, both parents and children, and parents and children looking to do things together, which will shift as they grow. We're trying to make a pretty clear investment in family programming, particularly this spring, to see if that has traction. [For example, with *A Year with Frog and Toad*.]

Port Hope is also home to a lot of Toronto expats and retirees who tend to be very active in the community in terms of investing in

cultural events, but also continuing to have a Toronto connection.

We also are very well known for our annual holiday pantos [short for pantomime – a traditional music-based holiday production, based on a fairy tale], which appeal to a huge group of people who don't tend to visit us the rest of the year. We're working hard to bridge those gaps and make sure that our summer audiences come see us in the winter and that our winter audiences come and see us in the summer, and letting people know about the different kinds of theatre that they can experience at the Capitol.

BB: Since becoming the Artistic Director at the Capitol, Rob has committed to a new commission by a Canadian playwright each year for the annual holiday pantomime. What is the process to choose that playwright each year?

RK: I have selected folks based on people I think could lean into the idea of a panto or would find that to be an exciting writing exercise, which isn't everyone. I've had conversations with folks who've said no, that's not really my jam, and that's totally okay. I've tried to approach people who write in the world of comedy and then try to express as much as I can what the panto form is or could be, and then see if that feels like a fit for them at a given moment in time. I'm still navigating it, and finding it fun to keep experimenting with it.

BB: Beyond the annual panto commission, what is the Capitol's commitment to programming Canadian playwrights?

RK: I'm only going into my third season here, so we're still figuring out what the right recipe is for the summer season. We're figuring out the recipe for production lengths and length of runs. We're figuring out whether it's good to start a little bit earlier in May or a little bit later in May. We're trying to figure out whether we start with a musical or we start with a play. There's a lot of things in flux, but I think there will probably always be one slot for a Canadian play, for sure, in our summer season. This year we happen to have two, which is even more exciting.

Sorry, this is a bit of a tangent, but I think it's interesting: The folks here don't have a great, vast knowledge of theatre. The only thing that would break through the noise is a Disney musical. So, if I'm not going to produce those (because I'd rather give money to artists who are not Disney) then I have an amazing opportunity, because a new Canadian play has the same weight or relevance to this community as something very, very popular, or what we would consider "commercial." I could do *Steel Magnolias*, but I could also do *Christmastown* and those are going to be weighted equally. So, that's a great opportunity, as far as I'm concerned, to invest in new work, and to talk to artists about the importance of things like a title and a tagline, because that's where we're going to see our ticket sales from.

BB: Can you tell me a bit about your Creators' Unit?

RK: First off, we don't have any money for new play development. I keep applying for grants to do it, but we're making a commitment to it anyway. That commitment is a small stipend

that we pay playwrights. Writers are given a free, day-long workshop with professional actors and a reading at the end of that day that is attended by the public. We also give them opportunities to connect with other writers and dramaturgy from myself. We do not then own the rights to their play in any way, but we support them over the course of a year with bi-monthly meetings.

BB: *How does one find their way into the Creator's Unit?*

RK: This year, we have four people in our Creator's Unit. Two of them applied through an open call, and two of them I curated from local artists who I know either have a connection to Port Hope or live within the region. And as a result, we have two who are based in Toronto, but one of those two spends a lot of time in Port Hope, and then two who are based in Northumberland County. And so, it's geographic only insofar as that people have to be willing to come here for those meetings, because we're not doing these meetings over Zoom, because part of what I want people to know more about is Port Hope: the town, the theatre, and our place in it.

BB: *Do selected playwrights need to be working on something appropriate for the Capitol stage?*

RK: If you bring me a play that I think is a great play that you seem excited about, even if I could never produce it here, I could still put you in the Creator's Unit. It's fun to show my audience a reading of something that is really outside the bounds of what we normally produce. But similarly, if you bring

me, you know, a tight two-hander comedy that's going to appeal to folks of all ages and seems like it's absolutely perfect and relevant and contemporary, yeah, I'll probably lean into that because I might be able to put it on stage.

I don't think that I've ever, as a playwright myself, written something to a brief that has been artistically satisfying. I've done that, but it hasn't ever been my favorite work. So, I always want to inspire people to write the thing that they actually want to write, and then what I want to do is just be transparent and communicative about whether or not that makes it marketable in the context of this place, which is the only place I can really speak to.

BB: *Do you have any tips for playwrights or other artists who want to work at the Capitol?*

RK: I think the first thing I would say is if you're approaching someone, be honest with them. If you've never seen something at my theatre, please don't pretend that you have. Because that's not going to endear me to you if we start out on falsehood.

I also think it's a great idea to go see things at theatres if you're going to pitch to them. I want to feel like if you think this is a fit for my theatre, like, you actually have a reason for thinking that, and that you've done your homework and you've thought a little bit about it. You're not just sort of looking up Eastern Ontario theatres and pressing send on all of those emails. I think those are two big things in terms of an approach that I think is really important. It feels more intentional if you actually come out and see a show. I would also say that I love talking to folks when they do

that. So if you're coming out to see a show, send me an email a couple of weeks in advance and say, 'I'm coming on this day, would you have time for a coffee, or would you have time for a drink or whatever?' And the answer will always be yes, if I can make it happen. Because I want to connect with you around what we're doing here, and that's going to make me know that you have us in mind when you're writing.

BB: *Do you accept unsolicited submissions?*

RK: A hundred percent, always. I will accept any script from anyone at any time. But I ask for the grace and patience to know that I also have a teetering, large, long reading list. So, if you are hoping to hear back from me within a month, you will not.

BB: *Do you prefer hard copies or digital?*

RK: I prefer digital copies, but I always prefer a connection before you send me a script.

BB: *Approximately how many plays do you receive and read in a year?*

RK: I receive upwards of a hundred a year, and I probably get to about half of that every year in terms of reading them. I will not offer you feedback on a script because I just can't, unfortunately. When I'm reading, I'm really looking at whether or not I think it's a fit for us, and whether I'd like to continue the conversation. This is something that I want playwrights to know because it's something that I wish that I knew. It's always just about fit. And it's kind of a shitty reality. But when I talk with other Artistic Directors, I know

that it's true for them, too. It's not because someone isn't a good playwright or is a good playwright. The issue is almost always about fit.

That might mean that your play has one too many people for my next season. Or it might mean that your play is about a similar theme as a musical that I want to do. Playwrights can't be mind readers. There's no way that you would know those things. So, you just have to accept that I am an expert in my theatre. And you're an expert in your play. And I don't want anyone to ever try to mold or reshape or push their play into a place that it's not, just to try to appeal to me. I would much rather have you tell me something with confidence about what you're making, and I'll let you know if that's a fit for us.

BB: *Thank you for that. That's really important.*

So, from a place of transparency, my play is going to be part of this upcoming season, and I thought it would be interesting to speak a little about that lengthy journey, just as an example to illustrate the road to programming.

RK: I think a lot of folks don't necessarily expect the length of that journey. You and I connected on this play at a different theatre, when I was in a different job, in 2016. So that's almost a decade ago. I was working as the Associate Artistic Director at the Thousand Islands Playhouse in Gananoque, where you were part of the Playwrights' Unit and I was a dramaturg. *Christmastown* was a piece that you started work on over the course of that year. And I don't want to speak for you, but I don't think you were super happy with where it landed by the end of that year.

BB: *That's true, yes.*

RK: But it's something that has always stuck in my head as a concept that I think is really clever, and would work really, really well. Then I got the job of Artistic Director at a theatre where one of the most important things we do is a massive Christmas festival. So, it was pretty easy for that play to re-enter my brain space.

And then I reached out to you and said, 'hey, I think this could be a fit for the Capitol. Are you interested in continuing to work on this script at all? Have you been working on this script at all?' And then we sort of went from there.

And I think one of the things that I remember about its journey that I think is particularly fascinating is the moment, probably 18 months ago, when I said to you, "Do you think that you want to be working on this for a 2024 season or for a 2025 season?" And that's not a question that I can answer for you.

But I think knowing as a writer that you get to have agency in where, when, and how your work happens is important. I think there is a danger sometimes, and I certainly have felt this danger, in saying yes to an offer because you think it's maybe the only offer that's going to exist. But I think if it doesn't feel like that person has your back or has the best interest of your artwork at their core, then I don't think it's going to be the right fit for anyone.

I've worked with a number of playwrights in a

number of new play development settings, and I always feel like my job is to ensure that I am presenting the most truthful version of that play. I'm not making it the Rob Kempson directed version, I'm just helping elevate that play into a performance.

I think that it's really important that playwrights are clear about what their own boundaries are, and really clear about what their own goals are, and what their own expectations are. Because having a backbone about your work does not make you difficult, it does not make you hard to work with, it does not make your work less desirable. It means that you have a point of view that you're looking to offer, and if you do it in a respectful way, and if you do it in a way that responds to the reality of the work that that organization is doing, I think it's really valuable for the playwright to be a force in that conversation, and to have a voice.

BB: *I think that's a really important thing to note. And also to know that if you are in a situation as a playwright where you are not feeling free to do that, or be that, that it's not because it's not out there or possible. It is possible to engage with artistic leaders who come at it from that position.*

RK: Yeah, and I also think that sometimes the thing that feels tricky... You and I are also friends, right? And that's hard because it feels insider-ish. But there's also something about a commitment to a connection that you made, that I made, that we continue to make, that is about more than following me on Instagram. I hate it when I speak to a class, or I announce auditions, or I'm going to be interacting with a larger community of artists in some way, and

then I get a whole bunch of Facebook friend requests from people I don't know. I understand the desire for a connection, but I would so much rather that connection be honest and be real.

You know, since 2016, you have come to see a bunch of my work, and you write me an email afterwards, and you've come to the Capitol a number of times to see work here, and then we have lunch, or we talk about the work. And I think that fostering those kinds of connections is the best way to really advance a relationship with an artistic leader, which does take time and investment, and that's unpaid and unfair, but the reality of the situation is that if I have 100 scripts in my pile. I'm going to probably prioritize the one where that person has come to see a show, or we've talked recently, or they swung by Port Hope and we had lunch. I'm going to put their script on the top of the pile to read just because they're a person who's really making that effort. And I know that that's a lot of work, but it's really helpful for me on this side of that pile of scripts to have a reason to prioritize something.

BB: *Speaking of that pile of scripts... do you have a sense, percentage-wise, of how many of them are written by women?*

RK: I do not. I'm sorry. I can tell you what the percentage is in terms of my producing plays written by women. Which is a lot. I am a gay, white man, and I'm in a position of leadership and power. And so my job must be to uplift and hold up marginalized voices or the voices of those who have traditionally been marginalized as much as I can through

my work. That is not only a responsibility that I take very seriously, but it also makes for better seasons and better work. All of my pantomime commissions have gone to women. I always ensure that almost all of my guest director positions have gone to women or folks who identify as part of the BIPOC community. I ensure that we produce at least a couple of plays by women every year. We look for female leadership and BIPOC leadership and LGBTQ+ leadership in all of our creative teams and all of our casts, both on stage and off. Our organization is led by women. There are only two male staff members here. Our production department is entirely staffed by women.

The thing that I will say is that that continues to feel like a provocative act. And I hope that it doesn't soon. But in my time here, we produced the first play by a woman of colour on the Capitol Theatre stage. Now we've done it three times. We've had the first director of colour on the Capitol stage. We have had the first female director of colour on the Capitol stage. We have had the first queer playwright on the Capitol stage. We have the first queer play on the Capitol stage. And I'm really looking forward to not having as many firsts. That's what I'm looking forward to. When that gets to stop being part of our press release and just becomes part of our normal work.

I think Port Hope can be a beacon showing that the diversity experiment that we are undergoing in our industry at large, can be successful. Even in a place that's pretty small, where it is assumed that the community, and therefore audience, is exclusively white, straight, and elderly. Because it just isn't.



Briana Brown

Briana Brown's work has been presented at theatres and festivals across Canada. Selected credits include: *Colin & Coffee & Lennox & Kleenex* (with Janelle Hanna, A Festival for Weary Hearts), *The Concessions* (Touchstone Theatre, Vancouver), which earned a Jessie Award nomination for Outstanding Original Script, *Wait* (SKAMpede, Victoria BC), and *Cassandra* (2006 Canadian Fringe tour, 2007 Winnipeg's FemFest, published in the *One for the Road* anthology). She is a proud recipient of the Cayle Chernin Award, and a past participant of Women's Work Festival (St. John's, NL), Stratford Festival Playwright's Retreat, the Thousand Islands Playhouse Playwright's Unit, and an Ontario Arts Council Playwright in Residence with Driftwood Theatre where she developed *Robert*, which was shortlisted for PGC's Comedy Award. Briana is a graduate of the University of British Columbia's Creative Writing MFA program.

Her new comedy *Christmastown* will premiere at the Capitol Theatre in Port Hope in 2024. You can find Briana on Instagram: [@that.artworker.life](https://www.instagram.com/that.artworker.life).





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