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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Sarah Garton Stanley,
Associate AD of NAC English Theatre

Conducted by Megan Piercey Monafu,
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SARAH GARTON STANLEY - The Invisible

Theatre maker, observer, experimenter, and conversationalist, Sarah is the Associate Artistic Director of the National Art Centre (NAC) English Theatre and the Creator of *The Cycle*.

Recent directing projects include: *Sexual Misconduct of The Middle Classes* (Tarragon); *Fun Home* (Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre); *The Big House* (Toronto Fringe); *Unsafe* (Canadian Stage); *Out The Window* (Luminato/Theatre Centre); *We Keep Coming Back* (Factory Theatre, English Theatre Berlin, Nowy Teatr in Warsaw, Winnipeg Jewish Theatre); *Bunny* (Tarragon and Stratford); *Awkward and Embarrassing Conversations About Difference* (Newworld); *Kill Me Now* (RMTC/NAC); and *Helen Lawrence* (Canadian Stage, Arts Club, BAM, Kammerspiele etc.).

Sarah is also the Co-creator and Executive Producer of SpiderWebShow and foldA.

Other recent dramaturgical forays include *Calpurnia* by Audrey Dwyer, *Between Breaths* and *Everybody Just Calm the F- Down* by Robert Chafe, and *Vigilante* and *The Invisible* by Jonathan Christenson.

I wanted to interview Sarah Garton Stanley because I've been appreciating her work from afar; her efforts in tackling pertinent issues by bringing artists together in new ways, such as through *The Cycle* at the National Arts Centre and through *SpiderWebShow*, have been an influence on my artistic practice.

I was also interested in SpiderWebShow (SWS) because it is grappling with important questions about physical space, the Internet, and theatre. SWS is also growing: last year it launched the foldA Festival and co-produced a new Canadian play at the Great Canadian Theatre Company (*Behaviour* by Darrah Teitel).

Sarah and I spoke via Zoom, as I am based in Ottawa, and she was in London, UK at the time planning for an upcoming international event with The Cycle, part of English Theatre at the NAC in collaboration with foldA.

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Megan: According to your website, the focus of SpiderWebShow started with the dramaturgical question: What defines Canadian theatre now? What does that question mean to your mandate?

Sarah: When I came to the National Arts Centre, I was interested in cultural nationhood as it related to my work there. At the same time, I was interested in questions around the Indigenous lands we inhabit and work on.

The idea of 'Canada' is an imagined idea. So, for SpiderWebShow to be relevant, it needed to exist above land, allowing a new set of dialogues to occur. I think that remains true. I didn't realize how successful social media would be in organizing and in changing culture. The Internet has been an extremely powerful force for change. I have worked for the National Theatre School, the Canada Council for the Arts, the National Arts Centre – all institutions that refer to themselves as national – and so I was engaged in the question of what "national" really is. And I was interested in

working with Michael Wheeler and Adrienne Wong to engage dramaturgically with the question, 'What defines Canadian Theatre now?'

M: Have you found any answers to that question?

S: Our work is no longer affiliated with the NAC, and we've gone in other directions to try to break down those 'national' definitions. FoldA [SWS's festival held in Kingston in June] is engaged with what the potentials of technology are in storytelling. The festival is rooted in Kingston, but interested in engaging across borders. At the same time, my work at the NAC has engaged in similar questions, for example, the final Cycle is on climate change, an issue that crosses borders.

I don't think we can say that there's one national representative. It's dangerous to suggest that there is. There are so many nations on Turtle Island; those here prior to Canada, and continuing arrivals of other nations.

M: What is the structure of SpiderWebShow as a company?

S: Michael Wheeler has been the full-time artistic director for the last two years, I am the executive producer, and Adrienne Wong is the artistic producer. Myself, Michael, and Adrienne have formed a triangular leadership structure within SWS, and we work with a board.

We put out a bunch of writing under the heading of 'Perform' (it used to be under #CDNCult). 'Thought Residencies' are audio time capsules from artists who inspire us from different corners of theatrical performance. We produce work, such as *Behaviour* at the GCTC. We ran a project called CdnStudio that allows artists to rehearse across distance, and we made a show called *The Revolutions* using that technology. And we produce the foldA festival.

We are based out of Queens University, and are working to become a research centre that thinks through the connection between the Internet, liveness, and storytelling.

While SWS is no longer a part of the NAC, foldA is presenting the culmination of *The Cycle* as mentioned, which is focused on the climate crisis. It will take place June 10-13, and there will be a 45-hour window where eight cities (six in Canada, two abroad) will connect online to gather for a shared meal, shared conversations, and performance bursts in a co-created event. We're also working with HowlRound on the next level of live-streaming aesthetics.

I have worked for many established institutions, but I am an indie artist at heart. I'm always interested in how to join the two.

M: Can you tell me more about what foldA is about?

S: It's about a digital conversation and liveness. I feel some ambivalence about digital connection because I'm concerned about the environmental footprint of this connection. But the core reasons for digital connection come from different directions, such as financial accessibility and other access needs that are difficult for artists to meet. So, if we're looking at climate change and movement, we need to think differently about how we do things.

There's a lot to be said about gathering locally and feeling each other in the same space. But as artists, we also have the capacity and creativity to accentuate the idea of a gathering online. It's more democratic, there are more points of view, and more ways into who is telling the story. There's an opportunity to maybe have a thinner line between audience and performer.

M: How can playwrights get involved with SpiderWebShow?

S: This year, foldA will have an open call; this is the first year we will be doing this, so we will be learning. But there is now a submission process, which will be announced soon.

I invite playwrights to come to foldA. 'The Start Up' is a series of workshops and

conversations. Last year, HowlRound did their first international convening at foldA and through this initiative we met artists whose work will be seen at the festival this coming year.

Reach out to us if you're doing work in a similar vein. We are always looking for colleagues. We want to learn things that we don't know, and have people be a part of the conversation. We have made great connections with Vancouver artists, as they are thinking in a way that we are.

There are article writing opportunities under our 'Perform' banner, with new submission opportunities forthcoming.

For submission inquiries, it's best to get in touch with Michael Wheeler (michael@spiderwebshow.ca).

M: Do you have any submission tips -- for playwrights in general, but also specifically for women playwrights?

S: Andrea Scott has a play coming up at Neptune Theatre in Halifax [called] *Controlled Damage*. She is amazing at informing people about her work. She has sent me and I bet lots of other people postcards, cards, and other information on what she's doing. She doesn't send a letter, just simple information. To be candid, I've rarely been in the same city as her shows, but I'm always aware of her work. Obviously, others are too, as she's having productions across the country. People say that connections are how you get produced, but you

need to do that work to make the connections and keep people informed.

Find ways to connect that aren't long emails. Find ways to have vital conversations. Reach out and say, "hey, I'd love to have coffee." For women in particular, I would say this: don't give up after the third request for coffee, ask again. Keep looking for ways to make a meeting possible for both of you. It might take time but I think it is time well spent.


Submissions can feel overwhelming as a producer. Especially because of social media, where we are inundated with information, it's harder for everybody to have the time to dig deep with long-form email relationships. In my opinion it's better to send simple information about your work, and then try to find a way to connect offline at a deeper level. Let's just assume you are a good writer, and then we can get to know each other.

M: What keeps you working in the theatre?

S: Stories. Getting to make and tell stories with other people, to other people. So, community. Stories to people and people back to stories. I find that feedback loop powerful.

I love being reminded of my humanity and mortality, both precious things. The theatre is the space that allows me to commune with people about what it is to be human. Particularly now as the essence of what it means to be human is in question, with AI, with algorithms. I fell into this work because of a deep response to the Tupac Shakur hologram.

I began to wonder, if in the future, we can't tell the difference between avatar or human, is the experience less live? If the data is so complete that the avatar smells and feels like a person, what is it that will allow me to reflect on my own humanity? Will I be less human when more of me is data? This hologram rattled me and made me want to explore the mutability of the human condition with this in mind.



Megan Piercey Monafu is a playwright, director, producer, and facilitator, holding an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Guelph. In 2018-2019 Megan was playwright-in-residence at the Great Canadian Theatre Company, and artist-in-residence at the Ottawa Fringe's undercurrents festival, working on *Strata Inc.*, a play set in virtual reality about a hacker going corporate. Megan is the Founder and Artistic Director of CSArt Ottawa, a social enterprise that connects local audiences with local artists across disciplines.