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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Sean Giust,
Artistic Director of Intrepid Theatre
in Victoria, BC

Conducted by Melissa Yuan-Innes
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Sean Giust is the Artistic Director of Intrepid Theatre in Victoria, BC/Lekwungen Territory. He has been with the company in various roles since 2013. Administrator by day, and queer artist/producer/ director by night (though these roles are blurring more and more), Sean is the founding Curator of Intrepid's OUTstages Queer Theatre Festival, and he has created new residency programs for local artists, and fostered new work through cabarets, emerging artist programs, and mentorship opportunities.

Giust is the co-creator and director of *The Book of My Shames*, a new queer opera composed and performed by Isaiah Bell, which has played at Tapestry Opera, Opera Kelowna, and UNO Fest, with other upcoming engagements in 2023. Recent directing credits include readings of *Sunday in Sodom* (Belfry Theatre, SPARK Festival), *The Empress* (Theatre Outre), *Tom at the Farm* (Puente Theatre), and productions of *Side by Side Sondheim* and *Down Dangerous Passes Road* (both independent). In 2023, Giust is working with author, musician, and performer Ivan Coyote on a new solo show commissioned by Intrepid Theatre. Sean can be seen on drag stages as the bearded queen, Woofie, and has created queer events in non-traditional queer spaces, like the sold-out drag show hit, *Drag, Queers & Beers* at Phillips Brewery.

Melissa Yuan-Innes (MYI): I understand that Intrepid doesn't produce plays, but rather presents them. Can you explain this difference to emerging playwrights like me?

Sean Guist (SG): Sure! As a presenter, we don't produce plays, meaning we don't select scripts for a season of plays that we would cast, hire designers and directors for, then rehearse and stage. We present work, which in short mean that we bring in existing, fully produced shows that are either touring or tour-ready from artists, companies, or collectives from outside the city, or give presentations to local shows that are presentation-ready. This is often self-created work, where the performer is also the creator or playwright, but not always.

MYI: How should we submit a completed project to Intrepid? What are you looking for, and what's the best way to follow up?

SG: We have open calls for presentation-ready or tour-ready work to be a part of our festival line-ups, both for our curated festivals, like OUTstages, a queer theatre festival, and our new festival, Incoming Festival, which is focused on new works. The application process is the best way to tell Intrepid about your project, if it's ready to tour or be presented. Often, we are looking for smaller scale works that can play in a festival line-up, meaning smaller technical pieces like sets and lighting, as we have shows playing in rep, so the shows we program in the festivals need to be relatively light or adaptable in terms of their technical needs. We program work that is often multidisciplinary, that blurs or blends genres, and plays with traditional performance styles - like installations, work in non-traditional

performance spaces, etc. We also use our two venues, the Intrepid Studio and Metro Studio, which are intimate, so the work we program is usually intimate and smaller scale.

MYI: I believe you also do play readings at festivals. How could we become a part of that?

SG: We do have some readings or in-development showings/workshops. It all depends on what is emerging from the local community, as these are usually ways for Intrepid to support and invest in new works from local creators/performers/playwrights. The best way is to inquire with me, tell me about what you're working, how it might fit our different festival outlook, and how it is something that fits Intrepid's mandate and aesthetic. We are looking for new voices, new ideas, and it doesn't have to be traditional plays, it could be devised work, too.

MYI: Tell me about UNO Fest (and the Victoria Fringe, OUTstages, and year-round series if you have time).

SG: OUTstages is our queer theatre festival, and we present work and artists from the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and the programming is often interdisciplinary and combines disciplines and genres. For example, past work includes a drag opera, a fully lip-synced show that had actors interacting with projections, and a pop rock concert. UNO Fest was our solo festival, which we sunset in 2022 after 25 years. In its place, we are launching a new works festival this Spring, the Incoming Festival (applications are open now), and it will feature work that is not just solo shows. Our year-round Presenting Series has shows that happen

outside our festival dates, and outside our festival mandates, and they're a mix of local, national, and international work. The Victoria Fringe is part of the Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals, and shows are un-juried and chosen by lottery in three categories: local, national, and international. At the Fringe, artists pay a participation fee, and are given a performance spot in the festival which includes five presentations over the eleven days in a venue that includes a technician and FOH [Front of House] Manager, blanket festival promotion, and billeting when possible. The artists at the Fringe get 100% of their box office.

MYI: How do you invite women and people of colour to participate? Can you explain the conVERGE program?

SG: conVERGE is a residency program that is in partnership with Puente Theatre, curated and produced by their Artistic Director, Mercedes Batiz-Benet. In this residency, created for IBPOC artists, residency artists are matched with an IBPOC mentor who is tailor-picked for their project. They receive studio time, and artistic support from Mercedes, and production support from Intrepid.

We invite applications through our applications and open calls. Since we can't travel a lot, this is a great way for Intrepid to meet artists we don't know, especially since we are based on Vancouver Island, and can't always travel to other festivals, pitches, or openings. We have created programs that are specifically targeted to underrepresented artistic communities. As part of the Fringe, we have an Indigenous Artist Program for local Indigenous artists that

includes mentorship and free festival participation; we have also created a Spotlight Series for underrepresented artists to present in-development work, a reading, or a showing of devised work that does not need to be a fully produced play. OUTstages Festival and the OUTstages Residency program serve 2SLGBTQ+ artists.

As a white, queer, cis-man, I also think it is important to have other curatorial perspectives as part of our work and reflected in our season of programming, so we work with guest curators with different lived experience and curatorial interests, who share their viewpoints, artistic outlook, and identities. In recent seasons, this has included Mercedes Batiz-Benet from Puente Theatre, and Lindsay Delaronde from Visible Bodies Collective.

MYI: What is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play?

SG: We don't look for plays (scripts) ourselves. As presenters, we are looking for presentations or productions that are ready to hit the road, and are relatively small-scale, so they can be programmed for a festival rep schedule.

MYI: What is the Intrepid audience like, and what plays have resonated with them?

SG: The Intrepid audience changes depending on the festival, and even the show being presented, with OUTstages drawing a large queer audience, and our cabarets drawing a younger audience, for example. But what is common across all of our programming is that the Intrepid audience is interested in theatre

that colours outside the lines, whether that's in form or content. Maybe it's because a lot of our long-time audiences have grown up with the Fringe, and Fringe shows have historically been outside the conventional and mainstream theatre. I like to think of our audience as thrill-seeking, theatre lovers.

A few years ago, I was sitting in the lobby with a patron. We were both between shows at a festival. I don't remember which festival or

what the shows were anymore, but I asked her what else she had seen at that festival, and where else she sees theatre in town. She sees a lot of shows at Intrepid's festivals and series, and she told me that she loves seeing shows at the Fringe, OUTstages, and UNO Fest because it's often shows and artists that are pushing boundaries and making her think, adding that she's old, but she still likes adventurous art as she did when she was younger. Her taste hadn't changed, just her age. This really stuck with me!



Melissa Yuan-Innes is an emergency physician and novelist now exploring the world of playwriting. Her debut Fringe play, *I Am The Most Unfeeling Doctor In The World (And Other True Tales From the Emergency Room)*, won Best of Fest at the Ottawa Fringe, was a Behind the Rideau Award finalist in 2019, and was selected for the Stage One Festival of New Canadian Work at Calgary's Lunchbox Theatre.

Terminally Ill, her immersive mystery inspired by her novel penned under the name Melissa Yi, will debut at the undercurrent's festival in 2024, thanks to funding from the Ottawa Community Foundation, the Ottawa Fringe, TACTICS, the City of Ottawa, and the Wuchien Michael Than Foundation.

Melissa's prose work has been a finalist for the Killer Nashville Silver Falchion Award for Best Thriller, the Crime Writers of Canada Award of Excellence (best crime story in Canada), and the Derringer Award (best crime story in the English language). She is now diving into playwriting.

