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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Simon Joynes,  
Artistic Director of The Port Stanley  
Festival Theatre in Port Stanley, ON

Conducted by Dyanna Jacklin,  
June 20, 2023



## SIMON JOYNES

For the last eighteen years (since 2005), Simon Joynes has been the Artistic Director of the Port Stanley Festival Theatre, which is situated on the north shore of Lake Erie in Southwestern Ontario. During his tenure, the company has experienced unprecedented growth, becoming an Equity theatre under the CAEA (2007), switching to an all-Canadian mandate with a focus on new play development (2010), and undertaking a \$2 million rebuild of the theatre (the final phase started in 2017). The theatre produces at least one premiere every year, and it fuels that commitment with ongoing dramaturgical work and an annual Playwrights' Festival.

Joynes was born in England. He came to Canada at age 10, and grew up primarily in Halton County. He studied at East Tennessee State, the University of Toronto, and the Ryerson Theatre School. Joynes is married to Daniele Guillaume, who works as a theatre stage manager. They have a daughter. Joynes gave up acting many years now ago, but he still writes and directs at least three shows per year. When he's not working, Joynes coaches youth track and field. He is a triathlete, he likes to sail, and "food is also of interest."

*On June 20, 2023, I had the opportunity to talk with Simon Joynes, who is in his eighteenth season as Artistic Director of the Port Stanley Festival Theatre in the historic fishing village of Port Stanley, Ontario. With a background in acting, directing and playwriting, Simon gave me a fascinating look inside the mind of one of Ontario's leading artistic directors.*



***Dyanna Jacklin (DJ): What is the mandate for the Port Stanley Festival Theatre?***

***Simon Joynes (SJ):*** A big part of the mandate is all-Canadian content. A secondary part of the mandate is developing new work. We have an annual playwright's festival where we workshop a couple of scripts and put them up in front of an invited audience. The other aspect is far more pragmatic - we are an economic driver in the region. There's a real sense of responsibility as a company that we have of maintaining that role.

***DJ: Did you have to talk your board of directors into the decision of "all-Canadian content"?***

***SJ:*** I kind of soft-sold it in that I did a couple of years of programming where they didn't even know it was Canadian content. I was able to say, it's obviously marketable. It's been marketable. So, it was very easy when it came to saying we want to change the mandate to Canadian content right across the board. It gets easier all the time because there's more and more great Canadian work out there.

***DJ: What do great plays at your theatre have in common, besides being Canadian?***

***SJ:*** There's a bunch of different reasons. Some are purely commercial, and some are more, "the play that you really want to do." In an ideal world, our plays are about dealing with

issues our patrons have something in common with. For example, stories with rural content go over very well for us and stuff about the urban/rural split. LGBTQ content is important to us.

***DJ: What kind of plays are you interested in, in terms of size?***

***SJ:*** Because it's a 200-seat theatre, a six-hander is a big fill for us, and a six-hander is a particularly big fill for us as we come out of the pandemic. There is one I'm considering for next year and it's a seven [hander], and it's by far the biggest we've done. It's a balance over the season. There's a certain amount of bravado in saying, we're back! We're doing the kinds of shows you want to see. They're not all tiny.

***DJ: How does a playwright get your attention with a new play?***

***SJ:*** Having a clear idea of what they want is the biggest thing. It's about clarity of intent in the approach. I am totally up for unsolicited scripts. I'm not up for reading a script and then the playwright sends me an updated version two months down the road to re-read. That happens a lot. If the playwright thinks it is production ready, then they should say that, so there is no ambiguity about what the intent is. If they know there's still more work to be done, I would suggest they ask if it could be considered for play development, because then I'll read it differently.

*SJ Cont'd:* The other thing I would say, which is the hardest thing, is don't pester me. I guarantee you I will read it. If I'm interested in producing it, you will hear from me. I want the same thing that the playwright wants: I want that play to be good enough that I feel I can put it on my stage. Also, there are times of year when it's good to send a play and times when it's not. With me, don't do it in the summer. I won't have time to read it. The fall/winter is a good time.

*DJ: How many new scripts come across your desk each year?*

*SJ:* Thirty, I'm guessing. The level of quality of script varies immensely. The other thing I would always encourage a playwright to do would be, if they really feel they would like to get to know us a bit, the OAC [Ontario Arts Council] Theatre Reserve Grant is always a good route to go as well. It's a chance to get acquainted a bit in a non-threatening way. It's a fabulous grant.

*DJ: What turns you on or off a play?*

*SJ:* I am by nature a fan of comedy, and comedy is hard. Most of what we do has some comedic edge to it. So, something that's well-written from a technical comedic perspective, that's going to grab me always. The other thing is, if it's going to be really light-weight, it must be superb. I'm looking for that combo. If it's something I think our patrons can connect to, that's going to give it a leg up. You want to stretch an audience's experience, but they need a way in.

*DJ: How important is the title of the play to you?*

*SJ:* When I read it, not very important. When I produce it, very important. Yes, I have asked playwrights to change titles. People don't come to see a play because of what it's about; they're taking you at your face value. A title has to intrigue. You don't want to promise people something you're not going to deliver.

*DJ: How long after someone sends you a script will you be in contact if you're interested?*

*SJ:* It depends on when I read it. It really depends on how my year is going. As much as we're still looking for new work, a lot of us still have our heads down going, how are we working through [the pandemic come-back]? How are we going to get back to better than we are now?

*DJ: Do you think theatre will bounce back? What are your feelings on that?*

*SJ:* I'm an optimist. We're seeing improvement. I don't think anyone thought it was going to be an overnight recovery. This is a three to five year rebuild.

*DJ: What was the last play you read or saw that really excited you?*

*SJ:* I just read *The Gang on the Hill* by Dan Needles. It's a three-generation farm story. It's not all sweetness and light. That one really grabbed me.

*DJ: One last question: what would you say to your younger self?*

*SJ:* Stop being a mediocre actor and start trying to be a superlative artistic director.



## DYANNA JACKLIN

A native of Hamilton, Ontario, and a graduate of McMaster University, Dyanna Jacklin has called Muskoka home for over the last decade. It was here that she found her place and her people in the vibrant art scene of Huntsville, Ontario, after joining the Board of Directors for The Huntsville Theatre Company (HTC) in 2015. Dyanna wrote, directed, and produced many shows and events for the HTC, such as *For the Love of Broadway* (2014), *For the Love of Broadway 2* (2015), *Broadway After Dark* (2018), *Broadway After Dark 2* (2019) and *The HTC Awards* (2018, 2019). She has also had the distinct pleasure of acting in many productions for the Huntsville Theatre Company and the Huntsville Festival of the Arts, notably as Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (2018), Caitlyn Rose in *The Wakowski Brothers* (2017), Jan in *I'll Be Back Before Midnight* (2015), as well as vocal director for *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2015).

It wasn't until 2020 that things really got interesting. Dyanna, on her first maternity leave, was suddenly stuck at home in a way completely different from the first eight months of child-rearing. Together, with frequent creative collaborator, Mallery Davenport, Dyanna wrote and starred in *The Three-Minute Therapist*, a web series started in the hopes of lifting theatrical spirits as well as keeping sane. This led to Dyanna's participation as co-writer in the HTC's interactive online play, *Holidate with Destiny?* in fall of 2020, quite possibly the catalyst of the start of her professional writing career. After co-writing *Holidate*, she had another play almost annoyingly forming in her head for months, one that relentlessly kept her up at night, one that she never had any intention of putting to paper. Finally, in early 2021, while pregnant with her second child, she wrote the first draft of *In Another Life*, a choose-your-own-adventure style play that would eventually become her first one-act play, *One Brief Shining Moment*. *One Brief Shining Moment* was professionally produced nine months later in September of 2021, and after a very successful run, was remounted in fall of 2022 with The Monarch Performing Arts Studio in Huntsville. It was at this point that Dyanna knew she had to follow her heart and ferociously began pursuing playwriting. She has since written three other plays, *Between Floors* (2021), *Maternal Combustion* (2022), and *Dismissed* (2022). She is currently laying the foundation for her next play, *Above and Beyond*.