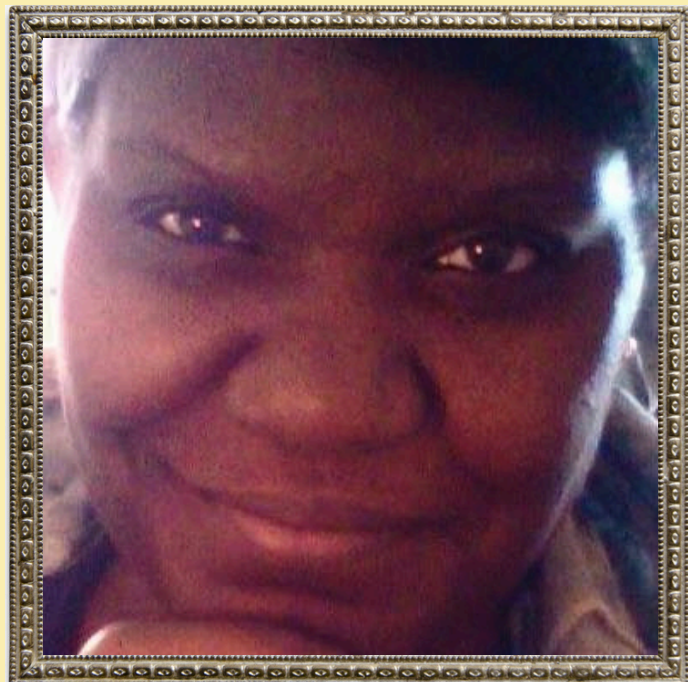


PGC
WOMEN'S
CAUCUS
NEWSLETTER

Interview with Tanisha Taitt,
Artistic Director of Cahoots Theatre
in Toronto, ON

Conducted by Lily Chang
August 2024



Tanisha Taitt - In addition to her role as Artistic Director of Cahoots Theatre, Tanisha is a Toronto-born, bred, and based playwright, theatre, and audiobook director, performer, educator, sometimes dramaturge, and accidental essayist. She is a YWCA Woman of Distinction nominee for her commitment to artistic excellence and social justice, and a two-time Dora Award nominee for Outstanding Direction. Her plays *Keeper* and *Admissions* are published by Scirocco Drama. A singer and songsmith since her teens, Tanisha is a recipient of the Canadian Music Publishers Association Songwriters Scholarship for exceptionality in songcraft. She is part-time faculty at Sheridan's Bachelor of Music Theatre Performance program where she teaches Acting Through Song, and at George Brown Theatre School where she teaches Contemporary Scene Study. Tanisha is the 2023 recipient of the Gina Wilkinson Prize, honouring female theatremakers recognized by their peers for their community-mindedness, dedicated leadership, and notable achievement in their craft.

Lily Chang (LC): Thank you for meeting with me today and agreeing to be interviewed. I thought we could start with: What is the mandate and focus of Cahoots Theatre?

Tanisha Taitt (TT): Cahoots was founded by Beverly Yhap in 1986 as a response to the lack of artists of colour in Canadian theatre. The mandate for decades was to showcase racially diverse works and creators. It's still that on paper, but the mission has expanded to include all marginalized groups including LGBTQ+ artists and artists with disabilities. Fulfilling this mandate is incredibly challenging. Trying to represent so many demographics is difficult when the company itself is tiny (we have a staff of three!). Although it's an honour and a huge responsibility to pursue this mission, a company of our size does not have the resources to match the scope of what we're tasked with doing.

LC: How often does Cahoots Theatre premiere new Canadian plays?

TT: Every season. Most recently I directed our production of *Sweeter* by Alicia Richardson in 2023/24 in association with Roseneath Theatre. We produced two plays in 2022/23 — Kanika Ambrose's *our place* with Theatre Passe Muraille, directed by Sabryn Rock, and Amanda Lin's *Between a Wok and a Hot Pot*, directed by Esther Jun. At the very end of the 2021/22 season, we emerged from the pandemic with me directing *Three Ordinary Men* by Steven Elliott Jackson. Cahoots leans heavily into showcasing new Canadian works.

LC: Do you prefer an invite to a staged reading or a workshop over reading a new script?

TT: I do. I enjoy reading scripts but it's so time consuming. Folks send plays but it takes a very long while to read them. When allocating OAC Recommender Grants to playwrights, I read everything because I don't want to miss the chance to support the creation of a play that might be great. But attending a workshop or reading often helps me better understand the full context of a play, and they are more efficient invitations to a writer's work. I don't want to mislead anyone and make artists think that Cahoots can do more than we can, though. I'm upfront.

I am drawn to writers who have a unique voice and resonant things to say. I get excited when I love the way someone's mind works, when they have abundant imagination, when they are clear — clarity is huge — and when they are truthful. I love championing amazing stories but I am also interested in championing people and their futures. It is immensely gratifying, and touching, to play even a small role in the development of a playwright. I'm drawn to artist development and cultivating relationships with playwrights rather than just focusing on singular plays.

LC: Are there programs at Cahoots geared towards artist development?

TT: We had a playwrights' unit called Hot House Lift Off, and a creator development unit for immigrant and refugee newcomers artists of colour called Crossing Gibraltar. We morphed the two into a playwrights' unit for newcomer artists called Hot House Crossing. We also had a collective creation unit for non-binary artists called The ENBY Ensemble. Because of the pandemic, the programs concluded with digital

[TT Cont'd:] presentations of their works. They were great programs, but we put them on hiatus. I want to focus now on cultivating a smaller selection of plays rather than on so many playwrights at once. In Canada, there are lots of companies with playwriting units but the plays aren't being produced. We decided not to work that way anymore.

LC: From what you were saying earlier, it sounds like you have a preference for learning about the storyteller behind the stories rather than playwrights just going, "Here's my play. Here's my product."

TT: Exactly. I'm interested in artists, not just in their plays. We have an in-house initiative, Tea With T, where artists can meet me for tea on Zoom and just introduce themselves as artists and receive some feedback or helpful tips. It's about making connections, not just about making pieces of art.

LC: When you meet an artist, you can also get a sense of, "Is this someone I would like to share a meal with?"

TT: Yes! Would I voluntarily break bread with this person? If I don't want to connect with them as a human, why would I work with them as an artist?

I receive a lot of emails with submissions not suitable for our theatre. Creators should research companies and their mandates. Playwrights! Please avoid sending generic messages to "Dear Artistic Director" or "To Whom It May Concern." It means that you haven't even Googled the theatre and the individuals you're sending your play to. Being

[TT Cont'd]: specific and intentional is the best way to approach an artistic director and theatre company.

LC: Thinking about Tea with T and the other programs you mentioned, it sounds like there are many ways for playwrights to promote their plays, not just through script submissions.

TT: Yes. I was asked to direct a reading of a play for a company that wasn't ours because the playwright was interested in working with me. I loved the spirit of the piece, and its bones, and the energy I got from the writer. Very gutsy. Now, Cahoots is going to produce it.

LC: What is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play? Are there favorite themes, issues, styles, or genres that currently appeal the most?

TT: I like plays that haven't been subjected to a lot of self-censorship, but have been subjected to a lot of care. I appreciate when the playwright has written what they felt compelled to write, but am turned off when what they felt compelled to write is obviously and overly self-indulgent. I'm drawn to work that is truly and simply courageous, in which the author dares to tell the story they want to tell, asks the questions they want to ask, and asserts the provocations they choose to in a way that is simple and unassumingly brave. Not pretentiously 'edgy' and arrogantly attention-seeking — genuinely and humbly courageous. Few people want to bump the boat and rock it. They either want to keep it still, so they'll be funded (especially those afraid of losing subscribers), or they want to capsize it entirely to show how rebellious they are. I find both of

[TT Cont'd:] those approaches equally predictable and tired.

Running a company like Cahoots means reading a lot of stories of alienation and oppression, which is heart-breaking because it speaks to how many of us are carrying deep-seated pains that yearn to be expressed. But it's frustrating, not because accounts of trauma aren't very valid, but because I would like to see our art move with more of a spring in its step beyond traumatic, identity-based narratives towards light and the unburdened. Towards joy. I want more stories about subjects other than our wounds, how we are mistreated, our experiences of being othered, etc. There are necessary stories of pain and also some happy tales being staged, yes, of course. But I truly crave more balance. I hope to see our artistic narratives move out of the struggle zone, so that we're not restricted to only this zone in the headspace of others. We can't justly accuse companies of producing trauma porn until our typewriters stop producing it. That will be hard for some folks to hear, and it isn't fun to say. But as someone whose inbox doesn't lie, it's also true.

LC: Just folks of colour doing regular, banal things. How glorious! Earlier, you had mentioned that it is difficult to fulfill Cahoots's mandate with so little resources. What do you dream of then for Cahoots?

TT: I dream of a much bigger budget for Cahoots. We have an annual budget of about \$400K which sounds like a decent amount, but after covering our studio rent, bills, and taxes, fixed expenses, and three salaries, there's not

[TT Cont'd:] much left for production, which costs a fortune these days. I would love to have a \$1M to work with every year. Or at least double what we have now. It's frustrating to see a theatre for marginalized artists with marginalized resources. I'd be lying if I said that it hasn't kept me up many a night. Bigger companies with bigger funds catering to mainstream majority audiences now pursue money to produce diverse and equity-seeking work, because they have to do that to maintain funding levels, while smaller companies who always nurtured that work barely have the money to do what they've always done for the people they've always done it for.

I adore hiring early-career artists and multiracial creative teams. It's pretty dope to have so many young creatives fill a room, so cool to have 80% of the creative team reflect the backgrounds of the characters in a play. But I also would like to work with more older artists, who are often totally overlooked. It would be so impactful to get consistent funding from several sources other than the government! If we had a bigger budget, I'd love to do two productions annually without having to wonder every year if we can do it. Cahoots is 38 years old, and frankly, I believe we deserve that.

LC: I think those were all the questions I had.

Thank you so much for your answers, Tanisha! I connected a lot with what you've said. I feel inspired and encouraged as an artist. It's been a pleasure to meet and chat with you.

TT: With you too, Lily!

Lily Chang (she/they) is a queer Taiwanese Canadian writer, editor, and early career director / producer in theatre and film based in Tiohtiá:ke / Mooniyang / Montréal. She is a graduate of Concordia University's MA program in creative writing and Mel Hoppenheim's microprogram in screenwriting and film producing. Their work has been published by *Room Magazine*, *Frog Hollow Press*, *HerStry*, *Dark Helix Press*, and *Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop*. She is a 2023-2024 Nightwood Innovator, the winner of Infinithéâtre's Write-on-Q 2023 Playwriting Competition, FringeMTL 2023's Frankie Award recipient for Most Promising Emerging English Producer, and a 2018 CBC Nonfiction Prize finalist. Their projects have been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, Access Copyright Foundation, and Barbara Deming Memorial Fund.

For their portfolio, visit lilychang.art and canasianarts.com/artist/lilychang/.

