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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Weyni Mengesha,
AD of Soulpepper Theatre

Conducted by Sangeeta Wylie,
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WEYNI MENGESHA

Weyni Mengesha is the Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company and an award-winning director, known for her groundbreaking work and community engagement. Weyni has directed shows across Canada that have gone on to tour nationally and internationally, and have been developed into television shows playing on CBC, Global, and Netflix. She has also directed in London, New York, and Los Angeles, garnering a NAACP nomination for Best Direction, as well as multiple Dora nominations and awards for Outstanding Direction. She has been an instructor at the National Theatre School of Canada, and was Co-Artistic Director and teacher with the A.M.Y Project for seven years.

In 2017, Weyni was named one of the Women In View's "Five in Focus," identifying five rising film directors across Canada. She was recently named one of the 50 most influential people in Toronto by *Toronto Life Magazine*.

Weyni Mengesha is a force, and I leapt at the opportunity to talk with her. I saw her direction of Hosanna at Stratford in 2011, and she has been on my radar ever since. She's had a diverse career: theatre director, producer/director in film and television, composer, teacher, and arts educator. In 2018 she returned to Toronto to take up the reins as Artistic Director at Soulpepper Theatre Company.

Weyni was in the midst of directing Scott Joplin's Treemonisha, set to premiere at Stanford Live in California when the pandemic hit and they had to postpone the show. One of the world's first black operas, Treemonisha is a rare, first-person account about the post-slavery era, but it was not produced in Joplin's lifetime.

Weyni and I talked about all things theatre, the pandemic, and how Soulpepper is helping Canadian playwrights with new initiatives, such as Fresh Ink.

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SANGEETA WYLIE (SW): You've described theatre as a great connector where different communities tell each other their secrets in the dark. I love that description. What kind of overall vision do you have for the theatre? Right now, finally, we're seeing a little bit more diversity come out. What kinds of stories do you want to tell to fulfill your mandate?

WEYNI MENGESHA (WM): I want to tell stories that feel relevant to our city and to our world at the time we are telling them. To take advantage of the fact that theatre, unlike film, has the ability to respond to the moment it is in. The dream for me is to make the theatre feel like a welcoming place for everyone to hear and share their stories. So that means that in programming, promotions, casting, staffing and technicians, we see the city we live in represented.

SW: The project that you are supposed to be involved in right now is on postponement, Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*. I was blown away first by the music when I listened to it, the fusion, and the story, and the fact that this

SW (Cont'd): thing didn't get produced in his lifetime. Here you were, about to open it. Can you talk a little bit about this project and what it means to you personally?

WM: Yeah it meant a lot. I feel this spiritual connection with Joplin, as I have been thinking about him for years. He never saw it produced in his lifetime. He spent his last dimes to make sure that his score was printed and preserved in the Library of Congress. It makes me feel like he threw a bottle in the ocean for a future generation to pick up. Like he thought, "They are not ready for me now, but one day they will be ready." It is an honour to be picking it up with the incredible team of artists collaborating on the show. It's a bit of a re-imagining with the Canadian playwright, Leah-Simone Bowen working on an adaptation of the libretto. It was a really large and long process and we finally felt like we were reaching the finish line, so the cancellation was hard. I believe it's still going to happen though. It's important. This is a man who was writing about slavery as a child of parents who lived through it. We don't have many stories that are first-person accounts like that.

SW: What initiatives of inclusivity would you highlight at Soulpepper, and what do they have in common?

WM: Well, they all consider that this is a public institution that wants the public to feel ownership and trust in it. A place that they can call home. How else do people feel comfortable being vulnerable and empowered to take risks? I believe we need that in the theatre. So, that looks like many things. Efforts to make accessible tickets for everyone. We have \$25 tickets at every show. We have a program for those who are 25 and under to attend any show for free. We have adjusted the pay scale on stage so that it could be more equitable for women and BIPOC performers. We have strengthened and put more energy towards our outreach to diversify our audiences. Our programming and casting is more diverse. Holding general auditions, ensuring we are seeing performers from different communities. We have zoned in on commissions from female writers this year. We have some news that will be coming out in the next month or so about this that I am very excited to share. We have been working to make our building more accessible.

We're continuing our ASL performances and relaxed performances. We're trying to make it a place that not just talks about being welcoming but gives people the ability to actually join in and feel comfortable. You have to see people on stage that look like you. You have to understand that your stories are important in this building. That you can come even if you don't make a certain amount of money. We're committed to being who we say we are; we want our theatre to feel like a community hub, and that means putting these initiatives front and centre.

SW: It's changing the landscape of what an arts institution has traditionally meant.

Throughout this pandemic it's a question of how we now frame art. Institutional art is threatened but I don't think art will die. An interesting question is where is the conversation on traditional artists, on ritual artists? We often don't talk about it. It might be the idea of a 'reset' in how we think about art in general.

WM: I think 'reset' is the right word. I was living in LA two years ago when there was a call out for this job. I don't know if I would have even considered it five years ago. In fact, there were jobs offered years before and I wasn't interested because it didn't feel like the momentum for change was alive. You had to be "disruptive" to really have real conversations about the inequities in our sector. With the movements over the last couple of years, we are actually having much more honest conversations about our industry. People are prioritizing the work of EDI [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion] as something that is not just a duty but something that is integral to do our job in a way that provides richness, empowerment, and ultimately better art.

SW: How are you pivoting with this current disruption [meaning COVID-19]? How are you adjusting?

WM: There's days that the innovation and [what] it's going to require gets me really excited. And then there's days that I wish I had more time to grieve. But I'm motivated by the city, the artists, and by this opportunity to collaborate and talk to other artistic leaders. We've all been colleagues, we've all grown up in the arts scene in Toronto together, but it was

WM (*Cont'd*): ...more of a silo situation. Now everybody is really coming together and asking questions as a unified sector: "Do we come back the same way as before, or do we figure out how we can be better and treat this as an opportunity to agree on new standards?"

Mental health is a priority for all of us. We actually acknowledge that there are children in our lives. We're human! There's a transparency now that I'm starting to see as people's kids jump on their laps in the middle of a Zoom call, where as before, at work in the building, it's almost like we pretend our children don't exist. There was this crazy expectation that I put on myself as a black woman to work twice as hard and never complain even if it meant I was running on empty. Days I would just go, go, go... dropping off kids... cleaning up messes, eating their leftover toast while fixing my makeup and rushing to work because one of my sons had a melt down and now we are behind the clock... dry my sweat... and then walk into a meeting and act completely normal. It is a bit of a comedy show.

Now it's like: This is my life. I have a 5-year-old and I have a 7-year-old. I have parents to take care of. I have a lot going on. And that is important for people to see because that's my life. That is a lot of people's lives. And what we're doing on stage is creating life, and how could we not acknowledge ourselves and our struggles but want to create something real and meaningful on stage?

SW: This physical isolation has now highlighted the areas of our lives that we have isolated away from other people. How do we see each other fully instead of pretending that it doesn't exist or that we don't see the other person's life?

WM: Before the question was, "How do you survive?" And now the question might be, "How do you thrive?" How are artists really valued? You have an incident like this with COVID-19 and you start to see the bottom dropout for freelance artists, and you're like, right, this model we were living in wasn't working.

We can't unknow what we've learned about each other through this. We have to act on what we now know.

SW: It's an unmasking. When we strip everything away, what we've been prioritizing ourselves with is not a priority anymore.

WM: The apologies that I used to make... about coming to work and being sorry that I have to leave early, and coming home being sorry that I have to come home late. It was impossible.

These steps towards empowering us to talk about who we really are, and bringing all of ourselves to our workplace and not having to do a dance where you're wearing two different costumes, is going to be healthy change.

SW: When you talk about being apologetic, it's also a Canadian thing. One of the things that concerns me is Canadian plays often get their first production and they go into this land of never being seen again. Is there anything we can do as playwrights to get the attention of people like you, to prolong this life, keep this play alive as long as we can?

WM: This is something I'm very passionate about. I think there are some models we need to look at in the States that are very effective to mitigate this problem. One of them is the New Play Network's rolling world premieres. Part of the issue is that companies want to get the world premiere, or the Canadian premiere. The New Play Network program gives multiple companies that. Then the play can continue to grow, and it can continue to get reviewed. And not just by the first evolution or by one reviewer.

For example, I did a show in a rolling world premiere that started in New York, went up to Michigan, Seattle, Sacramento, and then it came back to LA. The reviews were very different along the way. The writer was able to respond to the different directors' visions and the different audience reactions and added rewrites and cuts accordingly. It was an incredible experience. We want to make sure we're nurturing our writers, so we need to work together. Give it a national tour, give it a chance to go across the country. And give it time. It breaks my heart - they work so hard, and there's an opening, and you never hear about the play again. I really think it's integral to promoting our writers on an international level as well.

SW: How does a female Canadian playwright get our work seen by people like you?

WM: There's a list in the States of the best unproduced female playwrights across the country [called [The Kilroys List](#)]. It's been such an important resource for artistic directors in the States. I know PGC is doing it now [[SureFire](#) is PGC's version], which I think is amazing. I think it's very useful to have a centralized list, even just to be able to know the names.

Also, Fresh Ink - the reason why we're doing Fresh Ink is to give new work a national platform. It might just be ten-minutes that you're hearing of someone's play but maybe you didn't know that playwright before. You understand what she's interested in, what she wants to talk about. You get a sense of who those playwrights are in our country, and the way they think.

SW: Is there a submission process for Fresh Ink or for your theatre in general?

WM: We open general submissions for a couple of weeks a year as opposed to running it all year round, which would be hard to manage. I worry about people not getting responded to, so we have zeroed in on a time frame, usually it's in June. It's something we just started recently since I got here.

Fresh Ink was created as a live event because it was a way to get people to come and get excited about new pieces and for writers to be able to try things with an audience. We imagined other artistic directors might come, and we could see

how an audience responds to that writing, and go, “Oh, it's 50-minutes, maybe I want to commission that to go further.” So, it's just a way to support writers.

SW: Is that a preference - would you rather read a play or hear a staged reading, or does it matter?

WM: I'll always take a staged reading because I love theatre and I love to hear it spoken aloud and see how it interacts with the audience. When I am reading a play I leave a little bit of room to imagine how much more I would like it with the magic of the audience as the last character.

SW: Are there any red flags for a play that either it's a challenge and you want to go for it, or it's almost impossible. Where you may have thought, I really like the idea of this, but I don't see how we can produce it?

WM: Oh no, that's the best kind of play! Like, “the audacity, how can we do this?” “I love her, who is she?” You know, in theatre - anything's possible because part of it is the imagination. So, it's just a question of how you frame it, and you get the audiences to fill in the missing pieces. What's the poetic solution? That excites me.

SW: Is there anything that makes you crazy or turns you off when a playwright submits?

WM: I just feel like some scripts I read are not inherently theatrical. They could easily be on television, and they don't interest me that much. I get excited when I read a theatrical voice. Somebody who's clearly thinking about

WM (*Cont'd*): ...this to be witnessed by a group of people who are live.

SW: Is there a single most important thing you look for in a play?

WM: Transformation of a character, or of an idea. An Arc.

SW: Something that makes you think differently?

WM: Yeah, I believe that's what theatre can do. And that can be completely abstracted. It doesn't have to be linear but you still feel it, you know?

SW: What was the last play that did that for you?

WM: That's a good question. Erin Shields is writing a piece for us right now, and I think it's really special. She just has a way of the macro and micro seamlessly working together. She's speaking on a poetic level that really resonates spiritually to me. She's incredibly funny. And also, there's a real transformation of those characters in that play. Not to mention the transformation of taking a piece that's centered around King Lear and looking at a character [his daughter] whose story has not been highlighted in this way.

More and more, I really think about how, you know... Someone described it as, “How it can shift the atoms in the room.” And it's that thing about being able to touch on those large questions of our humanity. Also, with hearing so many playwrights read on Fresh Ink, there are so many pieces I am excited about.

SW: What keeps you working in the theatre?

WM: People. The act of assembly. To have somewhere to go together. To be the connector between communities. Experience is a hard thing to share. A story can do that in a way, more than reading each other's histories. Storytelling can take you to the heart of someone else's experience in a way that creates an empathy that I think is important for the health of the city.

It's been so exciting with the new program that we launched last year with the Free 25 and Under. It's just to say, "Hey come and try this thing; come be a part of this community. We want you here. We can't tell the stories of all of us if you're not with us." And also, it's important to inspire this generation to write and to make work. We had such a response from young people coming. It was so great to start to see diversity and a greater range of ages in the audiences.

I think it's a profound experience as we see more and more diverse stories on our stages to be sitting there and watching it with an audience that reflects the city we live in. It should be a given in a city like Toronto. We all need to work to make that a reality.

SW: Like we're in one world instead of many separate worlds, perhaps?

WM: Yeah. We're only fifty percent accomplishing it if it's only on stage.

SW: How do we move into this future? There's so many exciting things and opportunities that can come from a crisis. It's going to be interesting where we go from here. What excites you about the future? What scares you?

WM: What scares me is people's mental health, their ability to buy basic food, to be able to take care of themselves and their family. That's what scares me. What scares me is the precarious nature of the freelance artist and how artists will be supported, and how everyone will be supported if this continues. What scares me is the calls against Anti-black racism, and that the calls for real inclusion become something that dissipates before real change happens. I also get scared that we are going to lose some amazing technicians and designers who are not going to be able to wait a year to do another show. So, those are the things that scare me. Clearly there's a lot of things that scare me.

But what excites me is we're going to have think collaboratively, we're going to have to be innovators again. We're going to have to say, "Ok, there's no marching orders anymore, we can't all just do things the same way they have been done. We have to be prepared for the next time this kind of thing happens, so that artists are not in such a precarious position." Those are major moves around how we're structured as a country, as a society, how we're honouring artists and freelance work. But those are the conversations we can have. I think there will be a new understanding and empathy coming

WM (Cont'd): ...out of this. My job is going to be to continue to advocate for people whose stories we were just about to tell, and that we don't say, "Now we need just commercial productions." There could be a reactionary version that excludes anything that takes risks, and we would be moving back in time if that is the outcome. And it would be really hard because if certain companies do that and certain companies don't do that, you know, that becomes a new problem of competition.

SW: We have to be positive and come up with all the exciting conversations in order to combat the other side of things, and that's tricky.

WM: Luckily, we have incredible creatives to help think about problem solving. And I choose to believe that everything happens for a reason.

WM (Cont'd): It's the only thing that I can do to continue to keep myself ignited. I keep listening and trying to figuring out what the opportunities are here, and how to serve in the position that I'm in. I will continue to promote a voice that says, "Let's continue where we were going and let's try to work together." Twenty-three of the artistic directors in Toronto have come together, and we meet bi-weekly, in an Artistic Director Think Tank. We get together and we talk about those things, and everyone has brought up similar issues.

I feel really proud that the community is thinking along similar lines, and there's communication. So, it's not going to be a surprise when the lights get turned on and everyone's doing different things. I think we're actually looking for cohesion and how to be more efficient and how to collaborate, so I'm really empowered by that.



Sangeeta Wylie is an emerging playwright, and actor in film, television, and theatre. She has several theatre, film, TV, and commercial acting credits.

we the same is Sangeeta's first full-length play, in development since 2017, and inspired by a true story of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s.

Sangeeta also sits on the Board of Directors for the Cultch, plays classical piano, and holds degrees in Chemistry with a Music Minor and Dentistry.

