



PGC
WOMEN'S
CAUCUS
NEWSLETTER

Interview with Liz Gilroy,
Artistic Director of the Port Stanley
Festival Theatre in Ontario

Conducted by Lindsay Kyte
May 2025



Originally from Toronto, Liz Gilroy started her artistic journey as a professional performer at the age of twelve. That was the start of a robust career as a “triple threat” that included seasons at The Stratford Festival, three summers as Diana Barry at The Charlottetown Festival, and Canadian premieres starring in *Elf* and *Legally Blonde* at Neptune Theatre. Other theatres of note include: The Citadel, YPT, Canadian Stage, Magnus Theatre, and Theatre Aquarius, to name but a few. Gilroy attended Sheridan College’s highly revered Musical Theatre Program. As a Director and Choreographer, she has been fortunate to direct and choreograph plays and musicals from The Charlottetown Festival in P.E.I. to Stage West Calgary in Alberta. Liz has also been involved in the creation of many new Canadian works at The Factory Theatre, Port Stanley Festival Theatre (PSFT), Canadian Stage, Stage West Calgary, and the Lighthouse Festival Theatre.

Gilroy worked alongside PSFT Artistic Director Simon Joynes, who wanted Gilroy to be his successor, which came sooner than expected when Joynes unexpectedly passed away in 2024. Gilroy notes that assuming the Artistic Director role for the Port Stanley Festival Theatre would not have been possible without Joynes’ mentorship and belief in her abilities.

Lindsay Kyte (LK): In your own words, what is your company's mandate or focus?

Liz Gilroy (LG): Our mandate, since 2012, is 100% Canadian. We only produce Canadian plays written by Canadian playwrights, and in light of where we are now in the world, I think it's an excellent idea that we are producing 100% Canadian content. We have six shows in the summer season. We also now self-produce five shows in the off-season. Our mandate is to also present one world premiere by a Canadian playwright each year, and we do that through the Simon Joynes Playwrights' Festival at the end of September, which is three nights long. Also, part of our mandate is to encourage new playwrights — not in age, but new to the craft — and I do dramaturgical work with them. It's also our mandate to provide a space where people can see and hear their plays, which is what our Playwrights Festival is about. Often, writing is such a solitary gig and you send these babies out into the world and sometimes no one gets back to you. So, if we can even just get three plays going once a year and I can work with somebody on their work, then their voices get heard.

As well, our mandate is to do comedies. It's summer theatre in Ontario. Let's call a spade a spade. Some people don't want to come to the theatre on a beautiful day and watch a play about death. I try to stay away from hard dramas, but I do try at least one play a year that will spark an interesting conversation and that's not all about laughter — that's got more meat to its bones. It is our job as an arts organization to present work that sparks conversation, that might be challenging, might upset some people,

but might also get a different kind of person in the theatre. And sometimes we need to learn new stuff, and you can learn new stuff in the setting of a theatre if you present it in a way that's a collective experience that might have a few laughs as well.

I am also committed to pushing the boundaries on the kind of representation we see on stage, behind the scenes, and with playwrights and directors, so I'm being very mindful that we need some new, next gen stuff, even though our demographic is quite a bit older, and that we need to see different stories told by different people other than the regular demographic that we see in Southwestern Ontario, which is a conservative stronghold. So, yes, I'm trying to get more two-spirit, LGBTQ+ plus people here in terms of crew, directors, lighting designers. I'm also trying to get a lot more BIPOC performers. It's a challenge, but one that we continue to strive for, and that's not lip service; we are honestly trying.

Another piece of our mandate is that we've always thought of ourselves as a stepping-stone. It's a place for someone who's still at Sheridan to come and get their first set or lighting design or be an assistant. We want young crew, directors, and writers to use us as a jumping-off point and to, hopefully, come back to us.

LK: What is your theatre's relationship with plays with music and musicals?

LG: Part of my mandate is to bring small Canadian musicals to our stage. 2028 is our 50th season and I'm looking at doing a co-pro with another theatre of a Canadian musical.

We also encourage people who write musicals to send them in for dramaturgical work and to present at the Playwrights' Festival as well.

Usually, our season starts with two shorter runs of two weeks each, or a week each, and usually one of those is a solo show with music. Not really a concert, but that weird in-between where someone's on stage with some great patter who tells stories and you hear great music with the live band on stage.

We have two separate crowds: we have people who come to all the concerts and the self-produced shows in the offseason, and the people who love the plays. So, it's finding a common ground to possibly get them all in the theatre at the same time.

Last year we introduced Musical Mondays. We have a beautiful patio, so I thought, Monday we don't do anything at the theatre. So, we are now featuring local musicians on Mondays this summer from 7:00 to 9:30 pm live on the patio.

LK: What is your theatre's relationship with TYA?

LG: We are growing our family programming as new families move to the area. We featured a puppet show and a magic show last year, and a staged reading of *A Christmas Carol* with two or three people, and we specifically went out for a younger audience. We definitely want to grow in this area. If anybody sends me a TYA script, I would wholeheartedly be happy to look at it.

LK: And what about cast size for anything submitted to you in any genre?

LG: So, seven is kind of our top. We could manage eight if it was a smaller set. Also, we're a smaller theatre — we only have 202 seats and we're an "E house." We have a ceiling on how much money we can make. So, I have to look at budgetary issues because I have to find a place for those people to stay while they're here, etc. So, if anybody's ever pitching to me, less than seven is optimal.

LK: What kind of a show is not "a fit" for your company?

LG: Naked people who are naked for a long time on stage would not be a great fit. Running around in panties and a bra, it's fine. But if they were naked throughout the entire play, that's not going to happen at the Port Stanley Festival Theatre. If every second word was the f-word or "Jesus Christ," that's not going to happen here. We're in a very conservative area. I am pushing some things, and I would push some more if I believed the writing was good enough and the actors were great. We also have a ceiling on what we're capable of technically here. So, if your show comes with a ton of bells and whistles, it probably won't get done here.

LK: For your submission process, how does a playwright get your attention with a new work?

LG: You can submit to me. I read everything that comes to me. My email is on the website. What I ask is this: Is it a first draft? What stage of the process are you in? What do you want from me? What do you expect from Port Stanley Festival Theatre? Has it had a public reading? Is it a brand-new play? Have you published the play before?

LK: In what format do you prefer submissions?

LG: I prefer the whole thing. Also, sometimes a sample is a good way to dip your toe in the water, and I can let them know immediately if it's a fit.

And if it's somebody's writing that I really like, but that concept doesn't work for us, I often say, "Hey, do you have anything that might fit?"

LK: Do you take remounts of previous productions?

LG: Sure, we could. We are dipping our toe and probably doing some co-pros. We've got theatres that are close to us, and they do the same things we do, so why not?

LK: Do you like to encounter a new work in its early stages or in a more polished stage?

LG: Either. I love being involved from the beginning, but I also love when someone sends me something and I'm like, "Oh God, that needs like one draft and we're good to go." Both are exciting and satisfying. For different reasons.

LK: Do you also accept invitations to readings?

LG: It's my favorite thing. I will go to a play reading literally anywhere because if I don't have to read it, I'm happier. And I will go to Zoom readings as well.

LK: Once someone has submitted a play to you, what's a good timeline for a follow-up?

LG: If you don't hear anything from me in a month, give me a nudge.

Caveat: If my summer season has started, you probably won't get an answer from May to September. I don't have a ton of time because I direct most of the shows and I'm also working on the plays for the Playwrights Festival, so I'm still in communication with three different playwrights trying to get the final draft. Nudge me in September and I'll get back to you in October.

LK: What about second productions after their premiere?

LG: We are happy to do that. We've done some of that in the past. Works that have premiered elsewhere came here and we were happy to take them.

LK: Are there any programs, opportunities, or funding available to playwrights through your theatre?

LG: Yes, we do the OAC Recommender Grants, and all that information is on our website. We tripled our submissions last year. And I read every application, so it's a good way to get to us. And it's good for us as well as we want new works by Canadian playwrights. If I was ever really interested in a show and knew from the get-go that I wanted my dirty little hands on it and nobody else, then yes, we do have a small stipend for playwrights, if I really wanted something specifically for us.

LK: Are there any ways you do not want to be pitched or approached?

LG: Don't pitch me on Facebook. I will not conduct business over Facebook. In-person, introduce yourself and let me know you will be following up, but then pitch still through email.

Yes, I am happy to chat for a few minutes, but I can't hear the whole thing on the spot. Don't delve into it, if I'm out and about to see another show or something. If it's over three minutes, it's a bad idea to do that on the spot when I'm in a room full of people. But again, happy to say hello and I welcome the email pitch.

LK: Is there anything else you want playwrights to know?

LG: When people go to our website and they see what we do, please know that I'm open to expanding the types of shows we do, the types of stories we tell, and the types of people we see on stage. Don't let that put you off if you happen to be someone who writes a different type of story. It may not be right for me, but I

could know that another theatre that is a more urban theatre that can take more chances may take it. We all know each other. Especially ADs. There's only so many ADs in the country. If I really like it, I'll ask you if I can send it to somebody else.

LK: Are you open to doing Zoom coffees with playwrights from across the country, just so they get to know you?

LG: Yes. Not in my summer season from May to September. But, yes, please. January is great for that. It's what we do. We want to develop new Canadian works. And I'm approachable. I was an actor for so many years. I get it. Don't be intimidated. We are here and we want to know what you're working on.



Lindsay Kyte is a playwright, performer, and songwriter originally from Reserve Mines, Cape Breton. She has a Masters in Theatre from the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts in England, where Paul McCartney gave Kyte her degree. Kyte has performed on stages and screens across Canada. Her play *Tompkinsville*, with music by Kyte and Ian Sherwood, won Merritt Awards for “Outstanding Score” and “Outstanding Production.” Her *Toronto Adventures* was produced by Festival Antigonish, Victoria Playhouse, and Grand Bank Theatre. Kyte’s *Open Casket Open Mic* premiered at Victoria Playhouse in 2022, with music by Kyte, Terra Spencer, and Garry Williams. Rita MacNeil’s son chose Kyte and Mike Ross to create *Dear Rita*, premiering at the Charlottetown Festival and Savoy Theatre, and in 2024 in Ontario and Newfoundland with Tweed & Company and Terra Bruce. *Dear Rita* then ran at Neptune Theatre in the summer of 2024. *Dear Rita* won Merritt Awards for “Outstanding Score,” “Outstanding Ensemble,” and “Outstanding Musical Direction,” as well as a 2024 BroadwayWorld Award. The show was named “Outstanding Concert Show” of 2024 by *Entertain This Thought*.

Check out Kyte’s website at: www.lindsaykyte.com

