

Interview with Mel Hague, Artistic Director of Factory Theatre in Toronto, ON

> Conducted by Lindsay Kyte April 2025



Mel Hague is a dramaturg, mentor, and curator who has worked extensively with artists from all disciplines across Canada. Past roles include Associate Artistic Director at Canadian Stage, Buddies in Bad Times' Rhubarb Festival Director, Company Dramaturge at Buddies in Bad Times, as well as the Artist Development Coordinator and Company Dramaturge at Obsidian Theatre, to name but a few. For more than ten years, Mel has headed some of Toronto's most innovative new work festivals, programs, and development opportunities, and she has dramaturged bold world premieres such as *Oraltorio: A Theatrical Mixtape* by Motion, *Up the Garden Path* by Lisa Codrington, and *Venus' Daughter* by Meghan Swaby. Mel was also the production dramaturge for the stage adaptation of Ann-Marie Macdonald's internationally acclaimed novel, *Fall on Your Knees* (a National Arts Centre, Vita Brevis Arts, Canadian Stage, Neptune Theatre, and Grand Theatre production).

Mel's relationship with Factory began in 2010 as a dramaturgy intern. Following her internship, Mel became Associate Dramaturge, working under the guidance of Factory's Company Dramaturge, Iris Turcott. During that time, Mel not only assisted in supporting new play development, she helped launch the company's Factory Wired series of new works in progress. Twelve years later, she became the AD of <u>Factory Theatre</u>.

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

Mel Hague (MH): Factory Theatre is in our 55th year as a company devoted to producing, developing, and creating new Canadian plays. We're one of the oldest theatres in the country devoted only to Canadian work. Decades worth of multi-generational new Canadian creations have come through Factory, and playwrights (George F Walker, david yee, Judith Thompson). At this point, it's easier to make a list of who hasn't come through Factory.

And when I say, "Canadian theatre," I'm talking about this nationalist moment in the '70s that wanted us to not do British or American works, but to create our own work that had many different forms and creations. Theatre as an art form has been practiced on these lands for thousands of years, so working under a national Canadian mandate, as a person living in 2025, I experience the tension and challenges of "what is Canadian?"

So, those questions are very much at the forefront of how we construct ourselves and how we do things. But I do think Factory is — at least now that I'm here — it's a place for weirdos. Could it be disturbing? Could it be funny? Could it be odd? That's the work I've gravitated to in my career. So, it's the meeting place between this expansive mandate and the kind of margins of who sit uncomfortably outside of the labels that we have ascribed to ourselves.

LK: So, these days, what do great plays that you program have in common?

MH: I've been leaning towards shorter works, so works under 90 minutes. After COVID, people's bedtimes got a little bit earlier. Now our shows start at 7:30 and there's something nice about them ending before 9 that has really spoken to our audience. It's a part of your night as opposed to the whole thing. I'm really trying to tap into that concept because our neighborhood is also right near a whole bunch of bars and clubs and places where people go out for fun. And Factory is part of the fabric of what this fun neighborhood is about. Our works don't have to be funny, although sometimes they are, but there needs to be something thrilling about the theatre that we create now. So, I'm looking for work that is thrilling and tight both in time and in execution.

LK: And how often these days does your theatre premiere new Canadian works?

MH: There're a lot more collaborations and coproductions happening between theatre companies right now, including us. Part of that is financial. But also, when I was coming up in Toronto, there were a lot more independent spaces where you could produce your work. There are so few of those spaces now.

We are a PACT company and this year we premiered three works. Others are remounts of shows that premiered the year before. But it's all new and it's all Canadian. It's all within the last two years.

Also, I'm in a moment with "premiering" as a bit of a misnomer, because it actually takes a couple of tries sometimes with a work in front of an audience. It can't just go up once. If you do a play, you'll learn a ton, and it actually needs to be done again and again for it to really get to that "honed place." So, I'm less concerned right now with "premiere" as a concept.

You don't have to get it right on the first try as a playwright. You've got to keep going. One of the biggest issues in Canadian theatre is there are often no second productions. It's an iterative process. The Broadway premiere is not the premiere of the play. It's had a development process of productions along the way.

LK: Prior to this, you've worked extensively as a dramaturge and a champion of new Canadian work. How do you think that plays into your role as AD?

MH: Being a dramaturge for me is about having a curiosity that is inherent in every work and every person and every thing. I enjoy working with lots of different kinds of people. I like a puzzle. I like fixing things. I like figuring stuff out and there's something about being an AD and curating a season that allows me to work on multiple things at once. I like thinking of things as a whole — a whole season, a whole body of work. It's not about the one thing — everything is about the sum of its parts. That's how I've approached the job — the individual plays have what they need to be successful and they are all working as part of the machinations of a larger season for a company.

LK: What elements are you looking for in considering a new work?

MH: I'm a very relational person, so forming relationships as individuals is very important. The play can be good or bad, but if the relationship is not good between the individual artist and myself or my team, the play will not be at its best. So, I do really encourage finding out about the artistic directors and seeing if you even like them. I know that getting plays produced is very important, but it's a very unforgiving and multi-year-long process. So, really do make sure that you actually want to spend time with these people because your work is very precious. And just because I've got a job title doesn't mean I'm the right person.

As for contacting theatres, I would tell playwrights about this process: "It's hard because it's hard. It's not hard because you're bad." After Covid, theatre companies are a couple of years behind with what they have to deal with and figure out. So, I would encourage playwrights to think beyond "production."

Yes, "production" is the ideal way to form a relationship with the theatre. But what else can they do for you other than production? Do you need space? Help writing grants? Do you want to learn about budgeting? Do you want a place to sit and have coffee? Do you want some notes on your plays? Do you need help producing? How can you use the institutions knowing that production is something that may not be possible right now? These institutions are built for you to use, but they can sometimes require a bit of creativity to figure out how to use them as playwrights.

As for what I'm thinking about, one thing I'm really curious about right now is genre as a tool. In theatre, we've limited ourselves to comedy and drama. Where is my romantic comedy? Where's my thriller or detective mystery or slasher? How can we expand our toolkit of the words in which we describe works because they're really wonderful tools to bring audiences in. Audiences know what sci-fi is. These words can really empower an audience in seeing a work. A lot of these genres we've given up to film and TV and podcasts. But these words are how audiences access what they're looking for. And there are formal structures within these genres that we can take advantage of in the creations of our work that can create really interesting interplays that I would like to see more of in works.

LK: What do you offer playwrights in addition to production opportunities?

MH: We have our training enhancement program, which is for "young-in-craft" directors, actors, and playwrights. And we formed a mini-company that gets together in June and creates a showcase of their work. It's paid. We have emerging artist nights and they'll come to previews of the shows. We try to keep our emerging artists really close to our community of artists and give space when it's needed. Our training program is the cornerstone of how we're supporting emerging artists out there. We also have a full-time Associate Artistic Director who meets with a half dozen people every week, talking to them about their projects and about different ways that they can go forward. They are another resource to support independent artists to make inroads and figure out how to make connections within the theatre community.

LK: How can artists who are not Torontobased talk to you?

MH: We do zoom coffee dates. Our associate AD is talking to folks from all over the country. Toronto is different from Montreal, is different from Ottawa, and then there are the east and west coasts. Our country is enormous. There is an aesthetic and a style that each city and place is encompassed by. It's better to acknowledge that than to try and figure out how I can make this "more Toronto." That's not really a thing you have to do. Our distinctiveness is our power.

LK: Is there a certain cast size or maximum you're looking for these days?

MH: No, I wouldn't say that. Money is always part of it. Money is hard, but if you don't write the river into the play, there will never be a river in the play. When you are in the writing mode, you really have to put your producer hat down for a minute and let other people figure those things on the other side. Universities are always looking for large cast shows and if we don't write them, then they won't exist. Maybe we can't do a large cast show, but there are places that need those shows.

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

MH: We like a musical. They're really having a moment right now. The new Canadian musicals are fabulous. It's a very different development process than a straight play. So, if you're going to a theatre company with a musical and this company doesn't typically produce them, it's not necessarily that they might not be interested. It may be that there's a lot of

different work to develop it. I might encourage playwrights doing this to have a bit of that figured out for yourself about what it is that you need to develop your musical with us because our processes for developing a straight play don't apply easily to a musical. You coming with knowledge about what's the best practice of developing a musical is very helpful, because it's a very specific art form.

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

MH: We don't do TYA. Our spaces are not the most kid friendly. Again, there's a real expertise needed there. I feel very passionate about TYA and that it needs to be done by people who have the exact skills to support a younger audience. And so, no, that's not really our bag.

LK: Is there any show that is not a fit for your company?

MH: It always comes back to the relationship, the context, and the time. I'm a person who is very reticent to close any doors, but resources are limited. So, the amount we can do is more limiting than any content.

LK: Is there a formal submission process for Factory?

MH: There isn't a formal submission process right now. We don't take unsolicited scripts. If you're an Ontario resident, we have the Recommender grants for theatre creators, and that's our biggest intake. We use that for selecting playwrights for our training program.

On average, we'll get about 130 submissions through those. So, if you're interested in introducing yourself to Factory, we will read every single submission there.

If you're not an Ontario resident, then certainly emailing and getting in touch, not necessarily to pitch your script, but to introduce yourself. Then we can start building that relationship because again, those relationships are key.

As a dramaturge for many years now, I've taken a practice of when people email me their scripts, I'll meet with them but not read their script until after we have met. It's important that we look each other in the eye before we start talking about the artistic product. That's simply my feeling and through these conversations maybe we can find out that there are other ways that we can be a support to each other beyond production.

LK: How does someone pitch a remount to you? And do you need an elaborate trailer?

MH: Canva is a beautiful thing. Think of it more as creating a TikTok about your show than thinking of it as a trailer. If you have a crappy archival, I would make use of still photographs, along with text and then you can use memes. Don't use a trailer unless you have money to have really high-quality video footage. A bad video is worse than no video.

LK: When you've decided to consider a new work, what is your process for getting to know it?

MH: I read as much as I can, but I'd prefer to hear it. I'll bring a couple of staff members in and we'll read it out loud. I learn infinitely more from hearing it than I ever do on the page. I'm an auditory person, and in reading it, I don't always catch as much as I can, but if I hear it once, then I've got the whole structure and lots of details.

LK: What about invites to in-person or Zoom readings?

MH: I love a reading! But sometimes I can't make it. So, even then, if you send the script and then we have a chat, probably my next step would be, "Let's read it out loud together."

LK: What's the demographic of your audience?

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MH: For the last 15 years, Factory's audience has generally skewed younger — Gen. X and millennials, so somewhere between the age of 18 and 50. We're also seeing a real uptick in arts worker tickets.

LK: Is there anything else you want playwrights to know about approaching you and the theatre that I didn't ask you about?

MH: That you can just come and talk to us. You're a playwright. There doesn't need to be a specific project attached to talk to a theatre. We can talk in-person or over Zoom, and if I can't meet with you, I'll introduce you to Kalale Dalton-Lutale, the Associate Artistic Director. We work very much in tandem.

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 Lyte's website at: www.lindsaykyte.com

