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NEWSLETTER

Interview with Rachel Peake,  
Artistic Director of the Grand Theatre  
in London, ON

Conducted by Madeleine Brown  
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Originally from Saskatchewan, Peake is a director and dramaturge of theatre and opera and the Artistic Director of the Grand Theatre in London, Ontario. From 2021 to 2023 she was the Associate AD of Vancouver's Arts Club Theatre Company, Canada's largest urban theatre company, and from 2017 to 2020 she was the Associate Artistic Director of the Citadel Theatre, where she led the Citadel's New Play Development initiatives. For The Grand Theatre, Rachel has directed *The Sound of Music* and *Waitress*, and in January 2023, she won the Ovation Award for Outstanding Direction for her work on *Something Rotten!*, produced by Theatre Under the Stars. Additional credits in musical theatre and opera include: The Betty Mitchell Award-nominated *MacBeth* (Calgary Opera); *Ring of Fire*, *Sense and Sensibility* (Arts Club); *Frozen*, *9 to 5: The Musical* (Citadel Theatre); and *Carmen* (Vancouver Opera). Rachel's inspired and diverse work in direction and dramaturgy is celebrated among audiences and her peers in the arts community across the country. Selected highlights include: directing *Hyperlink* (Elbow Theatre), which was nominated for a Critic's Choice in Innovation; directing and dramaturging the world première opera, *Stickboy* (Vancouver Opera); directing the première of *The Contest of the Winds* (Caravan Farm Theatre); and helming *SexyVoices*, a community-based creation piece about love and sex in the disability community for Realwheels Theatre (Vancouver, BC).

*Madeline Brown (MB):* In your own words, what's the Grand Theatre's mandate or focus?

*Rachel Peake (RP):* The mission statement is to be the place to gather where world-class theatre thrives, and our motto line is: "World Curious. London Made." It's partially about the work that happens in our shops. It's about bringing artists to our area to make theatre. But it is also about new play development. So, it's a bit of all of that. Right now, we're really thinking about what it means to be a regional theatre in southwest Ontario and our responsibility to serve both audiences and artists in the area. And so, that's something that we talk a lot about and think a lot about.

*MB:* How often, on average, does the theatre premiere new Canadian plays?

*RP:* I would say under Dennis Garnhum [the Grand's Artistic Director from 2016 to 2023] most seasons they premiered a play. It was an on-going part of what Dennis envisioned. We're in a bit of an interesting period right now because Dennis knew that he was going to be leaving and wanted to wrap up the projects that he had in the works. He wanted to see them through to fruition and then leave the new artistic director to be able to kind of forge their own path, whatever they want to do with that. I've sort of taken a little bit of a hiatus, based a little bit on finances, but a little bit on kind of just getting my feet under me. I have a very strong background in working in new play development. When I was at the Citadel Theatre as the Associate AD, I ran all the new play development initiatives, and I used to run a company in Vancouver that produced

exclusively new Canadian work. So, that is a big part of what I brought in with me in the application for the job. What we're really looking at now is how we reimagine our place as a developer of new Canadian work. Because there were no shows currently in development at the Grand; what that's looked like in my first programming season - and continuing to next season - is second productions of Canadian work.

Lyndee Hansen, the Executive Director, and myself are very big proponents of the need for second runs. There's been a big push about premieres, which is also very important. Not to take away from that at all, but that the craft, the plays themselves, and playwrights as artists, get so much stronger when they get past that first premiere and are able to have a new team take on a work in a new environment. Maybe there's a new design, or maybe it's a continuation of how do we work into that original design concept? So, that's really what the focus has been, but definitely this year we brought in our Artists in the Auburn series, which includes a Playwrights' Lab for local London writers, and we brought Mark Crawford in to do a playwriting workshop. I'm hoping to launch the beginning of what I'm imagining as the new play development program at the Grand next season.

*MB:* What do great plays at the Grand all have in common?

*RP:* It depends because we have two stages and they're very different sizes. Our main stage, the Spry Stage, at the Grand is 839 seats, which is big for regional. (At the Citadel, both the big

houses have almost 700 seats, which is also very big.) And then our studio, the Auburn Developments Stage, has 140 seats. So, those are two very different sizes. And I do think there's a lot of new work that is most happy in a sort of 300-350 seat theatre where it balances both intimacy and enough size to kind of dream big. So, then it's about that the size of the idea needs to be big enough for that space. And that's not to say that a big idea is better than a small idea. I often use the example of the play of *The Humans* [by Stephan Karam], which is a play a lot of regional theatres did. And in some ways, it's a kitchen sink drama, but then it has this bigger idea that exists around it that helps make it make sense in a big space. So, I do encourage playwrights who are pitching things for our big stage to think about that. And then our Auburn Stage is the opposite. It is very small, and it doesn't have a lot of wing space. It invites people to engage with audiences in more exploratory ways. Now, we haven't traditionally commissioned for the smaller space, but we still often do new or newer Canadian work there, and we also present smaller Canadian projects that have happened elsewhere. We bring them into our environment in that small space.

**MB:** How does a playwright get your attention with a new play? Is there a formal submission process?

**RP:** We are not accepting cold submissions right now. I think the best thing for a playwright to do in order to get on my radar... because I also acknowledge that I'm new to Ontario. Most of my career has been in Western Canada. I do have connections here

from when I was interning at Stratford, and I was able to assist Morris Panych on a new musical that he did there. So, you know, I have engaged in new play development out here, but there are many parts I don't yet know. So, I think the best thing is for playwrights to introduce themselves, to reach out to say who they are, to let me know a bit about their producing history, and to begin a conversation that allows me to get to know who they are, and then through that can also say, "I've got a new work that might be of interest. Here's a synopsis and a bit of information about it." That leaves us in a position to say, "Great, we'd love to know more" or "Expand on that." I would also say that the best months to get a hold of me are between April and September. That's when I'm really in the thick of thinking about the future season and I've got a bit more time usually as well.

**MB:** Do you have a sense yet when you'll announce your new play development program?

**RP:** I have a feeling that it's not going to be the sort of thing that will have a big roll-out. I think one of the important things about a play development program is to have shows at many stages in the pipeline, so that we don't have a whole bunch of new commissions at once and then everybody's fighting for resources annually. I think that we're looking at putting out a call for proposals for a commission fairly soon, and then we're going to be continuing and expanding on our artists in the Auburn program and looking at an artist's residency. It's going to be more something that comes out little by little.

*MB:* That's great. To confirm, the Compass New Play Development Program was Dennis' program and so has wrapped up now?

*RP:* Yes, it has.

*MB:* Do you have a sense of how many scripts come across your desk in a year?

*RP:* Yeah, I mean, a lot. Like 200 maybe since I've started. I completely understand playwrights' frustration about not getting their work read. It is really tough, but I also don't have that capacity.

*MB:* No, of course! Do you know how many are submitted by women?

*RP:* Fewer. I mean, there are female playwrights submitting, but is it a third? Is it a quarter of the people who are sending me scripts? Something like that, probably.

*MB:* How long do you think it's appropriate to follow-up after sending in a script?

*RP:* I actually don't mind the follow-up because things do get buried. I would definitely say more than two weeks. I would sort of go in the three or four weeks kind of range.

*MB:* What's the single most important thing you're looking for in a new play?

*RP:* I don't know if I could say one. I mean, I want to be excited by the story. I want to be drawn in by the characters. Any work that I do, for me, is going to be centered on the people inside it and what drives them, what is pushing

them through this story. I do want something new. I want something that I haven't seen before. And I am thinking about, "Is this a story that is exciting and speaks to my audiences?" Which is ephemeral, but definitely something I look at. It's something that I find exciting, that I haven't necessarily seen before.

*MB:* How would you describe the Grand's audiences, and what are some of the things that really resonate with them?

*RP:* I think it has to ignite their imagination in some way. Is that something that speaks to life in southwestern Ontario, specifically? Could be. It isn't necessarily that. I certainly don't want playwrights to only pitch me stories that are set in and around London, though I am also interested in those, but rather stories that transport people. We've had a lot of success with stories that are delightful alternatives to the reality of everyday life. Right now, particularly, people want to have a good time, which isn't to say that they don't want to feel things. It does mean that at the end of the day, they want to leave feeling that there is possibility. So, even if it is a heavy story or has a sad element to it, that in the end, it feels that there's hope.

*MB:* How would a playwright go about getting a second production of a play at the Grand?

*RP:* If they have an agent, they can go through their agent. But, if not, the same sort of getting to know you thing. They can say, "I wrote this play called blah, blah, blah. It was produced at blah, blah, blah. I think it would be something that would really speak to Grand audiences



because of X, Y, or Z, or to audiences in London because of X, Y, or Z, or maybe audiences that we don't currently engage with, but that we could engage with, because we're always looking to connect with new audiences.

*MB:* It's hard to get a first production. It's even harder to get a second production. Do you think that's true? And why or why not?

*RP:* I think there was a major push from funders for new work and premieres. There was a belief that audiences really cared about companies having the world premiere of a show. I don't know if it's still as much of an issue. It might be improving, but I definitely think it's something that when I look at Britain or America, they feel ahead of us on that. Our identity as English-language theatre creators in Canada is younger than it is in some of the English speaking countries around us.

*MB:* Do you have a process for when you're reading a new script?

*RP:* Mostly just that I try to protect the experience of reading it, in that I try and read it all in one go. And I try to make notes right away like just initial things about it. They can be practical things like being struck by a need for a performer who could do X, Y, or Z, but more often it's about the themes that come out. I'm a dramaturg, so often I will have some sort of dramaturgical thoughts in my head when I read it or images or things like that that come out for me.

*MB:* Given that you have experience in musical theatre and in opera, is that something the Grand may also consider as far as new works?

*RP:* I'm certainly not closed off to the idea of developing new musicals. I'm not sure right now we have all the resources in place to do that. We're partnering with Theatre Aquarius on a show this year, *Waitress*, and I do think that they are positioning themselves to sort of take the lead on that, so I would probably be a little less likely to take on a new musical at this stage. I would probably direct them more toward that program.

*MB:* Do you attend stage readings and productions? Is that something you prefer versus reading a script, say if a playwright had one coming up of a script they had in mind?

*RP:* I dream of being able to do more of that, but the honest truth is Toronto's not that far, but it is a significant endeavor for me to go in, and I do have a small child, as well as running a major company. My preference right now is more to read or if people are able to record a reading and send it to me. I'm happy to be invited, if it ever lines up that I'm in Toronto for other reasons. It can be hard to get away.

*MB:* Are there any plays that you've read or seen in the last year that have really excited you?

*RP:* Yeah, I mean, there are some plays I can't talk about that I read that I'm excited about. I really love smart plays that make me feel and make me laugh. And it just brightens my day.

If I read it and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I want to see this play," it doesn't just mean joy. It means the emotional and intellectual journey that it takes me on. There are several season shows for next season that ignited that in me.

There was one of the last shows that Dennis programmed under the Compass program, which was Jordi Mann's *In Seven Days*, which was a co-production with the Harold Green Jewish Theatre. I loved that play so much. I thought it was so beautiful. It was very sad, but so much humor throughout it, and it left me feeling hope based on both an intellectual and emotional understanding of our place in the world and the cycle of life. It left me feeling fulfilled in many ways.



**Madeleine Brown** is a playwright and actor. Recent productions include *Margaret Reid* (Here For Now Theatre) and *Give 'em Hell* (Theatre Direct/4th Line Theatre/Prairie Fire, Please). She was a recipient of the Ellen Ross Stuart "Opening Doors" Award and a member of Driftwood Theatre's Beyond the Bard Playwrights Unit and 4th Line Theatre's Interdisciplinary Residency Program. She is Theatre Direct's Next Draft Producer and a volunteer with L'Arche Toronto Sol Express and Loran Scholars Foundation. Outside of theatre, she performs stand-up around Toronto, including as co-producer and co-host of *Ladies First Open Mic* and *Ladies First Comedy SHEbang!* (@LadiesFirstTO). Madeleine is a graduate of U of T Mississauga/Sheridan College, the Second City Training Centre, and CB Pro. Check out her website for more info at: [thatmadeleinebrown.com](http://thatmadeleinebrown.com)