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Interview with Heather Cant,
Artistic Director of
Persephone Theatre

Conducted by Karin Doucette
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Heather Cant is a multi-faceted theatre practitioner who works as a director, actor, playwright, dramaturg, and producer. Heather's work has taken her across Canada, with everything from large scale productions to interactive micro-performance. She has an MFA from the University of Calgary, where she developed "Process-As-Relation," an anti-imperial paradigm for centering intersectional empathy in creation practices.

Heather has formerly been the Associate Artistic Director of Western Canada Theatre and Artistic Producer of Project X Theatre. Currently, she lives in Saskatoon where she has been the Artistic Director of Persephone Theatre since the autumn of 2021.

Karin Doucette (KD): Thanks for making time to talk Heather. It's great to meet you. Let's kick off with understanding the mandate and focus of Persephone Theatre.

Heather Cant (HC): I'm always glad to talk about Persephone Theatre and its impact in Saskatoon and throughout the region. As a regional theatre, we try to serve the community as a whole. That's a pretty broad ambition, and it's important. Of course, we can't be all things to all people, and we can only do so many shows per season, but we do present a broad catchment of styles, genres, representations, and content to satisfy our community's diverse demographic.

We have 421 seats in the Rawlco Radio Hall and 150 in the Backstage black box space. For a main stage this size, the theatre is actually intimate. The main stage is elevated so the first-row audience sits below the edge of the stage. The actors feel like they have the audience in the palm of their hands and people in the audience don't have to worry about where they sit because every seat feels close.

For an artistic community to be feasible you have to invest in local artists. Persephone is over fifty years old, has a great venue, stable funding, and is in a position to support local area artists to grow. There's a lot of incredible work happening here and we prioritize prairie artists in every way we can. Persephone does a season which includes a main stage series (via subscription) and a youth series. We have a theatre school and a Young Company whose students also do productions, and we have a robust mentoring program for emerging and

early career artists. Some of our local artists have built their entire theatre career here on the prairies; others have gone to a larger centre, like Vancouver or Toronto for a time, before deciding to come back and make Saskatchewan their homebase.

KD: That's impressive! How often does Persephone premiere new Canadian plays?

HC: That's always been part of our programming; every AD at Persephone has shared this commitment. I take a long-game approach and don't put a particular number on each season: it depends on when a play is ready, and when the rest of the programming can support the work. I'm in frequent conversations with playwrights. Whether it's because we've commissioned a piece, or I'm interested in them as artists, or their idea resonates but I'm not yet sure when it could be programmed, I enjoy connecting with playwrights to talk about their work and whether Persephone can be a home for their work. Premiering a new play is a process that needs to work for everyone involved, including the playwright. I don't prioritize frequency over a piece being the right fit, right time, right people. I want a new play's entry into the world to be as successful as possible and go on to have a life beyond Persephone Theatre.

KD: That makes me wonder what great plays at your theatre have in common?

HC: Difficult to say! Plays are unique, as is the relationship between artist and play, audience and play. The word *great* is difficult for me to address. If you mean what makes a box office

hit, well, even then people come to the theatre for different reasons. Some want to have an exceptional time and be entertained. Some want a richer experience woven from talent, depth of discussion, content, and intermingling of laughter with seeing themselves in the work. A comedy that allows them to have an uproarious time will always do well; but we also premiere work that is deeply reflective or involves a spectacle our audiences love.

KD: Let's talk about your process a bit. How does a playwright get your attention with a new play? Do you have a submission policy?

HC: We do accept unsolicited scripts. A playwright can just email me (heather.c@persephonetheatre.org) and start a conversation. I want to know what they have to share and I'll add it to the reading list. It's a pretty deep list right now! But if someone sends a script, I commit to reading it – not just the first five or so pages, but the entirety. Some people feel that if the first few pages don't grab you, move on. But I'm a writer, too, and I think, what if the play starts in Act 2 vs the first five and the playwright doesn't know that yet? This ties back to your earlier question about premiering works. It's one thing to produce a play that's tried-and-true/the kinks are worked out. But when a company is committed to premiering new works, I think they need to be actively involved in conversations during the early development stages as well. So, while it takes me some time to get through the script pile, I do read everything but I only get back to the writer if it's something I feel has potential for Persephone. Local writers, I do tend to give feedback to, since we have a community

relationship, but I don't have the capacity to do that for everyone, unfortunately. I really would like to be more responsive, but I also have to make time to read published plays. Bottom line, I am a passionate advocate for plays and playwrights. There is always a big focus on premieres, but those plays also need to have a future, so my advocacy extends to telling other ADs about a piece I think has promise for their theatre; that's part of our regular conversations as ADs.

KD: Do you personally prefer to read a play in its early stages, or when it is further along?

HC: It depends on my relationship with the playwright. Some share their work in early stages because they want feedback and our relationship is such that I can openly give it. I most often read work in the early stages because the relationship makes it possible to give feedback they're looking for. I recognize that the feedback I give in early stages could be detrimental to the path a playwright wants to be on, or hasn't yet realized they need to be on, if they're not actually open to the feedback or I don't understand their goals. That's why the relationship piece between us is important – trust is integral. If neither of us is that familiar with the other, I'd worry about being overly influential and veering them off their intended path because my role as an AD may be overly persuasive. Some playwrights stand firm in themselves, know what they want, and can filter feedback, but that's not everyone. I will say that for most unsolicited scripts, the playwrights think they are ready for production and then my perusal of the script is focused on whether or not I agree.

KD: Approximately how many new scripts come across your desk each year?

HC: I don't actually count that, but I will say the current pile is very large but because it's mostly digital, I can't measure its height.

KD: Do you have a rough sense of how many are submitted by women playwrights?

HC: I can accurately say that the number of women pitching me is significantly less than men. That's true for every discipline, not just playwrights. It's probably reflective of theatre being historically a more male-dominated sector, but it could potentially also reflect whether a playwright feels Persephone Theatre, or me as AD, is the right home for their work.

KD: What process do you go through when reading new scripts?

HC: It's not formal. I struggle to find dedicated reading time; it's one of the big things I'm trying to carve out in my schedule. I have reading piles here at the theatre, at home, and on my computer. They're all accessible to me at any time. I do tend to read a script in one sitting. That's how an audience experiences the show, so it's my preferred way to read a script.

KD: How soon after a playwright submits a script is it appropriate for them to give you a follow-up call/email. And do you prefer a phone call or an email?

HC: I always prefer email unless we have set up

a meeting. As to the timeline, I tell people, "I can't give you a time as to when I will read your piece," but it's never an inconvenience to email and check in on the status or give me information about how things going for you as an artist. For instance, you might be having a reading, or maybe you received a grant, or are training in a new capacity. A personal promo is always informative. Just know that when you do touch base, it doesn't necessarily mean I'll have read your play. I truly can't provide a timeline, just the promise to read it. It's never a hindrance to communicate with me and I try to be responsive, but I receive a lot of email, so it can take a while sometimes. Be assured that: 1) I will read it; and 2) if I think it has potential for Persephone Theatre, I will be in touch. That's my approach with all theatre artists, not just playwrights. There's a lot going on, everyone's busy doing amazing things and it's hard to stay abreast of it. But our very large country has a very small theatre community and it's important to keep in touch.

KD: Do you prefer an invitation to a staged reading or a production, rather than reading a new script?

HC: I love to go to staged readings and productions as well as read new scripts. I live in Saskatoon; so much happens outside this province! I do my best to attend, to read, or to go online for virtual experiences.

KD: Playwrights often note that it's hard to get a first production for a new play but even harder to get a second production of the same work. Do you think this is true?

HC: Yes, I think it's true. For many historic reasons, Canadian theatre emphasizes premiering new work. But the second production is equally important because that's when the artist makes a mark in the greater canon of work. Second productions are sometimes not viewed as the 'sexy' option but that's where the playwright begins to realize their creative and financial returns on investment!

KD: How might a playwright go about getting a second production with your company? Is that something you do?

HC: Yes, of course, we do that. We premiere new plays and also do plays that have been done before. We commit to Canadian work, but not exclusively. The second production process isn't any different from that of a premiere, really. If you have a great play that's a good fit for Persephone Theatre, it doesn't matter if it's a premiere or not, I want to hear about it.

KD: What is the single most important thing you are looking for in a new play?

HC: As a regional theatre we consider a lot of genres, themes, etc. What I look for is a piece that is socially reflective, funny, and offers a great opportunity for our local theatre community to showcase their skills.

KD: Are there favorite themes, issues, styles, or genres that currently appeal to you the most?

HC: No, we do a wide variety.

KD: What play or plays did you read or see in the last year that really excited you?

HC: We have some new work in development and more coming. One play we premiered (in February 2024) was *18 Jews Order Chinese food*, by local playwright Jenna Berenbaum. It grew from a 10-minute piece to a one-act then two-act play before we produced it on our main stage. Right now, what I'm most excited about are those scripts with programming potential for the future; it's exciting to be on a development journey with a playwright and know that their hard work will soon be front and centre on stage.

KD: Help us to understand the demographic of your audience base and its age, gender, racialization?

HC: We are a Canadian regional theatre. Persephone Theatre's audience base has been staunch supporters from the beginning, 51 years ago. We also run a youth series, so we have new generations of patrons, performers, technicians, and other theatre artists all the time. Last season, we offered a show for audiences as young as 18 months. We like to introduce our audiences to theatre when they are young and to grow life-long theatre lovers. Like most regional theatres, audiences are often older and predominantly women, but Saskatoon has a diverse community, and our theatre-going audience is always changing.

KD: What plays have been popular with them in the past?

HC: You can't make everyone happy; what one person calls their favorite play of all time, another person didn't like, and others are everything in between. When I came on board as AD at Persephone, I thought this kind of range in response would be an anomaly, but it's true for every show. That's the subjectivity of theatre. I like to have those conversations with audiences; I love audiences who say, "I didn't like it, but I appreciate it." That means they recognize the skills, time, and other aspects that make a production come together, even if it wasn't their cup of tea. We're often too quick to dismiss the live performing arts in ways we don't dismiss other art forms, such as film. So, I appreciate a self-aware audience. After all, you might not like a book, but that doesn't mean it's a bad book; someone else might love it.

KD: On a personal note, can I say that you come across as a high-energy woman with boundless patience and a passion for theatre. What keeps you working in the theatre world?

HC: The people. Working with artists, staff, production teams, the audience... It's a community I am proud to be a part of and one I believe in. People who make and support the arts are deeply invested in curiosity. I am, too.

KD: We have covered a great deal in this discussion, Heather. Is there anything you would like to add?

HC: At Persephone, we want this theatre to be rooted in the community through connection and intention; it's not just a place to buy tickets to see plays. We do a lot of programming that is not revenue-generating, too; for example, we work with a local company, SUM Theatre, to produce First Monday, a development program that presents seven to eight staged readings of new plays by Saskatchewan playwrights each season. There's the Pomegranate Art Gallery for local visual artists to exhibit their work, and the David Edney Community Library has plays and technical books to borrow. We think of ourselves as a cultural hub in the city.

Most theatre artists in Canada are working in multiple disciplines and/or multiple geographic locations in order to create a sustainable career. That's celebrated here in Saskatoon! The country may be big, but our national theatre community is small. Saskatchewan has an incredibly talented and thriving theatre scene, and everyone should put it on their bucket list for a place to visit and to see and make plays!



Karin Doucette (she/her/elle) is a playwright and internationally published short fiction writer. A PEI native who is currently living in Ontario, Karin has travelled on every continent as well as lived in US, Europe, Australia, and Asia during an adventurous corporate career.

She has written three plays, currently unproduced. *The Virgin's Daughter* (two acts) was performed virtually in 2021 through the University of Toronto SCS with Canadian actress Elva Mai Hoover and Toronto playwright Natasia Pappas-Kemps in the lead roles. *Clary and Alice* (three acts) reached the quarterfinals of ScreenCraft's 2023 Stage Play competition and was ranked internationally in the "Top 16% of 4,313 Stage Play Projects" by Coverfly. Mark Brownell, a Toronto-based playwright and co-artistic director of the Pea Green Theatre Group, mentored Karin in completing both works. Her third play, *The Butterfly Rose* (one act), was completed at the 2025 Sage Hill Playwriting Lab, mentored by the Governor General's Literary Award winner, Vern Thiessen.

