

PGC WOMEN'S CAUCUS NEWSLETTER

Interview with Mike Payette, Artistic Director of Tarragon Theatre

Conducted by Lindsay Kyte
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Born in Tiotià:ke (Montréal), Quebec, Mike Payette has worked as a director, actor, and educator for many years, and in theatres from coast to coast. As an actor, he has performed with some of the country's finest companies, such as The Citadel, Vertigo Theatre, Manitoba Theatre for Young People, Banff, Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, Repercussion Theatre, Segal Centre, Centaur Theatre, The Grand, Factory Theatre, Neptune Theatre, the National Arts Centre, and more.

Mike is a two-time Montreal English Theatre Award (META) recipient. He was the Artistic and Executive Director of the TYA company, Geordie Theatre, and prior to that, he was a co-founding Artistic Director of Tableau D'Hôte Theatre, as well as the past Assistant Artistic Director for Black Theatre Workshop. A frequent guest artist at the National Theatre School of Canada, Mike has served on several boards, including the Quebec Drama Federation, la Maison Théâtre, MAI, and on the Executive of PACT.

Mike has been the Artistic Director of the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, Ontario since 2021.

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

Mike Payette (MP): We are a playwright's theatre, and we develop and produce new work, and we've been doing so for fifty years. We are equally a production company, as well as a creation hub.

LK: What do great shows at your theatre have in common?

MP: First and foremost, our shows are story-centric. They're productions that open-up the scope of artistic form when it comes to the wide breadth of dramaturgical process — and through the many lenses of the Canadian experience, Canadian identity, or Canadian storytellers. All of the work that we develop and produce has that curiosity of opening-up artistic form — what are the ways in which storytelling can translate to theatre? Sometimes that includes embracing other disciplines or artistic forms, like musical dramaturgy, or Indigenous dramaturgy, or physical movement production dramaturgy — all towards creating deeply resonant and sensorial pieces of theatre.

Our work has historically been based on the text first, but the definition of “playwright” has expanded so much as the evolution of Canadian theatre practice has continued. And the scope of voices that are introduced or welcomed into a theatre like Tarragon has evolved as well. If you are opening-up the scope of voices, then you are ultimately opening-up the scope of storytelling.

In our spaces, we have an intergenerational and inter- and intracultural perspective. Our

programming seeks to share stories that encourage connection to the world as our backdrop. What is urgent? How does this work consider the complexity of the human condition?

We embrace both the established playwright, as well as the emerging playwright, and you will see the wide gamut of those artists presented, produced, and developed in our theatre.

LK: How often does Tarragon premiere new Canadian works?

MP: The majority of our programming is premieres. We are here to be a home for the playwright to thrive in and have resources. Tarragon is synonymous with the notion of Canadian “big T” theatre when it comes to new work, and we want to make sure that legacy continues towards the next generation and that our content is fueling the next chapter of our understanding of Canadian theatre creation.

There's absolutely value in international perspectives and we love influences from around the world. When we say, “Canadian work,” it's not denoting the conversation or the geography within the play itself — it's about the playwright's connection to that, regardless of where a story takes place. But at this particular moment, we have been affectionately considered an antithesis to the perceived over-popularization of stories that are not necessarily bred from our own backyard, and that's encouraging given the challenges of solely producing new work in our current climate. If we continue to generate, support, and develop in this area, the future of Canadian work is a lot brighter.

LK: Can you tell us about your submission process?

MP: We typically don't take unsolicited scripts, as it says on the website. We're really fortunate to have a host of residencies and my associate Artistic Director, Jeff Ho, also serves as the coordinator of all of our new play development processes, including support for myself and other staff members. Sometimes, we might be able to offer a reading or workshop support, so that we're still supporting an artist, even if we're not able to actually produce their work.

We have many ways in which playwrights can be engaged with us: one is through our awards that range from supporting emerging artists to hyper-established artists, and all the awards have cash value and associated resources in terms of time, space, and dramaturgical support. We do commissions that can run the gamut. If it's a playwright who has some foundation in this industry and has this really awesome idea, it's not unlikely that they might get a commission. Support usually starts with a seed idea to work towards a draft, and then continuing the work over two or three seasons with the hope of an eventual production. We also do the OAC Recommender Grants.

We have a few consistent anchors that help guide which plays we develop/produce and when. The piece has to exude or have the potential for high artistic value for the artists and audiences. It must have impact. It must have impact for the playwright, so that means the playwright is investigating other forms that challenge their own practice and could invite

interdisciplinary components, although we're not an interdisciplinary company. We also like offering experiences for the audience that are hyper-theatrical. I wouldn't say always immersive, but definitely sensorial.

Another large consideration is community impact — so, the communities that the work itself is tied into or wanting to connect to, whether that be from a cultural, class, or generational lens. Communities that might not have felt connected to theatre... does it invite them in?

We are a company that, when we say yes to something, we go full in, so it's an investment of time and space and dramaturgy, and so we want to make sure that it's a meaningful experience for the playwright, and all artists really.

We also consider care. This sometimes relates to staff in terms of our capacity. Like, if you're going to give me a twenty-person musical, chances are, I'm not going to necessarily close the door on it, but we can't fit twenty people on our stage, so there's a practical aspect to it. So, in relationship to the rest of programming or the rest of the resources, can we actually support it? So, we think of care for the staff, care for the artists. If we're going to do something, then we want to do it right.

Then, we go a bit deeper and ask how we serve the artist. We also have to serve the audience. We have to serve the community at large. And we have to take care of our staff. So again, we will look at the plays that can tap all of these.

If it's an opportunity for you to dive into the development of your piece, it will move audiences in ways that are real and honest to what you see, it will invite new communities to experience theatre, and will get the whole team excited, let's talk about it.

LK: Can you tell us about your educational and professional development programs?

MP: We've leaned into the professional development and community engagement component of art making to support our foundations as a development and creation hub. So, that means we also need to foster discussion and create environments in which we're talking about the art, or we're building upon our own expertise within the art itself. We have courses, like Brian Quirt's playwriting and dramaturgy course, and we have a young playwrights' unit, and we just started a seniors' playwriting unit last year. We had an Indigenous dramaturgy circle that we created and that was more of an opportunity for folks from different nations from all over the country to gather and share knowledge about their own discipline and how they create and connect with community.

LK: What's the demographic of your audience?

MP: It is historically middle class, typically white, and fifty plus, which is what I came into. But I just had a conversation with a colleague about the programmatic work that we do and how it is a reflection of how the audience has evolved. There's a lot more first-timers coming, like single ticket buyers, which has offered demographic diversity. I can't quite say that the

pendulum has swung away from what our traditional loyal audiences have been, and nor do I want it to. It's about an expansion. It's not about a replacement. But now we have a hyper intercultural audience. We have young people coming. We have a family series as well. We even have babies. We're actively building relationships with family programming in particular. We do classes with our universities, so we're getting the student population coming to see our shows more often.

LK: Are you open to pitches for TYA?

MP: We're not a TYA company, so I'll just say that right off the bat. And I say that having run a TYA company before I moved to Toronto. That being said, when it comes to the family series in particular, what we consider are works that are geared towards youth and families. So that might be in a traditional TYA capacity, like it's a play, or it might be in a workshop type of situation, like a drama workshop. It might be in puppetry or dance. So, it's work that is geared towards younger than twelve and families. But no, we don't do TYA in terms of our main stages.

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

MP: We're doing our first original musical now called *After the Rain* [co-created by Rose Napoli and Suzy Wilde], and it's our first collaboration with Musical Stage Company, and it's a big one. We've done musicals before, and we've done plays with heavy musical components. I would say there's no barrier there.

LK: Are you open to playwrights just having a Zoom call with you? And, are you open to pitches from outside of Toronto and Ontario?

MP: The short answer is yes. We engage local artists, certainly, but when it comes to playwrights, we have a national mandate. I love it all. The country's so big. We love our East Coasters. We love our West Coasters. Their work resonates so richly.

LK: After playwrights have submitted to you, what's a good timeline for follow-up?

MP: We're pretty good with responding once we received it. And Jeff is really great with it.

I would say if you haven't heard anything in two, three months, go ahead and contact us. It's probably related to times in the season. Like, in the spring, it's insane. August or September is probably a better time to make a pitch for the start of a relationship in the next season.

LK: Is there anything you wanted to add?

MP: Playwrights are amazing and we love them. And we know that there are lots of stories that deserve to be told. Don't be discouraged when you don't necessarily get that initial response that you need. That's not an indication to stop trying. Keep at it. You're respected. We need you!



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

