

## Inside

- 1 **Editor's Note**  
by Pam Bustin
- 2 **Towards a National Theatre: A Manifesto**  
by Vern Thiessen
- 3 **The Conversation:**  
Vern Thiessen  
Kelley Jo Burke
- 10 **The Lay of the Land: What's up at Persephone Theatre**  
by Pam Bustin
- 13 **Questions for a Playwright**  
Kenneth T. Williams
- 14 **Out There in the Real World**  
by Eugene Stickland
- 15 **SHORT SHOT:**  
**A Touch of Grace**  
By Wendy Lockman
- 18 **Inside/Out: Mapping Divergence in Search of Unity**  
By Madeleine Dahlem
- 19 **MEMBER RANT:**  
**To Stand or Not to Stand**  
by Pam Bustin
- KUDOS**
- 9 **2009 SPC Member Productions**
- 19 **Spring Festival 2010**
- 20 **OUR SPONSORS**

CHECK OUT our WEBSITE for  
 Ongoing NEWS and EVENTS

[www.saskplaywrights.ca](http://www.saskplaywrights.ca)



*Bite the Hand (by Mansel Robinson): Robert Benz, Kent Allen, Jacklyn Green, and Caitlyn Vancoughnett. Photographer Peter Christensen. Photo courtesy of Persephone Theatre.*

### Bigger and... Bitey—er!

Welcome to the new expanded version of PlayWORKS! Our aim with this issue is to get the conversation going. We didn't set out to bite anyone's hands – but we wanted to get people talking – about playwrighting, about Theatre in Canada, about... anything!

I went to the membership to see what you all wanted to hear about & talk about. You wanted to hear from SPC members and alumni and you wanted to start talking about how we work and how we get our work out into the world. So, I set out to explore both fronts – internal and external.

My thanks to the playwrights who jumped in to start mapping out the territory with me.

Vern Thiessen kicks us off with his Manifesto – *Towards a National Theatre* and he and Kelley Jo Burke volunteered for our pilot Conversation.

I envision future conversations with playwrights, dramaturgs, directors,

designers and anyone else we want hear from. For this first round, we used Vern's Manifesto and questions from members to get the convo going.

Eugene Stickland offers up his article *Out There in the Real World*, in which he echoes Vern's call to get our work OUT into the world – meaning beyond Canadian borders.

Madeleine Dahlem is hard at work on two plays these days and she gives us a look inside her creative process with *Inside Out*.

New member, Wendy Lockman, offers up a new play, *Touch of Grace*, for our new Short Shot feature.

Kenneth T. Williams answered our Questions to a Playwright.

I stopped by for a chat with Del Surjik at Persephone Theatre, and I commandeered the Member's Rant space to air my current grievances about... standing ovations.

Let's get talking.

— Pam

# Towards a National Theatre – A Manifesto

By Vern Thiessen

- 1) Every great nation has a National Theatre.
- 2) A National Theatre is not a building.
- 3) A National Theatre is a recognized canon of work.
- 4) A National Theatre must live forever.
- 5) Everything in the theatre dies except the written script.
- 6) The written play is the centre of any National Theatre.
- 7) To launch a National Theatre, masterpieces must be identified.
- 8) To foster a National Theatre, these masterpieces must be studied at all levels of education.
- 9) To cultivate a National Theatre, new work must be produced alongside these masterpieces.
- 10) To harvest a National Theatre, publishers, producers and adapters must make these masterpieces accessible to the entire population.
- 11) To sustain a National Theatre, new work and masterpieces must be exported to other countries.
- 12) When seven Canadian playwriting masterpieces are identified, the National Theatre will be launched. At least two of these writers are women. At least one writer is Aboriginal. At least two writers are French. At least two writers are dead.
- 13) When the majority of Canadian high school graduates can name a Canadian play or playwright, a National Theatre will be fostered.
- 14) When a majority of all plays produced by a majority of Canadian theatres are written by Canadian playwrights, a National Theatre will be cultivated.
- 15) When a majority of all plays produced in Canada are translated into English, French, an Aboriginal language, or adapted into other mediums, a National Theatre will be accessible.
- 16) When Canadian plays (masterpieces and new) are consistently produced around the world, a National Theatre will have been exported.
- 17) Three groups are responsible for a National Theatre: Playwrights for developing & writing great plays; Producers for staging, maintaining, and exporting the ever-growing canon; Citizens (*i.e.* audience, public funders, educators, and the private sector) for financial and cultural support.
- 18) A National Theatre is the legacy of every great nation.
- 19) A National Theatre is the memory of every great nation.
- 20) In order to survive, Canada must have a National Theatre.

# The Conversation

The Players:

**Kelley Jo Burke [KJB]:** An award-winning playwright and poet, a director, storyteller, documentarian, and broadcaster. She was born in Gardner, Massachusetts, because her hometown, Westminister, Mass. was too small to get born in and she currently lives in Regina SK. Her plays have been produced and published in Canada, and around the world, including her stage plays, *Special*, *The Selkie Wife*, *Jane's Thumb*, and *Charming and Rose: True Love*, and her radio play *Big Ocean*.

She dramaturgs, directs and produces for stage and radio, is the host/producer of CBC Saskatchewan's radio art performance hour, *SoundXchange*, and has written and produced a number of documentaries for CBC Radio's *Ideas*. She is the 2009 winner of the Saskatchewan Lieutenant-Governor's Award for Leadership in the Arts.

**Pam Bustin [PB]:** PlayWorks 2010 editor. Pam has been a member of the SPC since 1994 and has served two terms as president. Her produced plays include *Saddles in the Rain*, *barefoot* and *The Passage of Georgia O'Keefe*. She's had three radio dramas aired on CBC Radio and her novel, *Mostly Happy*, won the First Book and Fiction awards at the Saskatchewan Book Awards (2008).

**Vern Thiessen [VT]:** Whoring Scribe. Born in Winnipeg, currently living in NYC. Vern was on the SPC board a million years ago (mid '90s) and is one of Canada's most produced playwrights. His stage plays have been seen across Canada, the US and Europe, including *Shakespeare's Will*, *Apple*, *Einstein's Gift*, *Blowfish*, *The Resurrection Of John Frum* and *Vimy*. He has written for stage, radio

and television.

Thiessen is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Award for Outstanding New Play, The City of Edmonton Arts Achievement Award, the University of Alberta Alumni Award for Excellence, The Canadian Jewish Playwriting Competition, and the Governor General's Literary Award, Canada's highest honour for playwriting. He has also been shortlisted for the prestigious Siminovitch Prize in Theatre.

**PB:** Welcome to the first PlayWORKS Conversation! Let's dive right in. What's your current bugaboo or pet peeve about anything related to Theatre?

**VT:** Where to start? The communications between playwrights and theatres in Canada is getting worse and worse. Now I get a lot of productions, and I ain't complaining, and this may sound snotty, but I have FRIENDS who won't return my calls or emails or even acknowledge communication from one of my three agents. So I really am concerned, not only for myself, but more importantly, for younger playwrights starting out.

**KJB:** I think the thing that really gets me about Theatre (as opposed to theatre) is the dichotomy between "worthy" work (that is grant-able, because it hits some goal set by a funding agency) and "commercial". Because often as not, and there are glorious exceptions, if you want to be able to feed yourself (not well mind you, just pay your way) with money made on your play work, you have to write one of those two things.

You know, I think if we could all just write playable comedies

that folks could bring their parents to, we'd get staged. Or if we all wrote docu-dramas, based on true Canadian atrocities, preferably somewhat past, we'd all get funded, a premiere, and a very small royalty cheque from a publisher that would then gobble up. And if we all wrote comic musicals, that touched on a true Canadian atrocity, but lightly, and then lifted our hearts with song, while things fell out of the ceiling, we could retire.

But what if writing those things isn't what we're passionate about? Writing without passion is, by definition, lousy writing. It can be competent, and engaging even. It can be a "good" play, but if we're writing without our whole souls and "all our stars out" (Salinger) then it's lousy writing.

And who wants to spend a short life being lousy at what they love?

And I'm not talking about me. I did exactly what Jason said I had to do in his article in This Magazine [*Scenes from My Last Play: Why Governor General's Award winning playwright Jason Sherman is in television now*]. I went and hosted a radio show — so I could have a family, and a home, and food, and still be a playwright (in my spare moments). I'm talking about others — great playwrights, who can't find avenues to make their work live, and who live hand to mouth and without many attachments, so they can make those avenues, for little or no money.

And I don't blame the theatres, because they've been put in a

position where they have to make money on every show...

And I don't blame the audiences, because they've had no opportunity to develop a palate for non-branded work...

Maybe I just want something to happen for plays the way it happened for books. I want Oprah to make going to plays (as opposed to wildly expensive musicals) COOL, and talked about, and not so... last century,

**VT:** Well I can only say that I have written the grantable stuff and I have written the musicals and I have written the comedies and what happened? No one wants to do them.

It's been tough to get theatres in Canada to do *VIMY*, if you can imagine that, and every theatre says they want a comedy and when you give them one they won't do it.

I've been thinking about creating a phoney playwright from Arkansas because I think then my comedy will get produced.

What are my most produced plays? *APPLE*, a play about sex and death, and *EINSTEIN'S GIFT*, a play about an obscure scientist. So the problem isn't the material, I don't think.

The problem is the theatres in Canada. Period. I DO blame them, for not creating relationships with playwrights.

And I blame the playwrights for not marketing outside of Canada. It's a big world, and we have to think bigger than our country. Because the lack of artistic leadership at MOST (not all) theatres in Canada

is appalling.

I totally agree with Kelley Jo on the Oprah thing. That's why I created the idea of seven masterpieces.

I really do believe that if we want to move forward we have to have a national strategy, something on CBC, something in the public, to get a conversation going. At the very least, we should try it as (a) a party game and (b) at the provincial and national levels of orgs (*e.g.* Playwrights Guild of Canada [PGC] and provincial Play Development Centres [PDCs]).

**PB:** Here here! I really appreciate you letting us use the Manifesto to get the convo going and I hope that this conversation can kick off others. I really do want us ALL to dive into the issues you bring up, but there are sort of two things I need to do with this first conversation — get us all thinking about the big picture and also toss out some more “basic” or “personal” questions sent in by SPC members. Members are very curious about how different playwrights work — the individual creative process. I'm hoping if we start that conversation there, we can move on out from the personal into a wider discussion about theatre in Canada.

So, Let's take it back to the very beginning — how do you each develop a play?

**KJB:** I draw it first. Arcs. Graphs. Set ideas. Then I start writing poems from character profiles I've been working on. When I start hearing the characters' voices actually talk to each other in my head, I start to

write.

I read every draft it out loud. Always. Sounds simple, but it saves all kinds of grief. If possible, I write it out loud — I have dictation software. It's better for me than having my hands get between the blank page and the words I hear in my head.

Next, I read it to someone I trust intimately. Out loud. Then I go and re-write. A lot.

There's a point, during all this drafting and re-writing, where I have to try to get access to a good dramaturg. Until I am sure about what the arc of the story actually is, who's carrying it, I can spin my wheels forever on clever scripting — so a dramaturg who really knows me, knows my blind spots, and asks questions that will lead me to see them, is really helpful.

Then, I prefer a physical workshop. I am less interested in the actor's voices, than in whether they know where to move, based on the script. In early dramaturgy, I'm looking at the flow of ideas, and emotions, the underlying structure, rather than the text.

I find that once I sort out the blocks in my understanding — that is, the things that I assume to be true and evident, that really aren't in the text yet — the words start correcting themselves.

**VT:** I've developed a system, for myself, that involves manufacturing consent. I usually interest a certain company, and/or director and develop it with them (and sometimes designers/actors) over

a number of years until a theatre is hard-pressed NOT to produce it. It takes time, effort, marketing skills, publicity, and arm-twisting that goes far beyond writing the play.

I also work on commission a lot. It's a ton of work, but I figure it's better than working at McDonalds.

**PB:** When do you invite others into the process, and WHO do you invite in?

**VT:** I use dramaturgs at various points, and workshops, but the key thing is to be IN CONTROL, to TAKE RESPONSIBILITY for your own development, rather than relying on other orgs and people.

It depends on where I am in the process and the play. Sometimes, people come in early after the first draft. Sometimes I don't let them in until much later. It depends on the play, the theatre and what I need to fulfil the needs of the play.

**KJB:** For me, it's the dramaturg first, then actors for a blocking workshop, then a director. The director deals with set and music, but there's always a lot in my script about what the emotive effect of the design might be.

**PB:** Do you work with a specific dramaturg — or a variety?

**VT:** Again, it depends on the play. Sometimes, it's one dramaturg all the way through, but usually, it's many people. Not all dramaturgs have the same skills. So, early on, I may want someone who's good with seeing the POTENTIAL; other dramaturgs are good with staging ideas and theatricality; others are

good for text issues and logic.

The question is what/who does the play need to get better?

**KJB:** I've worked with a number of different dramaturgs. My favourites have been people who were very personal in their reactions to my characters — who loved them, saw themselves as the characters' advocates, and really fought for the best text for them. Because then I trusted them — we had the same goal, and it was more important than egos, or anything else.

That being said, as a dramaturg, I always see my role as simply being one of removing impediments. I try to know the artist well, get a sense of their process and challenges, and talk a lot about the play they want to write. Then, I try to identify what in their process is blocking getting that written. I do a better job of that when I love the characters or the story ...when it really matters to me that they get home, and on stage safe. I really see dramaturgy as a close relative of midwifery—midwives have all kinds of technical training in how to prevent things from going wrong in a birth, but are professionally committed to supporting and facilitating the mother's vision of the birth. They also bring life experience, compassion and love for the process into the room. And, in the end, while the midwife is the mom's advocate with everybody else, she is finally the baby's advocate with the mom. A healthy birth is the goal.

Dramaturgs have all the technical training for facilitating new work, but for me they also have to bring

life wisdom, compassion, and a kind of love too — a willingness to be not only my advocate with everybody else, but also the script's advocate with me. A healthy play has to be the goal — just healthy and itself and nothing else. No other agenda. Or they're not for me. And, I suspect, I'm not for them.

There is nothing as a dramaturg that I love more than hearing the play whose possibilities I first heard on the page, come alive on the stage. And there's nothing as a playwright that I love more than the dramaturg that was part of that happening.

**PB:** What do you get from a dramaturg? What is their role? Does it shift from play to play?

**VT:** I use them. They are tools to be used. They are people to call when the plumbing doesn't work, or the roof is falling in, or if I need a landscaping job. I wouldn't hire the same person to do all those jobs.

I rarely see them as collaborators (sometimes, but rarely) but I do see them as important colleagues and INSTRUMENTAL to the theatre community at large. In the LARGER picture, a good dramaturg is critical to seeing your play through to a production at a particular theatre. Or passing on your scripts to other theatres. It's not ONLY about the script, but the larger business of the theatre.

**KJB:** It always shifts... depending on where the script is. But at every stage, I need someone I trust, who really knows about how things work on stage, who is outside

of the space between my ears...and therefore has perspective, and sanity.

I'll go back to the midwife comparison. In my second birth, my son was in trouble, and they needed me not to push...well... that's incredibly difficult at certain points in the procedure, and I wasn't paying attention...the nurse tried to stop me, the doctor brought in was yelling at me—

*SFX: Hospital beeps, carts being rolled quickly, a young doctor shouting in the background.*

But my midwife, who I trusted completely, took my hand and whispered in my ear:

Midwife: Kelley, I want you to squeeze my hand. Squeeze it as hard as you like. Break my hand if you need to...but DO NOT PUSH.

And I didn't. And my kid didn't die

*SFX: Little cry, sound of KJ's partner fainting.*

I knew that she wouldn't ask anything of me if it wasn't necessary. That's how much trust I want with my dramaturg. That's how personal the relationship is for me.

**PB:** What part do workshops play in your process? When do you need one? What do you get from them? What is your job in the workshop room?

**VT:** Your job in the workshop is to make the script better. Nothing else.

BUT, the PURPOSE of a workshop may be different every time. It may

be to hear the play, or to try staging, or to try out working with a certain director, or to audition the play for a theatre.

There are many purposes to workshops, but once it starts, in the room, you have only one task: make the play better.

**KJB:** Like I said—I prefer standing workshops—I can see the problems with the script structure best when I can see that actors don't know where to move.

Recently, I discovered that the very best way to edit the text down, in the final round of the process, it to have to memorize and play it yourself. Man, do you hear the clunkers quick when YOU have to make them work!

**PB:** (chuckles) I know what you mean. I took my one-woman shows, barefoot and Georgia on the road, too. Doing a long run will totally help you work out some kinks. Speaking of ... going on the road and other ways to pay rent...

How do you survive – cash wise?

**KJB:** I did what Jason said (and got another gig)—I got a job hosting a radio show. And became a dramaturg/director for CBC.

**VT:** I write plays on commission, I get royalties, and I do workshops and some teaching. I have been very lucky to do so, and could not do it in Canada alone. I have gone to the world at large to rely on playwriting income. And yet, I could not survive WITHOUT Canada. So basically, I have a passive-aggressive

relationship with my country.

**PB:** How do you survive – morale wise?

**KJB:** By having other things in my life that feed me creatively.

**VT:** It's never easy. Keep working, stay in shape (spiritually, physically), get pissed off when you need to, take a lot of naps, find something else to entertain you.

**PB:** How do you get produced? Submissions to folks you don't know? Personal contact? An agent?

**VT:** THAT is the million-dollar question. All of the above.

**KJB:** Personal contact. Once, I wrote a cheeky letter to a selection committee, and got into Nightwood.

**PB:** How much time would you say goes into self-promotion and marketing yourself?

**KJB:** Not nearly enough and more than makes me comfortable.

**VT:** Self-promo is at least 50% of my work time and sometimes more.

**PB:** The public seem to think that writers in general rake in a lot of dough from print royalties, when the truth is that many print runs – especially for plays and poetry – can be as small as 500 copies and the author makes about 1.00 per book sold. So... publishing isn't really about the money – but...

What does publishing give to us, as playwrights, and how important is

publishing to establishing a National Theatre?

**KJB:** We have to publish the plays. It is the only way the work survives. I got a production in New York because my play was in the Library of Congress, and some student researcher found it.

**VT:** Publishing is critical to the national theatre. People would read more plays if they were available and cheap. It is also a very important prestige thing. It is HARD to get published and should be. It also allows you to submit to things like the GG [Governor General's Literary Award], which you couldn't if you weren't published.

**PB:** When do you publish? After a premiere? Later? At all?

**VT:** Always after. Sometimes a second edition if there are many changes. Sometimes, not at all.

**KJB:** After the premiere, or at least the Fringe run. I wouldn't want to publish something that hadn't been on its legs for a while, to work the kinks out.

**PB:** How does it happen? Do you submit to publishers or do they seek you out?

**KJB:** Both have happened. Lately, it's more the publishers coming to me, thank god.

**VT:** I have a relationship with Playwrights Canada Press now, but at first, it was very hard getting a publisher. Sometimes I let smaller work go to a collection or a monologue book.

**PB:** How has it gone? Are your books

well-promoted? Do you self-promote or leave it to the publisher? Are you living happily ever after on your print royalties?

**KJB:** Ha. Ha. Ha.

**VT:** The print royalties aren't the way you make any cash on publishing, its on Access Copyright and PLR [Public Lending Rights] cheques. Publishers have no money. I don't expect them to do anything but print the books, then I use the books for my publicity.

**PB:** Have you had plays translated, produced in other countries or adapted into another medium?

**VT:** Yes.

**KJB:** Yes. I have had a number of radio adaptations. I have been produced in the US, Scotland, and Finland... the radio plays have gone round the world.

**PB:** How involved were you?

**KJB:** In the radio work, intimately. In the out of country productions, not at all.

**VT:** Not at all on some, a lot on others.

**PB:** What was the experience like?

**VT:** Fantastic! Who doesn't like their work in another language?

**KJB:** Great. Distant. Not really much to do with me.

**PB:** I also think it is tough to get our plays produced in CANADA – let alone exported to another country. What has your experience been? Do

your plays tend to only get produced where you are – or do they head out across the country?

**VT:** Sometimes they travel, sometimes they don't. Thus is life.

**KJB:** I have had one play with legs. The rest get second productions, if they get second productions, it's because they're published and one-act play competition companies pick them up.

**PB:** How do these productions generally come about? Meaning, bluntly, how the heck do you get your work onstage?

**VT:** Connections. History. Development. Commissions. Oh, and WRITE GOOD PLAYS.

**KJB:** Someone loves the play enough to push. A director twice. An actor once. It's always personal. And it's never uncontroversial.

**PB:** How involved are you in productions – does it vary?

**VT:** Yes, it does vary. On premieres, generally I am very involved. Other productions, not so much or not at all.

**KJB:** Right now, I'm very involved, because I perform it as well. First productions, I am usually in the theatre for most of the rehearsal, because there are line changes. The last play, I was at first reading and never went back, 'cause I had such faith in my director, who was also my dramaturg, and the whole cast...I have never felt so safe.

**PB:** Let's play the Masterpiece game.

Name your picks for SEVEN Canadian Masterpieces—keeping in mind Vern’s guidelines and, he adds, “Remember, this can be a TYA play, musical, comedy, blatantly commercial success or a forgotten classic.”

**VT:** Well, mine change a lot from conversation to conversation and I’ve had a lot of these conversations over the last year. But here’s my TEMPORARY list, for now, in no particular order, keeping the conditions in mind (the two dead playwrights might be the hardest to incorporate into the list)

—*Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapaskasing*

—*The Donnelly Trilogy* (if I had to pick one, *Sticks and Stones*)

—*Marsh Hay*

—*Les Belle Soeurs*

—*Blood Relations*

—*Lion in the Streets*

**KJB:** I can’t do this. I have never lived anywhere where I could see Canadian masterpieces, acted by a cast up to the script...reading the script in a book doesn’t do it for me, and I haven’t seen that many even good productions...

Let’s see...*Billy Bishop, Rez Sisters, Some Assembly, Farewell, Elephant Wake, Les Belles Souers, House...*

I’ve never seen productions of Jason, Sharon Pollock, Judith Thompson, Timothy Findlay, or George Walker’s work live...

So if I can’t pick seven (because they’re not playing at the theatres where I have lived, not because they aren’t out there), how are we supposed to sell the nation on the need for seven?

**VT:** Well I have to disagree with Kelly on this. I mean, the most celebrated author of the English language is a playwright, and we ALL had to read him in school, and reading Shakespeare was one of the ways I fell in love with writing plays.

Yes, plays are meant to be staged, but I believe all great plays can also be READ with joy. And if we all agree that publishing is important to us as playwrights then defacto we believe they should be READ.

*PEER GYNT* was meant to be read and performed. No one can tell me that *STREETCAR* or *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* is not great literature.

The GG is a LITERARY award, not one for production.

If we can’t see our own plays as great literature, as Canadians we are going to be in deep shit as a culture. Because, as KJ has mentioned, if you’re living in Small Town Canada, you may not get to see a “great Canadian play” but you sure as hell get to read one. And you’re going to be reading SOMETHING in your English class, and I’d rather have it be a Mansel Robinson play than a Tony Kushner play.

And by the way, more and more small town community theatres ARE producing Canadian work. And bravo for them. Better Norm Foster than Neil Simon.

So, I re-challenge KJ to the list. *Great Canadian Kid, Skin*, how many 100’s of thousands of kids are seeing one of those masterpieces of TYA this year? How many 10’s of thousands of people are seeing *THE DROWSY CHAPERONE* this year, one the most successful musical comedies in Canadian history?

Come on KJ, even *PAPER WHEAT* is a good read!

**KJB:** I hear you, but I am a completely aural thinker, and I really do need to hear a work, performed competently, to be able to tell what it is, how it lives...I read Shakespeare too... all the time...but I need to SEE it to have it affects me in a way that makes it a masterpiece for me.

**PB:** I gotta dive in with my picks. Most of my choices are from reading scripts too – which, to me, just emphasizes the need to get the plays published.

I’m having a hard time with the DEAD Playwright guideline, too.

Umm.... OK. Here goes...

—*Les Belle Soeurs*

—*Walsh* – though I also love *Blood Relations*

—*Crackwalker* – though I also love *Lion in the Streets*

—*Billy Bishop Goes to War*

—*The Rez Sisters*

—*Spitting Slag* and *Ghost Trains* (cheated here a bit, but they are both PUBLISHED in one book, and, to me are a set too lovely to break up.)

—*Donnelly Trilogy* (Don’t make me pick one!!!)

But, oh man, this HARD because I want to include: *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. *Spirit Wrestler, Waiting for the Parade...*OOF! OK then, for fun – name three more Canadian plays/playwrights you love or are excited by. I say... George F. Walker, Colleen Murphy, Kenneth T. Williams.

**VT:** All the others that are horribly

excluded from this list: George Walker, Morris Panych, Hanna Mosciwich.

**KJB:** Yvette Nolan. Cathy Banks. Kit Brennan.

**PB:** Here's a burning question... Why do you write plays?

**KJB:** Bad habit. How I think. Can't help it.

**VT:** Because it is the only thing in the world that doesn't bore me.

**PB:** What EXCITES you about Canadian Theatre today?

**KJB:** The young indie companies who make things happen despite no money, for the love of it, and to work—same as it ever was. And the old indies who still make things

happen, 'cause they've gotten used to no money, and they love it too much to take a job at CBC.

**VT:** It is well known internationally. There are SO MANY F—ING GREAT PLAYWRIGHTS in Canada right now. It's the THEATRES that suck.

**PB:** Your turn. Any questions or burning issues to add to the discussion for Round Two?

**VT:** I would add, and emphasise, that we all need to start thinking beyond our own borders. It's the only way to survive. Talk to any Canadian rock band.

**KJB:** I want to know what people have found least helpful in their relationships with dramaturgs, PDC's etc?

**VT:** Hmm. I can start that off right now... Least helpful...Conferences are no longer my thing, though they used to be. Oh, and directories/member websites. Perhaps they don't do those anymore, but I always found directories to be pointless. Also, I am not sure the PDC's have been the best political and social advocates that they could be. But they have a lot on their plates....

**PB:** Yeah- too much to do and way WAY too little time to do it in. But then, it's also up to the members of PDC's to set our priorities so.... we should be looking at that. Anyhow... for now... let's leave it at that as an EXCELLENT place to pick up our next conversation. Thanks to you both for participating in this pilot convo. It's been fun. I can't wait to see where we go from here.

## 2009 SPC Member Productions and Publications:

*Act of Elusion* (Curtis Peeteetuce) Live Five Elusion Co-op, Saskatoon

*Bite The Hand* (Mansel Robinson) published by Scirocco Drama

*The Bob Shivery Show* (David Sealy) Staged reading, Playworks Festival (APN), Calgary

*Bring It On* (James Trettwer Short Story) 2nd Place in the Saskatchewan Writers Guild Short MS Awards

*Dry Streak* (Leeann Minogue) The Grand, London Ontario

*The Walnut Tree* (Geoffrey Ursell) Persephone Theatre, Saskatoon

*Gimme Shelter* (Andy Carlson McNab) Saskatoon Fringe

*Homecoming* (Leeann Minogue) Station Arts Centre, Rosthern

*The Last Windwalker* (Catherine Harrison) Dancing Sky Theatre, Meacham

*Life is Wonderful: A Rez Christmas Story VII* (Curtis Peeteetuce) Saskatchewan Native Theatre, Saskatoon

*Radiant Boy* (Daniel MacDonald) University of Regina

*The Selkie Wife* (Kelley Jo Burke) published by Scirocco Drama

*Special* (Kelley Jo Burke) Dancing Sky Theatre, Meacham

*sTain* (Madeleine Blais-Dahlem) Staged reading at the Groundswell Festival at Nightwood Theatre, Toronto

*Thunderstick* (Kenneth T. Williams) Persephone Theatre, Saskatoon & Theatre Network, Edmonton

*Tyrone and Mary* (Simon Moccasin) Self produced

*Velocity* (Daniel MacDonald) Reading Theatre Yes, Edmonton

*Write Right* (David Sealy) On the Rivers Edge Festival, North Battleford



*Act of Elusion* (by Curtis Peeteetuce) Lance LaRoque and Robert Benz. Photo by Ken Williams. Photo courtesy of Elusion Co-op.

## The Lay of the Land:

### What's up at Persephone

#### Theatre

By Pam Bustin

Del Surjik is the Artistic Director of Persephone Theatre. He recently returned to Saskatoon from Pi Theatre in Vancouver where he had been Artistic Director for a decade, as well as maintaining an extensive national freelance career.

Shortly after graduating from the University of Saskatchewan, he became a founding member of the Saskatoon Soaps; he was also Technical Director of 25th Street Theatre and Production Manager of Actor's Lab for Nightcap Productions. He was a co-founder of Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan and the Ottawa Shakespeare Festival as well as Vancouver's See Seven, which has served as the model for many other groups including Saskatoon's Live Five and pLay 7 in Los Angeles.

I met with Del, over a beer, in December—to talk about what it's like being back in Saskatoon, and how things are going at Persephone. It was a grand ole yack and went a little something like this....

**PB:** You began your theatre career here in Saskatoon, wandered out into the big old world and have recently returned. What has that been like?

**DS:** I didn't think I was "leaving" when I went to the Coast. I was going on a sabbatical. Things were really happening for me in Saskatchewan. We were exploring new territory at the Saskatoon Soaps – starting to work with and un-lock Serial Improv – it was exciting and, at the time, ground-breaking stuff. I was acting – had roles at Persephone, 25<sup>th</sup> Street and Shakespeare. I was the Associate Director of Shakespeare

and had designed and acted in the Lepage *Romeo and Juliet*. It was a peak time for me in a lot of ways.

I went to Vancouver and began working there. Calls came from across the country and I was working... all over the place. But, oddly, no calls came from Saskatchewan and, to tell you the truth, over the years it sort of... fell off my radar as a place to work. After awhile, you just think a door is closed.

My first work back in Saskatchewan was when Tibor invited me to direct James OShea's *Dogbarked* in 2004.

Then we saw the call for a new AD at Persephone. It was not a position I applied for casually. We discussed it – Johnna [Wright] and I. She was running Solo Collective (where she commissioned and produced more new BC works than... anyone else at the time). I was at Pi. We had a lot invested in the companies and the community. People joke that when I was hired as AD at Persephone, the Saskatchewan Community really got a "two-fer" – Johnna is a very experienced and adept dramaturg and director.

What is it like to be back? Well... there is a strange feeling... writers will relate to this... there's a feeling that you are suddenly the main character in an epic novel that is going full circle. Hopefully, it isn't a tragic novel! In a way, it's like coming out of a coma – you see people that you haven't seen and sometimes, haven't even thought about in years – and there's a history there that comes flooding back – a personal and/or creative

relationship.

There is a comfort to being back. There's a certainty that this is the right thing. This is the place we are supposed to be and the work we are supposed to do. It all fell into place so smoothly and I truly had the thought, "I know exactly what we need to do!" I have a familiarity with a certain portion of the history of the theatre community here in Saskatoon, and I've been away and come back with fresh eyes and a few tricks I've picked up along the way. The new eyes helped me see the community from the outside (with some insider knowledge). I can see what we've done, how we've moved forward and grown, and where we still need to grow. I've always been very involved in "community building." That comes from growing up here. I was shaped here, as an artist. I took the community building skills with me, and now I've brought them back – along with what I've learned in other communities.

On a personal note. We've started a family and it thrills me to know that Sascha, our son, will be raised as a Prairie boy.

**PB:** How do you see Persephone's role in the community?

**DS:** We have a responsibility to the Theatre Community to build an artistic community—which, to me, includes not taking over. I want to see a whole slew of healthy, strong, companies that we can partner with, not ... absorb. Right now there is amazing work being done by a bunch of small independent theatre companies in town—mostly as Equity Co-ops. Because we are

a PACT [Professional Association of Canadian Theatres] house, we cannot do co-productions with companies that are producing Equity Co-ops. Instead of taking over their work and re-presenting it as a “Persephone” show, I want to see all these independent companies grow and become partners. We need to embrace many visions. In the long-term, one vision is deadening. We all need to remain agile and engaged as artists.

At Persephone, we want to aid the critical mass of artists STAYING in the community. Meaning that they have work—here and elsewhere. We already bring in other artists. I say, let’s bring in artists who have a commitment to taking our work back to their community. This will take time, of course—to build a reputation as collaborators, and to excite people about our plays and the artists who work here. I see these collaborations growing—here in the province and across the country. This season, we saw *Thunderstick* here and in Edmonton

and we brought *Elephant Wake* from the Globe. I think it is the first time in the history of the theatre that Persephone brought in a show that was originally produced at the Globe in Regina. It feels great. We are no longer “two solitudes.” We want to build on this and our relationships with other companies—in SK and beyond.

To the citizenry of Saskatoon, I think we have a responsibility and, right now, a CALL to rearticulate the role of the Regional Theatre. We need to open it up—to our Youth, and to those who still see Theatre as a type of elitist entertainment. We’ve broadened our Youth Programming by taking on the Youth Series that Joan Flood used to run in the city. We now have four youth presentations in our season along with our two touring shows and school matinees of our other shows. In an effort to break down the economic barrier, we’ve instituted special prices for people on income assistance so they can attend shows. We also have a program for Seniors

– they get dinner and a show and transportation.

We are also very focussed on providing a variety of genres in our programming. Who needs 27 more versions of CSI? We want it all – absurdism to musicals, drama, comedy, the whole gamut.

And most importantly, we are committed to the pursuit of professional excellence—in all aspects.

There has been a great confluence of events at Persephone in the last few years. We have a new building, some new people, and some who’ve been around a long time and continue support our vision for the future.

We have our own programming—but we also underwrite a lot of our rentals by providing substantial support to the performing arts groups that use the theatre. Last year, we had 28 different groups use the facility and our staff have provided professional development for all of these groups – from production work (like how to fly something or run the tech rehearsals), to marketing, box office, all sorts of procedural infrastructure that we can share with the community. We’ve done all this without much change in the size of our staff. It’s an amazing feat.

**PB:** It is, and I think it has a lot to do with the energy and commitment you bring to the job. You mentioned once that people sometimes talk to you about “filling Tibor’s shoes” and that you’ve never looked at things that way.



*Thunderstick* (by Kenneth T. Williams): Lorne Cardinal and Craig Lauzon. Photographer Liam Richards. Photo courtesy of Persephone Theatre.

**DS:** No, I haven't. I don't think Tibor would want anyone to "fill his shoes". I've put on new shoes altogether and I think he knew that was what had to happen next for Persephone.

**PB:** And spiffy shoes they are! To me, it truly feels that the changes you have mentioned – the new building and your appointment as AD have ushered in a new era. As though everyone's relationship with Persephone has been newly minted. That's exciting.

And, speaking of excitement... (she segues so elegantly)

What excites you about Theatre today? What spins your pin, pops your cork? What kind of work do you really want explore?

**DS:** I've gone through a few cycles in the last decade. I have a soft spot for absurdism – though there doesn't seem to be much of a tradition for it here in the city yet. I'd like to develop that appetite over time—just like we have developed the audience appetite for Canadian plays. Fourteen of the fifteen plays we are producing and presenting this year are Canadian.

**PB:** That's... outstanding.

**DS:** It is, actually. I think that may be unheard of for a Regional Theatre.

**PB:** I also want to commend you on the fact that four of your shows this season are by Members or Alumni of the SPC: *Thunderstick* and *Bannock Republic* by Kenneth T. Williams, *Walnut Tree* by Geoffrey Ursell and *Home Ice* by James O'Shea. Three

of these are on the mainstage, and one is in the Deep End series that, last year, opened up with Mansel Robinson's *Bite the Hand*. You, Sir, have been very very supportive of SK playwrights.

But... back to the interview. Can you pinpoint what grabs your attention in a play?

**DS:** Because I'm a designer, I'm often grabbed by visuals and metaphors that can be strengthened and explored in the design. I'm very interested in Design Dramaturgy. I remember applying for Canada Council funding to pursue this sort of play development years ago, and no one seemed to know what I was on about. Now, it seems to be a hot thing. We worked this way on *Walnut Tree*—searching for a staging concept for an EPIC adaptation from the novel. It was great collaborating with Carla Orosz on the set design – and everyone else as well: Angus, Geoffrey, Evgenia and all the people who were involved in the dramaturgical efforts. That's where the luggage

as the metaphor for the 'immigrant' aspect of the story came from.

**PB:** Which I LOVED, by the way. It was beautiful and magical and just right for the story of the characters – dislocated, on the move, their lives cut down to what they could carry. Nice work!

**DS:** Thanks.

Y'know, what I get excited about is usually... the show I'm currently working on. With *Thunderstick* – we had Brad Moss and I co-directing and the actors playing both parts. That idea came from the actors, and Brad and I were leery at first—though we knew that Seymour Hoffman and John C. Riley did *True West* that way, on Broadway, in 2001. We decided to give it a shot and set a deadline in rehearsals for a decision to be made on whether we would actually go with Lorne and Craig alternating roles. It was a great experience. These two amazing actors with no ego issues. One would come up with a great bit and the other would



*Walnut Tree* (by Geoffrey Ursell): Devon Dubnyk and Kristina Hughes. Photographer Peter Christensen. Photo courtesy of Persephone Theatre.

say, “I am so stealing that!” Or they would say, “That is awesome, but not really my clown, so I’ll come up with something different.” The process absolutely accelerated and deepened the character development. It was great. And it got me thinking... imagine a four or five hander and the right group of actors. We bring them in and rehearse with each actor playing all the roles and no one knows until... a while into the rehearsal process... WHICH character they will actually play. It would, of course have to be the right script and the right actors. It is in keeping with my ideal of the ‘egoless’ rehearsal hall (although someone has to take a lead and keep it moving) but just imagine REALLY using all the brainstems in the room to their fullest. Of course the additional workload would be phenomenal, not just on the actors and director, but on the technical team: costumes, stage manager...

**PB:** It would be an adventure, that’s for sure.

**DS:** Absolutely. And, like I said, you could only do it with the right play. That’s always where it all starts.

On the whole, what excites me about all theatre comes back to the playwright – which may sound odd, given what I’ve just said about being drawn to audio and visual metaphor, but all that comes from the text. There has to be a lasting quality. A good play is something that we pull off the shelf again and again to produce because the TEXT is so good—the story holds us and inspires us.

**PB:** To wrap it up, then, how do we get

those stories to you? What is the submission process at Persephone?

**DS:** Will Brooks and Johnna Wright are our Literary Managers and our Script Submission Guidelines can be found online at <http://www.persephonetheatre.org/scriptssubmit.php>

**PB:** I hereby encourage our members to go forth and send in submissions—especially my playwrighting sisters. I know that I, for one, have been negligent in sending my plays out into the world for consideration. We need to get more women’s voices into the mix.

**DS:** And don’t forget, more roles for women.

**PB:** Thanks Del, it’s been great to talk with you and to get you into this issue of PlayWORKS. Any final words you’d like to add?

**DS:** I hope we can do this again sometime. These first seasons quite understandably have kept me extremely busy but I’m a gregarious person and I want to find more ways to share our exciting plans here at Persephone with our peers. Another round?

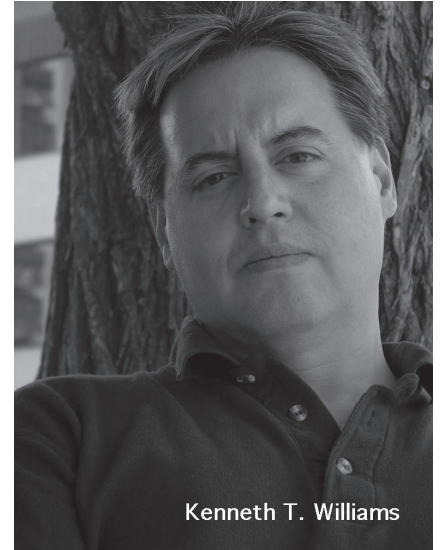
We went on, to finish up our drinks and...”talk of many things: Of shoes, and ships, and ceiling wax...”

I want to thank Del again, for the interview and to say how happy we are to have him and Johnna (and Sascha) back with us, in Saskatoon.

Here’s to a long happy future of creation, collaboration and the continued health and growth of Theatre in Saskatchewan.

## Questions For a Playwright:

with Kenneth T. Williams



Kenneth T. Williams

### When do you write (time of day)?

I do most of my writing in the morning, except when a deadline is looming then I can write anytime.

### How do you write (quill or laptop)?

Combination of the two.

I get started with handwriting a script but then do most of the work on a laptop.

### Where is your favourite place to write?

Coffee shops and bars.

### What do you need to begin a play?

Very clear characters. And a title.

### What do you need to finish a play?

The creativity to get my characters out of the jams I’ve written them into.

### What is the hardest part of writing a play or life as a playwright?

Getting other people to understand what it is you do.

### What is the most rewarding thing about your life as a playwright?

Getting a production!

But really, it’s when you have actors, directors and set designers get excited about your play.

## Out There in the Real World

By Eugene Stickland

I was pleasantly reminded a few years back when I was recognized as a founding member of the SPC that I was actually in the room that fateful night the organization was brought into being. I was a student at the time, quite intimidated by the existence of the real living playwrights in the room including such luminaries as Ken Mitchell and Rex Deverell. I wouldn't have dared to dream that night that over the next thirty years or so I would fashion my own career as a playwright but it would seem that's exactly what has happened.

My journey meandered back and forth from Saskatchewan to Toronto and then on to Calgary where I've been for the last fifteen years. Somewhere during that time, I actually resided back in Regina again and ended up on the Board of the SPC which by then had become a vibrant and effective organization for supporting the needs of the province's playwrights.

I remember during that time that the Board investigated the possibility of helping our members arrange for second productions of their plays. I'd never had a second production and so it seemed like a great idea to me. Obviously it's gratifying to get a play done, by anyone, but without subsequent productions it's hard to solidify one's reputation or to make any money.

I'm not sure anything ever came of that initiative. Maybe it's something that can't be done at an organizational level. Maybe it comes down to things beyond our control like media response and just dumb luck, as when a visiting Artistic Director happens to see a production and decides to do it herself. Or himself. (But increasingly, it seems, herself.)

Back in the day when we had that discussion in a meeting room in the Bessborough Hotel – and I know this may seem hard to believe – there was no internet, no emails, no PDF's. Back then, we typed our plays on a typewriter and if

we wanted someone in Toronto, say, to read the play, we stuffed a photocopy into a manila envelope, and, with a prayer, put it in mailbox.

My, how things have changed. No need to go through such a slow and laborious process. Now we can create a PDF of the script and have it to any number of Directors Artistic within hours of the play's opening. Has this improved our chances of getting a second production of a play? It doesn't seem to have. Maybe if nothing else we get our rejection letter sooner, by email probably. The more things change, the more they stay the same, it seems.

And yet, as I found out recently, there are other possibilities and opportunities that are at least aided by technology, and that is in the area of translation. My most recent play, *Queen Lear*, which opened in Calgary in February, 2009 was seemingly magically picked up by a theatre in Turkey, was translated and opened in Istanbul in December, 2009. I was there for the opening (I didn't understand a word of it) and it was unlike anything I have ever experienced.

And this is where luck enters into it, I guess. I wrote *Queen Lear* for my friend Joyce Doolittle in Calgary, who had impressed upon the fact that there is a real paucity of good roles for women of a certain age. I guess I could actually use the word: old. I gave the play to Joyce on the occasion of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Yildiz Kenter, who brought the play to her theatre in Istanbul and who stars in it and directed it herself, is 81. Who knew an actress in Istanbul was feeling exactly the same as an actress in Calgary? And yet when you think about it, is that really surprising?

One of the most telling conversations I had while in Istanbul was Yildiz about the first production in Calgary. (Her mother was English and her English is perfect, so we had no difficulty communicating.) She asked me how long the premier production ran for. She was probably thinking how many years did it run, at least how many

months. I told her two weeks and her jaw literally dropped open and she asked me, in horror, "But why???"

I tried to explain that the goal of the Canadian theatre, by and large, is to break even. It's the curse of the non profit entity that most theatres turn themselves into for funding purposes. It's also a curse of a subscription season, that a play that is stinking the joint out will have as many performances as a play that is truly great and beautiful and meaningful. In Calgary, there is a tremendous amount of theatre activity these days and a real shortage of performance venues adding to the problem. As a result, playwrights never really have a chance to make much money on our first productions, heightening the need for subsequent productions at other theatres.

Yildiz told me she once ran a play at her theatre for two and a half years. Well, one can't help but do the math and it can only be a good thing. I don't know how long mine will run there, but I can only think that any kind of a run of a play from a country far away is a bonus for all of us.

And so, going back to that discussion in Saskatoon so long ago, does the fact that the world is, as they say, shrinking, give playwrights an access to a greater, dare I say global, market? That's certainly what it seems like to me. I know there was some luck involved, some serendipity, but then I think there always is. Certainly there are many new opportunities open to all of us, if we can find them, or if we're lucky enough for them to find us.

---

*Like many Albertans, Eugene Stickland is a native of Saskatchewan, having taken a detour through Toronto before settling in Calgary where he currently lives with his daughter, Johanna. For ten years, Eugene was Playwright in Residence at Alberta Theatre Projects. During that time, he wrote six plays for ATP, as well as three one-act plays for Calgary's Lunchbox Theatre.*

# A TOUCH OF GRACE

By Wendy Lockman

Characters

HENRY: Homeless man.

ODIN: Angel of Death.

GRACE: Single female.

KAREN: Cancer patient.

**Setting:** *The action takes place present day in Anywhere, North America. The set is minimal: the outdoor scene has a large potted tree and park bench, the apartment scene has a table with chairs and a back counter, and the bedroom scene has a bed with a nightstand.*

## Scene I.

*Lights come up on HENRY, a homeless man sitting outside. A park bench is upstage left of him. He is whistling and mumbling to himself when ODIN enters. ODIN is wearing a black hooded sweatshirt with a black tattered dress coat over top. He has torn jeans and black boots. He removes his hood to expose black hair, a pale face, and his eyes lined in black. He is beautiful. HENRY sees him and is immediately silenced.*

**HENRY:** You're here...already?

*ODIN slowly walks towards him.*

I...I'm in perfect health though, sir. Miss Grace takes very good care of me. Very good care. She buys me toothbrushes. I won't use toothpaste though. Fluoride causes cancer, you know.

**ODIN:** Give me your hand.

**HENRY:** I...I'm afraid I can't do that, sir. I'm not ready yet. Still have to go through my files. They're all wrong, you see. Miss Grace is going to help me with them. She knows

people that can find them for me. We're going to find them and then everything will be okay.

*HENRY begins to sob. He drops to his knees.*

Please, sir. I'm not ready yet. What about Miss Grace? She won't know which files to fix. She needs me!

**ODIN:** Get up.

**HENRY:** Please, sir. I don't want to—

*ODIN roughly touches HENRY's head. HENRY gasps and falls to the ground. GRACE enters carrying grocery bags. She cannot see HENRY over the bags.*

**GRACE:** Hi, Henry! I've got some new granola bars for you to try. Oh, and juice boxes were buy one get one free today. Don't worry; I stayed away from the grape ones.

*GRACE sees HENRY lying on the ground.*

Henry! Henry, can you hear me?

*ODIN starts to walk away.*

Excuse me! Can you help us?

*ODIN turns, startled.*

Can you help us? Please!

**ODIN:** You can see me?

**GRACE:** What?! Of course I can see you, you asshole! Would you call 9-1-1?

**ODIN:** I don't carry a telephone.

*GRACE reaches into her pocket and slides her phone to him on the ground. She starts attempting CPR on HENRY. ODIN takes the phone and dials.*

**ODIN:** There is a 63-year-old male who's suffered a heart attack on West and Vine. We're

attempting CPR.

*Lights fade to black.*

## Scene II.

*Lights come up on GRACE and ODIN sitting on the park bench. GRACE is holding one of HENRY's blankets and is sniffing. ODIN slowly reaches out to touch her as an act of comfort, then stops and puts his hand back down.*

**GRACE:** Thank you for staying. I've never been around death before.

**ODIN:** How long did you know him?

**GRACE:** Three years now. I live in that apartment building, so I'd see him at least twice a day, every day.

**ODIN:** He spoke of files he needed to locate.

**GRACE:** Oh. Um...Henry suffered from a mental illness. He was completely harmless, but...not all there. He wouldn't step foot indoors, so I tried to give him as much as I could. Obviously that didn't matter in the end.

**ODIN:** You're very generous.

**GRACE:** Not really. Juice boxes and granola doesn't take you very far.

**ODIN:** I can tell by the way you're touching his blanket how much you cared for him. Most would have walked by him without even a smile.

**GRACE:** Well, a lot of people wouldn't have stayed with me after I called them an asshole, either. I'm sorry about that.

*ODIN ponders.*

**ODIN:** I *am* an asshole.

**GRACE:** No you're not. You're just... cautious. It's hard to get involved nowadays. Henry and I could have been con-artists. You stop to help us and we stab you and take your wallet.

*ODIN chuckles. He touches his mouth and his teeth to feel the smile on his face.*

Ouch. Toothache?

**ODIN:** I don't often smile.

**GRACE:** You should. You have a nice smile.

*Beat.*

Has anyone ever told you that you have a certain...quality?

**ODIN:** What do you mean?

**GRACE:** Um...I find you...I don't know...comforting.

**ODIN:** Nobody finds me comforting.

**GRACE:** You are! I feel...safe with you. Does that sound crazy?

**ODIN:** You have no idea.

*GRACE reaches towards ODIN's jacket. ODIN stiffens and leans back.*

What are you doing?

**GRACE:** Just brushing away that piece of lint off your coat.

*ODIN jumps off of the bench.*

**ODIN:** Don't touch me!

**GRACE:** I'm sorry. I should be going.

**ODIN:** Please. Don't go.

**GRACE:** What's your name?

**ODIN:** Odin.

**GRACE:** Well, Odin, I have some juice boxes and granola bars that can't go to waste, so would you be so kind as to join me for dinner?

*ODIN wears a pained look on his face.*

I'm joking about the menu. There'll be meat, potatoes, maybe even a vegetable. What do you say?

**ODIN:** Yes.

*Fade to black.*

### **Scene III.**

*Lights come up on GRACE and ODIN at the dinner table. GRACE is eating but ODIN is simply moving his food around his plate with his fork.*

**GRACE:** You hate it.

**ODIN:** Pardon me?

**GRACE:** Dinner. You hate it.

**ODIN:** No.

**GRACE:** It's okay. I am not known for my culinary skills. Hell, a starving homeless man wouldn't even eat my food. Why do you think Henry ate granola bars?

*ODIN chuckles, but quickly covers his mouth with his hand.*

**ODIN:** I don't eat much.

**GRACE:** You don't like to eat. You don't like to smile. So what do you like to

do, Odin?

*ODIN looks down.*

I'm sorry. I'm being nosy.

**ODIN:** No, you're not. You're simply trying to make conversation. I'm the one who's sorry. I struggle...being around people.

**GRACE:** Why?

**ODIN:** Generally speaking, I don't like them.

*GRACE chuckles then stops.*

**GRACE:** Oh.

**ODIN:** My job requires me to see them at their weakest, when they're at their most vulnerable. I see them begging for the very mercy they've refused to give others their entire lives. I see them looking up to the heavens, pleading for one last chance to say sorry to someone they were too proud to call; for one last moment to say "I love you" to someone they were too busy to speak to; for one last sunset, one last kiss when they've had a lifetime of sunsets and kisses that they've simply chosen to forfeit. It's hard to feel sympathy for the selfish.

**GRACE:** I am the first person to agree that every one of us is selfish and our pride makes us do ridiculous things to each other but I think when we're facing that final day, that final moment, that we all deserve to be hugged and told that everything is going to be okay. I wish I could have done that for Henry. I hate that he had to die alone.

*GRACE starts to get emotional.*

Sorry. Bad day. So what the hell do you do for a living?

**ODIN:** I'm an auditor.

*GRACE laughs. ODIN finds himself smiling again.*

**GRACE:** You're terrible. I suppose I can't interest you in dessert?

**ODIN:** No, thank you. I have to go.

**GRACE:** Already?

**ODIN:** I'm running late as we speak.

**GRACE:** You had other plans? Why didn't you say something? See, you're too nice. You have to tell me to shut-up.

**ODIN:** Shut-up. I didn't want to leave. Actually, I still don't. But I must. Thank you for supper, Grace. It was the best meal I've ever had.

**GRACE:** Odin? Can I call you sometime?

**ODIN:** I don't own a telephone.

*GRACE reaches into her pocket and takes out her cell phone.*

**GRACE:** Now you do.

**ODIN:** I can't accept that.

**GRACE:** Yes, you can. It's easy. Just take it. Reach out and touch someone.

*ODIN slowly reaches out for the phone, concentrating on not touching GRACE's hand. In his concentration, he doesn't notice that GRACE is moving closer to his face. She tilts his chin and softly kisses his lips. She takes a deep breath, starts to swoon, and falters. ODIN catches her.*

**ODIN:** No...no. Please...not her. Please! Grace? Grace?

*He lays her on the ground and begins to cry. Fade to black.*

#### **Scene IV.**

*Lights come up on KAREN in a bed. She has a handkerchief on her head. She is pale and her breathing is laboured. ODIN enters.*

**ODIN:** Hello, Karen.

**KAREN:** So we meet at last. You're better looking than I thought you'd be.

**ODIN:** Are you in any pain?

**KAREN:** The usual.

**ODIN:** Is there anyone you'd like to call? I have a telephone.

*ODIN brings out GRACE's cell phone.*

**KAREN:** Wow. I'd hate to be on your speed dial. No, I'm okay. I'd rather they get a good night's rest. They know I love them, right?

**ODIN:** Yes.

**KAREN:** Will it hurt?

**ODIN:** No.

**KAREN:** I knew this moment was coming and I thought I was ready for it but... I'm scared.

**ODIN:** There's nothing to be afraid of.

**KAREN:** Promise?

**ODIN:** Promise.

**KAREN:** Alright.

*KAREN nods her head. Alright.*

*ODIN smiles kindly at her. He embraces her.*

**ODIN:** Everything is going to be okay.

*KAREN fades away. ODIN places her gently back into her bed. He looks at the cell phone, smiles, and places it in his pocket. A figure wearing a long, black, hooded cloak enters the room. The figure slowly pulls down the hood to reveal her face—it's GRACE. She is more beautiful than usual.*

**GRACE:** He thought you could use an assistant since business has picked up lately. By the way, what kind of benefits package do auditors get these days?

*ODIN reaches out to touch her but stops.*

It's okay.

*GRACE touches his face. He leans into her hand in ecstasy. ODIN has never been touched before. They softly kiss then embrace. ODIN closes his eyes and smiles.*

Everything is going to be okay.

*Blackout.*

**End of Play**

---

*Wendy Lockman is a new member of the SPC who hails from Swift Current. Her play, The Chosen, is a finalist in the Global Age Project 2009/2010 contest for the new works reading series at Aurora Theatre, Berkley CA and The Day Rhubarb Fell from the Sky will be produced by Swift Current Little Theatre in April, 2010.*

# Inside/Out: Mapping Divergence in Search of Unity

By Madeleine Blais-Dahlem

Humans are dichotomous beings who crave resolution.

We see things in opposing pairs. Good/bad; heaven/hell; yesterday/tomorrow; interior/exterior; hope/despair; here/there; mine/yours; us/them; win/lose, up/down. Whether these pairs are truly opposite is unimportant. It is our perception, which makes them so. The Oriental philosophies posit yin and yang as complimentary but opposing forces working towards resolution. The belief system that formed my thought process and my moral code does not promote the resolution of opposites. One element must be crushed in order for the other to dominate. I am expected to choose; moreover, I am expected to choose the right thing or be forever damned. For me, writing begins in the tension formed by these opposing forces. A significant dichotomy for Canadian writers is the interior/exterior landscape. We cannot escape the overwhelming presence of our geography, even as our society becomes more urbanized. Deer and cougars enter the cities; people die during blizzards. We are also a nation of immigrants, with nomadic tendencies. “Here/there” as well as “now/then” are powerful dichotomies, clashing universes where the writer is compelled to step into the breach to explore the paradox, the duality or the problem exposed in that collision.

I write from my particular dichotomies. Everyone has an internal landscape particular to him or her, made up of family history, childhood misconceptions and faulty memories, hopes, wishes, dreams, and obsessions. My internal landscape exists in both time and space and affects my reaction to, and my understanding of, my external landscape which is, as we used to write on our notebooks in school: Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, North America, New World, Earth, Milky Way, Universe.

I am presently working on two bilingual plays about the challenges of being a woman. The first play, *sTain*, explores a spiritual dichotomy: the divergence between a woman’s spiritual needs (internal) and that which is offered to her by mainstream religion (external). The second, *The Art of French Cooking*, explores a physical dichotomy: the primarily North American obsession with the big-breasted youthful female body and the fact that you cannot stop aging by physically placing the protagonist inside her own internal landscape, her body, and confronting her with other cultural notions of beauty.

Both plays found their initial spark in my visceral, atavistic, personal response to facts from the external world. With *sTain*, I had already begun to work on the story of an immigrant farm wife, a contemporary of my mother, who would get herself admitted to the insane asylum for Easter. In the Catholic faith, you must receive the sacrament of Penance (also known now as Reconciliation) a minimum of once a year during Easter season in order to be in good standing with the Church. You confess your sins, ask for pardon, receive absolution from the priest and then you are in a state of grace (until you sin again).

I was amazed by the desperate nature of the farm wife’s ploy. Then, a news story identified some Palestinian suicide bombers as women with infants. I was horrified. I was compelled to explore the power of male-dominated religions over women, and to contrast that with their spiritual needs. *sTain* is both a modern and a Biblical story, the past made present yet again.

Two things propelled *The Art of French Cooking*. First, the fact that collagen freezes at –20°C, which was revealed in a news story involving Hollywood starlets in Banff for a Sierra Club benefit. Ironically, the Sierra Club exists to preserve and protect the natural world. Second, I was

reading a cookbook from Québec, titled *Les Pinardises*, which struck me as culinary erotica. My reaction to these readings inspired a Rabelaisian Alice in Wonderland journey.

In both plays, the tension and permeability between inner and external landscape is played out. In *sTain*, the external landscape includes an insane asylum, a windmill and a lonely farmstead but the protagonist, Françoise, seeks out visions of the Blessed Virgin within that landscape. In *French Cooking*, the inner landscape takes on the characteristics of an external landscape. Blanche’s stomach becomes the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Her lungs become an Arabian souk. The reproductive organs are a children’s playground. Not surprisingly, snow-covered mountain peaks feature prominently.

The two plays, similar in theme but contrasting in style and strategy, are a dichotomous set. However, both protagonists, Françoise in *sTain* and Blanche in *The Art of French Cooking*, are searching for resolution. They want to be whole. They want to be “in a state of grace.” Françoise cannot reject the religion that has refused her absolution because it means rejecting her universe. Her greater need, however, is to feel whole, to feel clean. Blanche is disconnected from her flesh. She needs to study the art of French cooking....

In these two plays, I use the duality of language, which is specific to my personal history, as elements in the play as well as a writing tool. In *sTain*, language is used as an exclusionary tool. In *French Cooking*, it goes beyond meaning into pure sound. Going back and forth from one draft to the other, I tap into thought patterns, different sounds, different cultural references, different countries in my internal landscape, so to speak.

We all have access to wonderfully

complex internal landscapes, entire universes to help us create works of stunning originality if we are true to the details. Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones*, suggests that writers make a list of their obsessions. Our obsessions are what is important to us. They are the impossible questions of our human experience. They are the features of our internal landscape. That is where the creative response finds its particularity in coming to terms with the external world.

Françoise, Blanche and I are dancing on a tightrope between two shores. On the far shore, external reality, there are real women: modern immigrants searching for their place in Canadian society despite cultural and linguistic barriers, and women of all ages bombarded by mass media propaganda of youth and beauty. I am drawn to the tightrope from my own safe shore, my imagination, because I care deeply, atavistically, about the real women. If I write honestly, if I'm true to my experiences, to my internal landscape, I have a chance to resolve the personal and the universally human, to express a whole truth. That is my goal, as a playwright.

---

*Madeleine Blais-Dahlem began her second career as a bilingual playwright in 1992 while she was still teaching high school. She has written for adolescents, has produced her own work at the Saskatoon Fringe and has had two professional productions in French: Foyer and Les vieux péteux with La Troupe du Jour, Saskatchewan's only professional French language theatre.*

*sTain recieved a stage reading at the Groundswell Festival of New Plays hosted by Nightwood Theatre in Toronto.*

*Madeleine continues to develop both sTain and The Art of French Cooking.*

## Spring Festival 2010 May 17-22, 2010

University of Regina, Riddell Centre

*A History of Breathing* by Daniel Macdonald  
*Gordon Winter* by Kenneth T. Williams  
*Gaudeamus* by Margo Regan  
*Really Crude Morally Bankrupt Artistically Devoid  
But Not Pornographic Crappy Play* by Jarrett Rusnak  
*Balance of Power* by B.D. Miller  
*A Place in the Shade* by Rodney A. McLean

Festival Dramaturg: Colleen Murphy

All staged readings are open to the public

## To Stand or Not to Stand - A Very Short Rant

By Pam Bustin

OK, here's my thing.

A few issues ago, RVM, a wise and honourable member of the theatre community in Saskatoon, and active member of the SPC, talked about Standing Ovations in this very newsletter. He said that if we are *known* in the community and we're out at a show, sometimes we have to "take one for the team" — meaning we have to stand for a show even if we don't really feel like it.

That statement has been driving me NUTS.

I know what he means and why he said it. We need to "support" each other. I get that.

I do support my fellow playwrights and the rest of the community. I'm THERE, right? I show up. I buy a ticket. I come out to see what folks are up to. I know that I also hold THEATRE to a higher standard than any other art form. I want to be MOVED and if I'm not, well, I'm sort of dissatisfied. But I don't get up and walk out or anything. I clap. I smile. I "appreciate the work."

But I refuse to stand up unless I really really MEAN it — unless you have delivered an AWESOME show.

I stand for various reasons, of course. The BEST reason is that I have just seen something absolutely magical — experienced that night when it all comes together — an awesome script, brilliant acting, directing, sound, lighting. You know what I mean — the show that glows and breaks my heart and makes me laugh so hard I pee a little.

THAT makes me leap to my feet. And, as we all know, those nights are why we all do what we do and... they are RARE!

I've also been known to stand up for an amazing performance, a script I really enjoy, or even just a damned good closing scene.

What I will NOT do is what seems to be the big thing at Persephone this year. I will not jump up clap-clap-clap and then get my coat on and walk out while the actors are still standing there bowing.

I don't get the standing-o that is actually just a way to get out of the theatre quicker.

Is it just me, or does that *clap-clap-clap run away* thing SUCK?

Mailing address:  
PO BOX 3092  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
CANADA S7K 3S9

Phone: (306) 665-7707  
Fax: (306) 244-0255

Office address:  
7th Floor, Delta Bessborough Hotel  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Website: [www.saskplaywrights.ca](http://www.saskplaywrights.ca)  
General Info: [sk.playwrights@sasktel.net](mailto:sk.playwrights@sasktel.net)  
E-zine email: [lminogue@sasktel.net](mailto:lminogue@sasktel.net)

Publication mail agreement #40063014  
Postage paid in Regina  
Please return any unclaimed copies  
The Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre  
PO Box 3092  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
CANADA S7K 3S9

# PlayWORKS 2010

## SASKATCHEWAN

# playwrights

## CENTRE

### SPC Staff

Dramaturg: Heather Inglis  
Administrator: Sheila Angelstad

### Board of Directors

Cheryl Jack, President  
Mansel Robinson, Vice President  
Mike Thompson, Treasurer  
Will Brooks, Past President

### Members at Large:

Cherise Arnesen  
Gillian Harding Russell  
Ian McWilliams  
Simon Moccasin  
Curtis Peeteetuce

### Dramaturgical Committee

Pam Bustin  
Pamela Haig Bartley  
Curtis Peeteetuce

### Supported by:

