

PlayWORKS 2011

It Takes a Village

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 Ongoing NEWS and EVENTS

www.saskplaywrights.ca



Gordon Winter (by Kenneth T. Williams): Front row - Gordon Tootoosis, Keisha Haines, Jamie Lee Shebelski and Kim Harvey. Back row - Josh Beaudry and Robert Benz. Persephone Theatre. Photo by Kenneth T. Williams.

Greetings all and welcome to another jam packed edition of PlayWorks the annual newsletter of the SPC. Annual... Yes indeed this is our second year with this format for the print newsletter and, I for one, think it's going swimmingly. We have our weekly e-zine to keep members up to date on the day to day and here, in these pages, we try to offer up some food for ... longer thought. Tidbits to chew on throughout the year.

Our "Conversation" segment was so well received last year that we rounded up a fresh batch of players to continue the dialogue. This year we are joined by Philip Adams, Layne Coleman, Heather Inglis and Colleen Murphy for a freewheeling talk about... National Theatre, peevs and pleasures, what audiences "want" to see, adventures in dramaturgy and all things theatrical. I pulled the title for this issue from the conversation. It's poached from Layne, who may have poached it off another (we are pirates - all). "It takes a village to birth a play." I'm glad our village has such feisty, fun, inhabitants!

A few other sections return as well. Catherine Harrison steps up to the plate to answer our Seven Questions for a

Playwright and Rod MacIntyre offers us a sneak peek at his new play, *In the Air*, for our "Short Shot" this year.

We have Jennifer Wynne Webber diving into action as our brand new dramaturge - *with an e*; Rodney McLean takes us on a rollercoaster ride from the desire to write his first play to... winning an award for it; Mansel Robinson's old pal, Steve, stops by for a visit; and Heather Inglis bids all a fond farewell as she moves on to other challenges in the wide world of Canadian Theatre.

We've got news and kudos, new submission guidelines and pics of shows we had produced this year.

What we DON'T have is... A member rant. Not one member answered my call for a rant. Can that mean that NOTHING is moving you this year? Nothing fabulous you want to rave about? Nothing pissing you off enough to toss me an email about it? Hmmmm... I don't think I believe it. Ah well, maybe next year.

Til then - enjoy this year's offering. Keep scribbling and, as always, *go easy*. - Pam

What's in a Name?

(To 'e' or not to 'e')

By Jennifer Wynne Webber

As your new SPC Dramaturge, I'd like to introduce myself much the way *Anne of Green Gables* always did — by saying, with emphasis and enthusiasm, "With an 'e,' please."

Why *dramaturge* rather than *dramaturg*? Let me explain.

Sure, "dramaturge" is the Canadian-preferred spelling but, for the record, I'm really not just clinging to Canadian Oxford here in any puffed up show of high-stepping nationalism.

Neither can I claim pure objectivity. Let me get my bias out of the way right now: aesthetically speaking, I simply like it better. The look of it. And, especially, the sound of it. I've got nothing against good hard consonants in all their guttural glory but, in this case, the sound of that soft 'g' does seem a little less harsh somehow, maybe a little friendlier.

For the record, I do aim to be a friendly dramaturge — one you can call on knowing your play will be handled carefully and respectfully at all times. But, then, that's still not the definitive answer because previous dramaturgs, despite their hard 'g's, have also been pretty friendly, pretty gentle. So why, then, am I so covetous of that little old 'e'?

Here it is, folks: I'm a playwright, first and foremost. I'm a dramaturge in that I'm someone who studies and analyzes plays and who works in a variety of ways to support their development. But, make no mistake, I'm a playwright who is also a dramaturge, not the other way around. And, while the root of the Greek word, *dramatourgos*, refers to being a drama or play worker, the French word for playwright is "*dramaturge*" which gives the word in English (and that particular spelling of the word) the connotation of someone who not only works with plays but who writes them. And that's me.

So, while anyone can chose to use the *dramaturge* spelling, I have a particular reason to do so.

The SPC has a long and excellent track record at hiring truly wonderful people to handle the dramaturgy for this organization. I am delighted and honoured to follow in their footsteps. I admit, though, a particular thrill at being the very first playwright hired to do it. All previous people hired for this position have been directors. Each brought unique expertise and vision to their posts and now I, in turn, hope to bring my own — as a playwright myself, as a long-time member of this amazing and self-described "playwright-driven organization," as someone who proudly calls Saskatchewan home, and as your new dramaturge. With an 'e.'

And, as your new SPC Dramaturge, I can tell you that my goal is to work hard to support, promote and champion Saskatchewan plays and playwrights in the name of excellence — excellence not only in terms of playwriting but in terms of community. I am enormously proud to be part of this rich writing community and plan, in all that I do as your SPC Dramaturge and as a fellow playwright, to nurture it.

But, having a somewhat extravagant nature (to which Visa can sadly attest) I would also like to announce my enthusiastic adoption of another unofficial title as well: *dramasplurge*. This lovely word was coined by Rodney McLean in response to the recent e-zine "fake debate" about the dramaturge vs. dramaturg controversy. (My thanks to Leeann Minogue for her valiant efforts to stir that up!)

In a witty response, Rodney suggested a uniquely Saskatchewan solution and promptly coined the very word to do it: *dramasplurge*. When I read his suggestion, I literally shouted at my computer (which may explain its subsequent crash). "That's it! Dramasplurge!"

Because if there's one thing I'd like to do as your SPC Dramaturge (and simply as a playwright and someone in love with drama) it's to encourage us all to "splurge" on drama even more than we have been. That is, I want to encourage an even wilder lavishing of attention on drama: on new plays, old plays, scripted plays, devised plays, movement-based plays, every kind of play. I'd like to see people going to everything they can (which, admittedly, is a lot of theatre to see, these days) but I'd also like to see playwrights reading even more

plays than they are now.

And, so, as your new SPC Dramaturge and unofficial but enthusiastic DramaSplurge, I'd like to issue a challenge. In this new year, I urge us all (me included) to splurge on drama in the following way: to read one more play a month than we've been reading.

For some, this will mean adding just one more play to an already considerable pile at the bedside. For others, though, it may only bring the monthly total to one. (And reading your own work doesn't count — or at least not for this purpose.)

Buy them or borrow them. (My call to splurge on drama acknowledges that our wallets aren't generally as fat as we'd like them to be. We're writers, after all.) But, please, in addition to going to see them at the theatre, read them. Read lots of them. Study them. Stage them in your mind's eye. Talk about them. Urge others to read them.

Not only will it make all the difference in the world to your own writing, it's also a great way to "see" productions of plays that, sadly, may never be produced here.

Best of all, we'll all find ourselves with even more reasons to "splurge" on drama.

Please check out my new blog devoted to drama & dramatists — a blog that, thanks to Rodney McLean, has finally found the perfect title: www.DramaSplurge.com

dramaturge: *n.* someone who studies drama and supports the development of new plays. *v.* to study, analyze and nurture the development of new plays by, among other things, offering critical feedback, historical context and moral support — a process that sometimes involves alcohol. *Origin:* From the Greek *dramatourgos* [drama-ergos worker]

splurge: *n.* 1. a lavish, extravagant and possibly dramatic display or effort. 2. a moment of great extravagance. *v.* to spend money extravagantly on or to lavish attention on.

dramasplurge: *n.* someone who lavishes attention on drama; *v.* 1. to lavish attention on drama and dramatists. 2. to splurge on theatre tickets or copies of published plays. *Origin:* 21st century, uniquely Saskatchewan word coined by award-winning playwright Rodney McLean.

In Conversation With...

The Players:

Philip Adams [PA]: Philip is a director, dramaturge, and a playwright. He dramaturged and directed Donna-Michelle St. Bernard's play *Gas Girls* which won the 2010 DORA Award for Outstanding New Play along with nominations for male actor, female actor, and set. He has been the Artistic Director of two theatre companies and is currently Artistic Director of Burning Sun Productions in Regina, Vice-President of Playwrights Canada Press, and is the Executive Director of Sage Hill Writing in Saskatoon.

Layne Coleman [LC]: Layne is a writer, actor, and director. This year, he teaches first year acting at the U of S. He is currently working on a film to be shot in and around Saskatoon. His Walrus Magazine story, *Oasis of Hope*, was nominated for a National Magazine Award.

Heather Inglis [HI]: Heather was the Dramaturge at the SPC from Sept 2007- Jan 2011. She is also a director, producer and educator. She is the founder and Artistic Director of Theatre Yes in Edmonton and currently the coordinator of the Citadel Theatre's Playwrights Young Company. A graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada, Heather studied and apprenticed at the CAEA Directors Master Class and at the Shaw Festival. She has received two Celebration of Women in the Arts Awards in Edmonton (2001&2010), is a recipient of the Mayor's, Telus Courage to Innovate Award in Edmonton (2007) and has been nominated for five Elizabeth Sterling Awards for Outstanding Independent Production. Her 2008 production of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* was nominated for four Sterling Awards, including Outstanding Director.

Colleen Murphy [CM]: Colleen is currently Writer in Residence at McMaster University in Hamilton, and Guest Playwright at The Citadel Theatre in Edmonton. Her play *The December Man (L'homme de décembre)* won the 2007 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama, the 2008 Canadian Authors Association/Carol Bolt Award for Drama and the 2006 Enbridge Playrites Award.

Other plays include *Beating Heart Cadaver* (nominated for a 1999 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama, and a Chalmers Award for Best New Play), *The Piper, Down in Adoration Falling* and *All Other Destinations are Cancelled*. Colleen is also a filmmaker and her distinct films have played in festivals around the world.

Pam Bustin [PB]: *PlayWorks* 2011 editor. Pam has been a member of the SPC since 1994 and has served two terms as president. Her plays include *Saddles in the Rain, barefoot* and *The Passage of Georgia O'Keeffe*. She's had three short radio dramas aired on CBC Radio (*Coffee in Lloyd, The White Car Project* and *Talking with the Dead*) and her novel, *Mostly Happy*, won the First Book and Fiction awards at the Saskatchewan Book Awards (2008), and the Ontario Library Association's White Pine Award (2010).

PB: Hello all, and welcome to the second annual *PlayWorks* Conversation! We're honoured to have you all aboard. This is a chance for our members to hear from fellow theatre makers across the country and for us all to toss around some ideas, questions, frustrations and joys—with the main purpose being to have people continue the conversation OFF the page.

We kicked off the first *PlayWorks* conversation with Vern Thiessen's *Towards a National Theatre – a Manifesto* (which can be found online in *PlayWorks* 2010 at www.saskplaywrights.ca) so let's dive into this year's discussion with this.... Do you think Canada has a National Theatre?

CM: I think that this country has great playwrights who have written some great Canadian plays but a National Theatre does not exist in the minds of Canadians or in reality. It ain't like hockey or the Kiwanis Festival or Tim Horton's. A National Theatre is not a familiar entity in this country – even the idea of theatre is becoming an increasingly foreign aspect of Canadian life.

LC: I like the robust joy that Vern takes in discussion, and I find his manifesto bracing.

As for a National Theatre, I think there are various theatres that represent the hopes and aspirations of Canadians. Not all Canadians though, because Canada is not really even

a country in traditional ways. How could it have a European style National Theatre? We are a grouping of various territories that are populated by immigrant peoples. And our territories are governed quite separately. We have an indigenous people and they, not surprisingly, have created some of our more exciting theatre work.

PA: I say we don't have a National Theatre. I think national *anything* smacks of a whimsical kind of didacticism and that scares me. Because as soon as someone pronounces something AS something, others will disagree, take a kick at it, boot it around the block, consider they have done a service to mankind and thespian alike if they pass not just their opinion but express a judgment upon it. This neither encourages debate nor enables critique; it is a definition locked in.

I think we have a theatre here that transcends any sense of nationalism. What's national about queer theatre? How does Filipino theatre respond to a call for a national theatre here in Canada? How does a Canadian Aboriginal company relate to a similar theatre in another nation, both of which were colonizers? My politics are subcutaneous, alas.

Theatre without borders is the direction I tilt.

CM: I interpreted Vern's notion of a National Theatre as something that sprung from and embraced all Canadians, not as a "colonizer," but rather as a state of mind, or national recognition that theatre is meaningful.

HI: Well said, Colleen. That is my sense of it as well. I'm interested in the idea that a National Theatre elevates the place of Theatre in the hearts and minds of Canadians. We are a country that is suspicious of nationhood. The notion of multiculturalism has its strengths, and has made us aware of our regional and cultural differences in a way that is unique and important. I think this is a good thing, but it may have come at the expense of Canadians having an understanding of ourselves as a nation.

In the United States, they obviously have a very strong sense themselves, *e pluribus unum* - many become one, and in that they are very interested examining themselves.

They value representations of all things American, including a variety of regions cultures and issues in schools, in popular music, cinema and, of course, in the theatre.

I rather suspect that our difficulty in acknowledging, studying, promoting and adoring our great artists has to do with the reserved humility and respect for difference that has been part of our national character. I think we could do with a bit more nationalism. I'm thinking of building our national self-esteem here. Celebrating and studying our history, good and bad, our accomplishments and struggles as a people who share this chunk of real-estate. I think this would need to start in the schools and it would include, of course, studying great Canadian plays as core curriculum.

I think that the problem of the position of the arts, in the hearts and minds of Canadians, is intimately related to our hesitance to acknowledge Canada as distinct nation. How can we value looking at ourselves if we don't value ourselves? How or why would we value work outside of our own region if we don't appreciate the importance of the unity of the regions?

Ultimately, I would like to see Canadian theatre become a powerful force in our society. So I like the idea of there being an informal cannon of theatrical literature that is studied and recognized on the street by anyone we ask. But I'm not sure we can make that happen from working only inside the world of art.

CM: I agree, Heather. We have to work outside the "art" container. Theatre needs to find its way back to the street – to the working class who might like to see themselves up on the stage once in a while, to the lower middle class who don't have a lot of extra money to throw at a night out but who are hungry for something new, to elementary school kids who should be experiencing theatre that gives them an electrical charge and a reason to go back again, rather than just a moral lesson about self-esteem, and to university students searching for something meaningful during their own search for themselves.

Vern wrote a great Manifesto. I really like 5) *Everything in the theatre dies except the written script...* but later on, his use of the word "masterpieces" is limiting and

I quibble with imposing a prescriptive formula.

PB: That would be item 12) *When seven Canadian playwright 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.*

CM: Yes. This is a good starting point but the prescriptive formula is limiting in both scope and size.

LC: I think that one or two of Vern's plays should probably make the list. He writes masterpiece-like plays. Again, I applaud him and his manifesto—but I have too many close friends who are playwrights. I would never make a list. Never.

PA: I'm with Colleen—it's a nice try but limiting.

To dramaturge this dictum...
Why seven?

It makes me think of Seven Samurai with Japanese cowboys riding the range. Seven Sisters mountain range? Seven deadly sins? It makes me ask these questions and is this what I should be doing as I try to understand what Vern meant? Why only two women? Why not half as they comprise over half of the population? In that breath, why are there not at least two by men? As the indigenous people of this country shouldn't there be equal parts allotted to them as to the invading French? Does a playwright have to die before canonization? If someone can name two dead female playwrights one of whom is Métis and the other French, case closed.

I appreciate Vern's honourable intentions because it provokes discussion, but it runs the risk of defining rather than embracing.

And, I must add,
David French is dead
Long live David French.

ALL: Hear! Hear!

LC: And maybe Vern's manifesto has validity. Certainly, his rage against the machine of Canadian theatres is justified. He points his finger in the right direction.

As Heather and Colleen have said, we need

our children to study plays in their early schooling.

CM: Yes, Layne, you are absolutely correct. Teach Canadian drama in elementary and high schools!

HI: I need to hop in on Vern's rage against theatres. It's true that many larger houses are very safe.

I'm someone who thinks the role of theatre is to challenge audiences. I also think that really safe programming drives younger audiences away. My theory is that they are often at home watching more challenging programming on television rather than going to the theatre. It seems to me that these younger audiences need to be courted if theatre is going to survive.

I'd also like to point out that some of the most exciting work being done in Canada today is being produced by small theatres which are not calcified institutions trying to maintain their audiences and programming from year to year, but are out there trying to attract new audiences. These are dynamic companies that are interested in risk. Companies that exist because of years of sweat equity lovingly committed by the artists that created them. I think Canadian playwrights would do well to look to the excellent crop of new producers to stage their work. These smaller theatres, like the playwrights themselves, have sacrificed much in order to work in the theatre, they will take risks and place their highest value on the rigors of the artistic practice.

PB: Excellent points, Heather, and good advice to our members on always expanding the list of who they need to get their work out to.

This gives us all another round of thinking to chew on as we continue our conversation about the concept of a Canadian National Theatre. It's a big thing to think on. Does it already exist? Do we need to promote its creation and/or is it even desirable.

Let's turn to the state of theatre today. How are you feeling about things? Peeves, pleasures, highs, lows?

LC: The thing that excites me, today, is the quality of young actors and writers coming out of Canada's theatre schools. I would say it is very high.

On the downside—I lament the corporatization of life, art, and theatres. Theatres are rewarded for brand, meeting fundraising goals etc.... Money is one way of evaluating the effectiveness of an organization, but I maintain it is not a very good way to look at the arts.

HI: Hear! Hear!

Also, I'm constantly disappointed at how often jostling for first place with audiences and plain old popularity, seems to come before making the best artistic choices. When this is the ethic of more senior artistic institutions, it seeps down to individual artists, who then place more value on media coverage, money and ticket sales than the work itself. I'm always sad when I sense a kind of "me first" attitude from artists who are all, really, on the same side.

PA: A concern for me is the apparent lack of rigour in the selection of new plays that are getting produced. New plays are, by their very definition, difficult and time-consuming to put onstage. Producers must be provided with the necessary resources to get the play right: money to buy actors' time, the provision of space, an exchequer full of patience, flexibility, and the courage not to go until the script is ready.

My hope comes from the breadth of practice and scope of our young playwrights. Some of the most exciting work I've seen and read of late has to do with practitioners who are reaching out through other media (video, dj, dance, gymnastics) in order to tell their story in a way that is meaningful to them, but all the while sticking to what they define as the principles of good theatre. If theatre practitioners are passionate about their work and present it in a compelling way, then I'm excited. If they are pushing themselves in order to find new audiences – ones with whom they connect – then I want to see their work.

CM: I have a list of peeves that include theatres being terrified of their audiences; warnings posted on theatres and on posters that a play has "mature content or themes" (why would people want to see a play with immature content or themes?); the endless contortions we all go through to justify theatre's existence by having to prove that art translates into money (sometimes it simply does not translate into money but does that make it less worthy?); the phrase "text-based and non-text-based work", and

storytelling passing itself off as a dramatic play.

AND.... I'm excited about Everything! Particularly the enthusiasm that young people feel for live theatre, and as well for my stubborn, stupid belief that theatre can change the world. Edward Bond said, "There is no world without theatre."

PA: Speaking of posting "warnings", while exiting a tough-subject play in Saskatoon recently I overheard someone decry the fact that there was no mention of how "depressing that show was." She thought there should be a public notice about this.

PB: Oh GAWD – I'm so sad to hear that, Philip. I'm thinking I even know what show that was. I do believe I leapt to my feet for that show! It was great.

And I'm totally with Colleen. I too, stubbornly, hold on to the belief that theatre can change the world. I think that it is our JOB to change the world – the only way it can be done, one heart at a time. I don't want *much* from us, eh?

HI: I think that the shape of Canadian theatre is shifting as a younger generation of artists become the decision makers and produce their own work professionally. New voices and new visions are the gateway to an invigorated theatre. I am also inspired by all the terrific, talented and committed Canadian women who continue, to write, direct, dramaturge and produce work of the highest standards no matter the odds. The theatre is still largely a man's world, but I think that too is changing—slowly, and I'm excited to see what will happen in the next couple of decades.

CM: I have a question for you all: what kind of plays do Canadian audiences want to see? What kind of dramas might they be interested in?

PB: Good question. I have a superficial/knee jerk reaction to this—"Something funny. Something entertaining (whatever the hell I mean by that)." But I don't truly believe that "entertaining" is all we, as Canadian audiences, want.

I hold theatre to an insanely high standard. I get excited every time the house lights go down – hoping that *this* will be the night when the magic happens...when I laugh

and cry...when my heart is broken open and I understand a little bit more about being human. I want that to happen EVERY TIME I go to a play. I don't expect so much from books or even films. I wonder why...

What do you guys think? What do we want to see? Do we count ourselves, here, as members of the audience? Or are we thinking of the audience as "them" for this question?

HI: I think there are a variety of audiences who want different things. I know that larger theatres need to make money to keep the doors open. They therefore need to do pieces that have a large audience appeal, that are primarily entertaining. But I just can't shake the notion that there must be a Canadian audience for more challenging work by our own writers. David Mamet sells out in New York.

LC: I don't know if audiences know what they want to see. I don't believe they really do. And it is hard to speak about them as if they have one or two characteristics that you can count on.

I know I don't have anything I particularly want to see. I just do not want to be bored. When you commit to closing the doors and turning the lights off and holding peoples' attention for an hour or two it would be nice if the event had some special reason for doing so. I don't want to see one person shows—though I have seen many that I liked. I agree with Colleen that storytelling is not drama. I lament that there are not bigger cast shows. Imagine Chekhov trying to get produced today. Shakespeare would not even be considered for a moment.

Drama is a kind of thinking machine where ideas get smashed against each other. There is a kind of thrilling violence of emotions that take place when theatre works. But I can't claim to understand it.

It's easy to say to a playwright, "You don't have any conflict here..." and I've said it many times, but that is not necessarily native to Canadians. Conflict is something we spend our lives avoiding. In the theatre, it is most welcome. But to have conflict between two characters in a play is not always the conflict that's most important. The tension between play and audience is sometimes even more essential. There is an unspoken conflict that arises in a dangerous

play between the thesis of a play and the belief system of an audience. This is the more alive conflict, the more necessary in the theatrical equation.

What are the conflicts that are loose in our world at present?

Speaking of David French, R.I.P., he had a story to tell about Newfoundland families, an ancient conflict between father and son, and yet the more raw conflict was the projection of Newfoundlanders held by mainlander audiences. David French made the mainland and mainstream audience confront their cultural prejudices about Newfoundland. His native culture spoke through him.

I remember in the 70's and 80's many of the plays I was involved with were about humans being caught in large development schemes. Farmer pitted against big business, that sort of thing. It appealed to us as artists that the individual could stand and fight. We believed that the audience needed to be challenged to cheer for the little guy.

So much of our life now appears to be our relationship to and through technology. How do you dramatize that? Linda Griffiths is currently writing a play about young men lost into the world of violent video games. And the conflict there is between boys and their parents. The parents are powerless to understand or rescue their son from the demon of gaming. I saw a reading at the Tarragon of this and it was thrilling and depressing at the same time. It depressed me because it did not end well. It was a lot of fun along the way and then the tragic denouement left you bereft. It reminded me that tragedy, where there's a funeral instead of a wedding at the end; tragedy is messier than comedy.

Deanne Taylor (VideoCabaret) used to say that good plays were like democracy; they make a mess and are not efficient. And they cost a lot of money too. But that is kind of the point of art. We ask ourselves to make something that is not of practical use, but of spiritual use.

HI: I think this notion of Canadians avoiding conflict is very interesting as it related to drama, which of course is driven by it. I'll be thinking on that.

PA: I think Canadians want to see plays that

make them shift in their seats. An excellent case in point Colleen is your play, *The December Man*. People want to be deeply moved by the total theatrical experience, something you achieved so masterfully therein. Of late, I've been reading Richard Wagner's ideas about theatre. He talks about the total theatrical experience or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which included the direct participation of the audience and not in a *We Will Rock You* kind of way, but rather by their silence at the end of a performance, which meant more to him than applause. I think there is a clamouring amongst certain rebels in the theatre for this. Tough to ignore Wagner's racism, but his belief in the power of theatre is difficult for me to overlook.

PB: Silence. I like that. Gives me chills.

CM: I think people—audiences—might like to see themselves on stage and experience some of the struggles they go through

PA: Yes! I've been working with two very different playwrights here in Saskatchewan: one who, with an ear to history, writes plays about people and events that happened right here. These are presented on the very soil where these historical events took place. The other playwright engages a dj and writes hip-hop songs, which he embeds right in the body of the text in the traditional musical format: talk, talk, sing, talk. Both playwrights have created pieces that have filled the house and moved their audiences but in radically different ways and for a diverse demographic.

I think there is a hunger in this land for theatre that does precisely this: makes us want more. And for the most part, the hungriest are audiences that are not familiar with attending the theatre. They come off the farm and emerge from their coffee shops and are moved by what they see and by how it is achieved. How cool is that.

I haven't quite figured out the deeper trend in these two approaches and I'm not certain I need to: I'm just enjoying the doing of it.

PB: I say, "Carry on doing it!" especially if, along with the sold out crowds, it is also the type of work that feeds your soul. I think that is what we are all trying to do—looking to bring people IN from the highways and byways to see our work. Looking to create

work that, "people want to see." Not in a "write a hit" kind of way—that isn't what I mean (though it would be great if something I wrote struck that sort of mass appeal chord). We all create the work we must, the work we have to give, and we all want it to find it's own audience.

Let's shift gears here and talk about creating new work ...

We left off the 2010 conversation with a question about new play development with Kelley Jo asking Vern what he found, "least helpful in a new play development relationship with dramaturges, new play centres etc." What about you? What do you find useful, excellent, desirable and /or challenging in relationships between playwrights, dramaturges, directors or theatres? Feel free to tell a specific tale – with or without names (*she grins*).

CM: When I was one of the playwrights in residence at Necessary Angel Theatre, Richard Rose, artistic director at the time, chose plays to develop and produce. He always made a commitment to produce the play. That is admirable. Often playwrights' units are organized around a "scratch and sniff" model. Playwrights vie for approval and production and the writing suffers.

Good dramaturges are amazing creatures; bad dramaturges are dangerous ones. I am not convinced that a director and dramaturge should be the same person. A good dramaturge deals with the structure of words on the page and has no stakes in the production. A play must be alive on the page. Some playwrights want a hands-on dramaturge, some want a hands-off approach. A playwright should determine what approach they want. They should not abdicate their authority and should take full responsibility for writing the best play that they can.

PB: Absolutely! I also believe that, for me, different projects need different approaches and I need to recognize that and go forth and find what I need or... not. What works for one show may not work for the next.

I know that some playwrights develop a serious, intimate, relationship with a one dramaturge and work with them on... everything. I've had the good fortune of working with various people on different things—always taking what is useful to

me and... slowly learning to trust my own voice and instincts. Good dramaturges actually helped me find that confidence.

HI: In my role as dramaturge, I try to assist people in writing the play they want to write. I try to ask questions and reflect back to them what I read. I try to be straight with them about how the play is functioning as I read it. I was in a session with Tom Wood a few weeks ago and he likened playwriting to writing a recipe for a cake. (A recipe that, God willing, will be used more than once!) In order for cake to be a cake, certain elements have to be present or the cake won't rise. Then you will have a flan, or a pudding, or maybe just a mess, but not a cake. You can be as creative as you want to about how you approach it, but it still needs to rise if it is going to be cake. In a play, certain elements must be there in order for it to be a play, in order to successfully tell a story in dialogue. So, I try to reflect back to playwrights the mechanics of the play so we can make sure it will "rise."

My work as director informs my work as a dramaturge, but they are different roles and I think Colleen is right they are often best separated. In the text-based theatre, the essential elements of the script (the recipe) must be in place before a production (the baking of and icing of the cake) can be successful. The tasks of the director are equivalent to baking and icing the cake. The playwright's task is to write a recipe that will work. I think plays can get in trouble when we confuse the production elements, (baking, icing) with the elements that give the play substance and cause the rising action (the text). Confusing the cake with icing is usually a recipe for Peter Brook's "Deadly Theatre". (See *The Empty Space* by Peter Brook).

I also really try to adapt what I'm doing to each individual playwright. Every writer is different and each needs different things. As Colleen said, some writers like hands on, some need a real hands off approach. Some want only questions. Some really want you to answer *their* questions. When I start working with a writer, there is always a bit of dance while I figure out how we are going to work together. I ask them a lot of questions and keep asking until I have a sense of who they are and where they are in their work. That isn't to say that I have not had some false starts, said the wrong thing, and then had woo them back.

I totally have, and I have learned from that. The relationship between a playwright and dramaturge is pretty special. Not every dramaturge is right for every playwright.

I think it is really useful for dramaturges to develop relationships with writers over a long period of time. As a dramaturge comes to know how a writer works, I think it is possible to more fully support them in their process. One of the many things I have valued so much about my time at the SPC is the relationships I have developed with writers in Saskatchewan.

PA: I, like some other dramaturges, consider myself to be a mid-wife to the play. I'm not here to change, doctor, prescribe, predict, or coerce the playwright into doing something that the play doesn't want done to it. Far too often, the play is tossed aside in the tussle between playwright and dramaturge, abandoned by dramaturge and director. Often there is a need for a stricter dramaturgy as it heads into production. This is a different kind of work and one that needn't be shared with the director. Good production dramaturges are rare.

At the risk of pissing off some playwrights who are dear to my heart, I would go so far as to suggest that, sometimes, a new play needs to be protected from the playwright. When new scripts come to the rehearsal hall fully formed out of the foreheads of the playwrights, it worries me.

LC: The thing about writing is... it is a very subjective art form.

After you've written something, you might fall in love with it, and, of course, after you pass it around for reading you will receive many different kinds of development advice. I found it very difficult to give dramaturgical notes myself. Often, when I was listened to (and that was rarely), I found second or third drafts of scripts less interesting than first drafts. (And by a first draft, I do not mean the first moment it flies off the pen. There is a good deal of rewriting that goes on in a first draft.) Sometimes, the later drafts *answer* the questions of readers or workshop participants and those answers can make too much of the glacier visible on stage. I try to follow Hemingway's rules, only one fifth of the glacier should be seen, the rest felt or intuited.

I find that the better the writer the more

dangerous it is to pile on the notes. For me, the most exciting writing comes out of the body of the playwright; not their minds as much as their ancient memories, unconscious mind, and instincts.

CM: I love how you said that, Layne; plays coming out the body of the playwright, and their unconscious memories. Good one, Layne!

LC: Plays should be dangerous. Good plays make the secrets of life (or hidden life) visible in public. This comes with a great deal of risk: Both financial and emotional.

I remember John Huston saying he believed only in the French version of censorship. When asked what that was, he said that the French had a habit of burning theatres down if they didn't like the play. I knew what he meant. Great plays are often dangerous for the health of the playwright, but good for the audiences. This probably comes from the early sponsors of plays being royalty and if you made fun of them, more than they were willing to abide, you died.

New plays need a particular kind of audience. And as much as I am happy that some theatres enjoy large subscription audiences, this is often the death knell for dangerous plays. The customers or audiences are deemed as always being "right." They have to be pleased with what's on the menu or they won't come back. If they feel a play is offensive to their sense of what is decent or "entertainment," they'll withhold their support of the company. Perfectly within their rights, but it means that great plays sometimes cannot find their audiences. Because where they are staged is not a place that more adventurous souls can afford or want to be caught dead in.

Another thing I have to say, in connection to this, is that I find that the level of play critiquing in our country is appalling. The critics are a familiar whine for artists and I don't want to waste important space with too much on this, but critics have an important role to play in *developing audiences*. Helping people find great art. But too often, they use their role as a policeman or punishing arm of some false god. They treat their jobs as consumer guides. This is a reductive way of building a country's art cannon.

PB: I like your point about theatres with

large subscription audiences. It is so true.

So, the big houses create backspaces. The “sandboxes” the “second stages,” where they can put the dangerous work and they actually CALL it that, in many cases—sort of DARE the audience to attend. I get that calling things dangerous is a marketing ploy but... I'm just not sure, right now, how I'm feeling about these “second stages.”

It is on these smaller stages where we can actually see new work at the regional theatres—which, in a way, is great. I'm glad I can see the new work and that others can see it. I'm super glad that Persephone's Deep End Series this year is premiering THREE new plays by Saskatchewan Playwrights - that is AWESOME.

So, what's my beef? I'm not even sure, Maybe I just wish the theatres could *somehow* hold the shows on their second stages more...EQUAL with the mainstage productions even though it is in a smaller space.

What do you guys think? New spaces are always good, right? But what do think about the second stage thing?

CM: Dangerous or risky plays, plays that might disturb or upset the status quo, the stuff that often rattles our nervous systems, these plays are often relegated to the second stages. That model was created twenty-five years ago...and so, today, plays with coarse language, mature content or angry protest are “contained” in the second stage ghetto. The “real” audience is then protected from them.

LC: The second stage thing is absolutely about managing risk. Corporate people are fond of saying these are “risk averse” times. You can turn risk into a marketing idea. Come into the small room where nasty things take place, nudity, swearing, sexual content, mature themes; everything that humans want to avoid talking about in public happens in the small room in the back.

I remember touring *The Drawer Boy* in Saskatchewan. We did a one-night-er in Yorkton. The doors opened at the end and the audience was on their feet applauding and one woman left the building huffing, “Honestly! The language! Enough is enough!” You'd be hard pressed to find

bad language in that play. There were a couple instances of taking the Lord's name in vain.

PA: As a sidebar Layne, in Nova Scotia we had to alter the language (with the playwright's consent) from one part of the province to the other. You can say “Jesus Christ” in one area but not the other, “fuck” in the latter but not in the former.

LC: We live in a country where some audience members assume that the standards they have in their own living rooms is the same one that should be applied in our theatre. The second stage is a warning to such people. Be careful those that enter here—you might be offended. The second stage is the room for offense. The main stage is where you are pleased. Fairy tales happen. No strong emotions. I prefer theatre in small rooms to that in big rooms.

HI: I agree. In contrast, HBO seems to make a very good business providing stories with challenging content to audiences. So I go back to my idea that younger audiences are more challenged and engaged by some television programming than by our current theatre programming. I can't get over the idea that there must be healthy audience for plays that reflect real life, which is nasty. I wonder if at times the opinion of the one lady who complained and walked out ends up winning out over the opinion of the rest of the audience that stood up and applauded. The squeaky wheel...

All this said I also love theatre in small rooms as an artist and as an audience. I like what small rooms offer audiences in terms of immediacy and intimacy. I think small rooms can be very exciting for audiences and the intensity of the small venue experience is something that can only be found in the theatre. This summer, I staged a play in a hotel room and found the audiences were very excited by being so close to the action. It really made for a one of kind experience that people continue to want to talk about.

Although I think it is true that theatres tend to put more challenging work on smaller stages and shows that they know will sell tickets on large stages, I think we should acknowledge that some plays work better on small stages and some are better on large ones. I've seen plays suffer and fizzle

The Deep End

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in production when presented in the wrong sized venue. For me choosing a space is a very important element of staging a play and I'm very interested in considering non-traditional as well as traditional theatrical space. So, I'd like offer that perhaps a small stage is *as important* a venue as the large one in that it creates an exclusive, one-of-a-kind experience for audiences. Both small and large sized venues can be a blessing or a curse for a playwrights work depending on the nature of the play.

PB: Yeah, that's what I'd like. I'd just like it to feel like the theatres cared as much and gave equal resources to the shows in the smaller space. OK... OK... maybe they can't give TOTALLY EQUAL resources – but just... “Do better, you big theatres with awesome shows booked into your second stage. Give ‘em a real fighting chance! C'mon. Pony up with some cash for production values and good marketing.” Some theatres do this already, I know. I'd just like to... encourage all the theatres to embrace and celebrate the small room shows... even more than they already do.

PA: This topic brings to mind the idea of someone asking a playwright to limit the cast size because no theatre company will produce it. I think this is less than

responsible. If the play itself, and the story it needs to tell, can justify a 13-member cast, then 13 it is. As an artistic director, I programmed two such productions and still made my nut. Recently, I directed a show with 28 in the cast. All of which is to say, it can be done. Be brave. If the play is going to work better in an intimate space, then produce it there. If it needs more breadth, then this challenge needs to be laid at the feet of the producers.

HI: The cast size thing is hard one. I struggle with this. I mourn the loss of large cast plays and I applaud your taking on larger projects. That is so important. If we only restrict ourselves to works with one and two in the cast, I think we do the art form a disservice. On the other hand, playwrights need to know that larger casts are a harder sell to theatres and that to land a production, their story needs to absolutely require and justify a large cast. In the end, I try and be honest and realistic with writers about the ...produceability... of a play in all respects. I think that both large and small plays can be producible. I also agree that it is important to dream and create big to achieve big.

CM: Even though it's probably a death sentence for the play when a playwright writes more than six or seven characters, it's also crap for playwrights to submit to eternally creating small cast plays. To see the stage fill up with twenty people is exciting, and if a drama demands twenty characters, then twenty characters have the right to be on that stage.

PB: Hear hear! I love big cast shows and small cast shows. Like Layne, the only thing I'm sure to hate is... boredom.

So, let's get spicy.... When we were first

discussing this year's conversation, Heather mentioned a desire to talk about opening things up, dramaturgically speaking – finding ways to develop work that isn't so... well, TEXT based. Any thoughts on this – things you've seen, things you'd like to try yourself?

CM: I would appreciate a definition of non-text-based work. Does that mean plays that are not based in language? Is it image based? Mime? I hear this term often but it is so broad.

PB: I think that is a great question, Colleen. I'm not really sure what it means either – even though we have actually kicked this idea of “different ways to develop a play” around a few times at our Spring Festival opening night discussions. I always sort feel like, “Well, OK, but really I just want to WRITE a play and that play is mostly dialogue and so... am I not then always MOSTLY text based? I do love theatrical images/pictures/sound/lighting/magic but basically... I think I am text bound.... Mostly.

Can you jump in, Heather, and give us an idea of what sorts of things you mean?

HI: So here's what I mean by non-text based work. I'm no expert on this so I'm a bit nervous that I'll misspeak on the subject.

In a number of regions of the country (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal), artists are increasingly creating theatrical events where a dialogue-based text does not provide the recipe for the proceedings. These works are often highly collaborative involving artists from a variety of theatrical disciplines who together devise events using impulses from design, dance, playwriting, acting, lighting,

etc simultaneously to create performances where there may or may not be a narrative structure. Robert Lepage is a good example of this type of work as is the Electric Company from Vancouver. Playwrights Theatre Centre increasingly works with a growing number of groups who create this way. I understand that that Centre des Auteurs Dramatiques in Montreal also does a great deal of this work and certainly it seems that French language artists have pushed these boundaries for years. Some of the artists who work this way would argue that their work is not driven by dramatic structure and is not served by traditional dramaturgy while others use tools drawn from of dramatic storytelling in their work. What arises is some truly arresting and exciting theatricality that can only be born out of a style of collaboration that reaches beyond the roles of mainstream theatre production.

If a play is akin to a recipe, I think it is fair to argue that some these theatrical events are not plays. Some are really nothing like what we have understood a play to be at all. They may be theatre, but they are not plays. I think this kind of work can generate some stunning theatrical images that are appealing and challenging for audiences. It pushes the boundaries of what theatre is and then goes past it to possible to create utterly new forms. And this work has an audience following and brings new audience to theatres.

It is not the way I work, though I've dabbled, but it is style creation that seems to growing.

I think people crave narrative and where they don't find it, they create it. Myself, I love work that can marry fantastic theatricality with engaging narrative through dialogue-based storytelling.

PA: Text spoken from a stage in front of people is about the only definition I have for determining what is and what isn't theatre. Is the 70s punk band the Viletones theatre? No. Is Patti Smith reciting poetry in front of her band theatre—even though Sam Shepard was the drummer? No. Are Michael Hollingsworth's *Clear Light* or his VideoCab work theatre? Clearly yes.

The dramaturge is called upon to expand his or her definition of what they do in order to support the demands of the script. As each script is different, so too



How High's the Water? (by Doreen M. Bleich): Hughene Day, Anne Boxall, Al Pinkney, Darwyn Worsley, Pat Butt, Heidi Hoppe, Tammy Murphy, Mel McCorrison. Missing: Shannon Steeg and Morgan Buyaki. Nipawin Centennial Players. Photo credit: Verda Hoppe.

should the approach to the script change. As in midwifery, every mother and child combination is a different undertaking, which requires a different approach.

LC: I feel that this [finding new ways to work] would be a good initiative to take. Some theatre is literary and some is not. Imagine reading a Robert Lepage script. I want to be surprised when I sit down and watch a play. I want to be transported. There is far too much conventionality in our theatre.

Urjo Kareda felt that the Fringe festivals were destroying new play writing in Canada. By this, I think he meant that what worked for ten bucks and within a 50 minute time frame was not necessarily great for theatre in the long view. He may have changed his mind if he'd lived longer. I don't know. But Urjo could talk about new writing in ways that were rare. He had a gift for that. He was critical and imaginative, but he connected somewhere deep to what dangerous writing could do. He believed in supporting the career of a writer, not just one play at a time. He was a literary dramaturge.

But other theatre artists need something else. They need a sandbox to play in. Paul Thompson is like that. He needs the flesh and blood actor to reveal their own humanity, their own culture; each artist within that vision contributes the unseen forces at play in their own lives. You learn something quite different about Canada from playing outside of the literary form.

Vancouver is, in my mind, more advanced in this area than most of our theatre communities. By that I mean they take work outside of the buildings of corporate art. Again, by *corporate* I mean art that is paid for by the familiar brand names, some companies are more enlightened than others. And we have big companies now instead of kings. I attended an incredible month long writing seminar at the CBC many years ago. They spent about 300 thousand dollars training twelve of us from across the country. We were not paid anything, but our instructors were. We were there to shake up the CBC. This is what we were told. Of course, it wasn't true. We were there to justify somebody's professional development budget. Anyway, an important television producer said something I will never forget. He said: "In television, you

can never undermine the values of the sponsor. Series television programming is a way of herding the audience like cattle from one commercial to the next. As soon as you program something that undermines the values of the sponsor, you are dead." It would be an interesting experiment to pay a group of gifted artists to consciously explore ways of undermining our sponsors. That might be a workshop worth trying.

The cliché is that it takes a village to birth a play. You want somebody with money in that village to pay the playwright. But you also need an audience to properly birth a new play. And right now, I feel like theatre is starving. Starving from a lack of attention.

CM: Thank you, Layne, for expounding on non-text based, particularly by contrasting Urjo and Paul. And thank you, Heather, for your insight into it. I am exploring new ways of positioning a character's relationship to the audience, but finally I use words as the bones to create images in the theatre. I'm a filmmaker and my films are mostly image - in fact, you could say that most of my films are non-text based films. It's a funny flip-flop.

I wish to pick up on Layne's point that theatre is starving. Maybe audiences are starving, too.

They are packing the movie theatres so they can experience an opera, a great opera that is emotionally demanding but finally, fulfilling. I've watched people file out of those things after four hours—their backsides numb, tears dripping down their cheeks and they're happier than pigs in a poop pile. Why? Because they've had some kind of emotional experience through music and drama, and opera offers it all: the high stakes, the big emotion, the crowds, love, sex, death, the heartbreak, the spectacle, the images, the costumes and that most cherished element, the music and the singing. I am not saying theatre can do all of that...but could it not do some of it?

PB: Mentioning Paul helped me understand it more, or maybe... open up to it more. It's not that I deny the existence of or have not participated in plays or "theatrical events" that are created by a group, but when we start talking about using the SPC to develop those kinds of shows, I guess I get my back up a bit. The SPC is a fabulous

organization that supports playwrights in developing new work. Playwrights. So... I get defensive of it and sort of want to say—this is OUR (meaning playwrights) sandbox. If you want to have a "theatre makers centre" that is a different thing, I also defend the SPC from all talk of moving into developing film scripts. We develop plays. We are good at it. I think we are good at it because of our focus and the actors/directors and dramaturges we work with... but... I blather on.

I also love what you said about Urjo "supporting the career of a writer, not just one play at a time." I had the honour of meeting and working with John Murrell at Sage Hill back in '95 and we talked a lot about developing playwrights as opposed to just plays. We spent a lot of time walking in the hills, John and I. I was working on my second play. We talked a bit about the play, but mostly we talked about what kind of lives we wanted to live. Not only what we wanted to say, what stories we needed to tell or hear, but also, where we wanted to live, what kind of relationships we hungered for.

And...thinking of John takes me back to what you said earlier, that "the most exciting writing comes out of the body of the playwright, not their minds as much as their ancient memories, unconscious mind, and instincts." I like that. I need to chew on that a while. I need to chew on a lot of things we've brought up here.

Thank you all so much for joining in and continuing the SPC's conversation about things theatrical. You've definitely given us all some interesting things to toss around and get talking about.

Here's hoping we can all gather in person one day and talk some more. Til then – work steady and be well.

Do you have an idea for next year's conversation? Something you would really like to hear about? Someone you really want to hear FROM?

Drop a line to Pam at pbustin@yahoo.ca and we'll see if we can make your dream come true.

Upcoming Member Productions / Publications

Velocity (Daniel Macdonald) Persephone Theatre (February 16 - 27, 2011)

Two Rooms (Mansel Robinson) Persephone Theatre (April 27 - May 8, 2011), published by Scirocco Drama (Spring 2011), The play is being translated into French by Governor General's Award Winner, Jean Marc Dalpe, and will be produced by Sudbury's Le Theatre du Nouvel-Ontario and in Ottawa by Theatre de la Vieille in 2011-2012.

In the Air (Rod MacIntyre) Dancing Sky Theatre (May 6 - 22, 2011)

Bannock Republic (Kenneth T. Williams) published by Scirocco Drama (Spring 2011)

Cafe Daughter (Kenneth T. Williams) Gwaandak Theatre (Winter 2011).

2010 Member Productions / Publications / Awards

A History of Breathing (Daniel MacDonald) reading at Native Earth Performing Arts, Toronto

A Place in the Shade (Rodney Mclean) 3rd Place - John V. Hicks Award (SWG)

A Touch of Grace (Wendy Lockman) King's Shorts Festival, Nova Scotia

An Act of Elusion (Curtis Peeteetuce) Nomination Saskatoon and Area Theatre Award

Outstanding Achievement in Playwriting

Bannock Republic (Kenneth T. Williams) Persephone Theatre

Bloom (Leeann Minogue) aRTLink Productions, Edmonton Fringe Festival

Daniel MacDonald, winner, *Enbridge Established Playwright Award*, Alberta Theatre Projects

Dry Streak (Leeann Minogue) Grand Theatre, London ON, Fox Valley, Abernethy and Chesley ON, Coronach SK

Ducks on the Moon (Kelley Jo Burke) published by Hagios Press and toured by Curtain Razors, IDEAS documentary CBC radio

Exit Strategies (Catherine Harrison, Amber McGrath Huck, Clare Middleton) 400 Pounds of Sunshine, Winner Saskatoon and Area Theatre Award, Outstanding Achievement in Playwriting

Homecoming (Leeann Minogue) productions in Kelihier, Anaheim, Lake Alma, published by Scirocco Drama

How High's the Water? (Doreen Bleich) Nipawin Centennial Players

Gordon Winter (Kenneth T. Williams) Persephone Theatre

Jesse's Girl (Charlie Peters & Kent Peters) Postage Puppies, Saskatoon Fringe

Kobyla (B.D. Miller) 2nd Place - John V. Hicks Award (SWG)

Luff Actually: A Res Christmas Story (Curtis Peeteetuce) Saskatchewan Native Theatre

Prairie Song: An Indian Cinderella Story (Pauline Whitehead) Thunderbird Theatre Group, National Fringe tour

Promises to Keep (Lenore Green) Prince Albert Community Players

Robots Eating Humans (Nathan Howe) Caca Pasa Productions, National Fringe tour

Saving Lonesome George (Gail Bowen), tour Carousel Players, Ontario

The Bob Shivery Show (David Sealy) Suncor Energy Stage One Festival Lunchbox

Theatre, Calgary

The Clinic (Charlie Peters) Honourable Mention at the Tarragon Theatre's Under 20 for Under 20s Playwriting Contest, Toronto

The Eternity Project (Shawn Erker) Fifth Wall, Saskatoon Fringe

The Interview (Ken Wilson) winner Dorothy White Award Ottawa Little Theatre

The Selkie Wife (Kelley Jo Burke) Fly By Night Theatre, Toronto

The Walnut Tree (Geoffrey Ursell) Nomination Saskatoon and Area Theatre Award, Outstanding Achievement in Playwriting

Thunderstick (Kenneth T. Williams) published by Scirocco Drama. co-produced by Persephone Theatre/Theatre Network

Two Rooms (Mansel Robinson) Winner John V. Hicks Award (SWG), Winner Downstage's Uprising National Playwriting Competition (Calgary)

Whistling at the Northern Lights (Jennifer Wynne Webber) reading at Urban Stages, New York



Ducks on the Moon (Kelley Jo Burke) Kelley Jo Burke, Dancing Sky Theatre, Meacham. Photo by Eric Eggerston

Steve: A Satire

By Mansel Robinson

My buddy, Steve, is trying to kick. Again. Trying to kick the habit that has ruined his life.

He's waiting for me in a coffee shop, a place he normally hates: "What a joint – all the texting and tweeting and laptop lap-dancing and all the hipsters with the latest must-have carcinogenic contraption from Silicon Valley." But he's into his fourth mug of joe when I arrive. He is gaunt, pupils pinned.

"I've really blown it, man. The kids were right, those young 'uns know the score. Playwriting is supposed to be a gateway drug. You crank out one or two plays, the phone rings, and you move on to the real work: TV, scenarios for video games. That's the way this racket works. But I stayed too long at the fair and look at me. I'm wrecked. I shoulda quit years ago."

He is indeed a mess, but his dilemma is not occupational or existential, more a function of his haberdashery. I don't really see the problem. After all, he got a grant last year to write a play. Free money.

"First of all, it's not a grant and it's not free money – it's a contract, one I signed with the tax-payer, committing me to produce quality work. But even though most of the money goes to the landlord and Safeway and Bell Canada, over at the National Post and the Star Kleenex the special ed columnists call me a drain on the public purse. And my colleagues, who didn't get a contract – they accuse me of sucking up to the juries and writing politically correct pablum. Free money? Bite me."

I remind him that the reason most of his friends don't get a "contract" is because their proposals read like a rough first draft.

"Exactly so. Written by a drooling rock drummer cranked on hillbilly heroin and scrawled with a sharpened popsicle stick dipped in poodle doo."

Over the top. Again. And now he's blathering on about the funding agencies, one-time champions of the artist, who have fallen in love with the American/Albertan model with its insistence that artists must be more entrepreneurial. "Thatcherite shite, a massive *E.coli* infection intentionally spread to kill everything: play development centres, art galleries, public broadcasting – and the arts boards themselves." He foams dark roast. "They tell us that art is a business. What, like Enron? Like Nortel? Like the Lehman Brothers? Entrepreneurial? Like those arrogant gargoyles on *Dragons' Den* who hijack someone's sweat-soaked ideas for chump change? A writer invents something brand-spanking new and takes it to the marketplace – what could be more capitalistic than that?"

I suggest he try writing something that people actually want to see.

Now it's me who's gone too far, and Steve begins to talk in tongues. Mayan, I guess, based on his intake. I suggest he switch to organic tea. And gently remind him that he is in the vanguard of a new civic order, a proud member of the creative class.

"Yeah, yeah, you've bought into that Orwellian double-speak too, all those tubby burghers on town council yapping about the creative city and Richard Florida and blah blah blah. But what working artist can afford to live here with all that oil money sloshing about and driving rents through the hole in the ozone? It's just lip service. And if I want lip service, I'll drunk-dial a coed talking smut to raise her tuition."

"Maybe you could teach playwriting. More dough talking about luminous dialogue than in writing it."

He scoffs. "Nobody can teach playwriting 'cause nobody knows how to write a play. They're snowflakes, no two the same. Playwriting is organic, but it ain't organic chemistry. No textbook."

I protest, talk about the Socratic method, and the value of the apprenticeship model, and the time-honoured tradition of the mentor, but he's already on to what passes for his next thought. "And teaching is just another corporate Ponzi scheme – you teach people to become teachers who teach people to become

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teachers. No, I gotta quit this whole shebang, cold turkey.”

And do what?

Ah, that old chestnut. Quit and do what?

Because after all this time, he still doesn't know. And after a few minutes of a fidgeting silence, he invokes the good days: snug at his kitchen table, the new scene going well, while across the street on a minus-thirty morning, the section gang is loading up their gear to go out and fix the frost-busted rail; or hunting the ever-elusive Story with a good dramaturg in an afternoon-empty bar; and the actors who breathe his characters into life; or the stranger on the street who says she went to one of his plays with friends and that they talked and argued about it for hours ...

And now here it comes: his eyes focus and his shoulders lift. It's something I have witnessed a dozen times: from across the room, through the din of chatter and clicking keypads, he has misheard a fragment of human speech, and a new character has just whispered in his ear: "Follow me. I know something you don't."

And out the door he goes, home to the kitchen table and the pencil.

And a year or two from now, with another little second-stage, small-cast snowflake melting away in our memories, he'll be back, kicking.

Steve. What a *schmuck*.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons or institutions living or doomed is entirely coincidental – and inevitable.

*The character of Steve first appeared in *Bite The Hand*, which premiered at Persephone Theatre and was published by Scirocco Drama. He has been barred from *Two Rooms*, which will premiere at Persephone Theatre in April. *Two Rooms* won the 2010 John V. Hicks Award and the 2010 Uprising National Playwriting Competition and will be published by Scirocco Drama in 2011.*

Seven Questions for a Playwright...

with Catherine Harrison

When do you write (time of day)?

I find I'm at my most focused first thing in the morning. If I can roll out of bed, make some coffee and get to work before other things start crowding into my brain, I will have some very productive hours.

How do you write (quill or laptop)?

When I am first sketching out an idea, I love having a new notebook and some good pens. There is just something so terrifically satisfying about filling a notebook with your own writing. I am a stationery nerd. Staples is my happy place. Told ya. Nerd. Anywho...

When it gets down to the business of editing, there's just nothing like the old laptop for speed and convenience (and frustration, and headaches...but that's computers for you).

Where is your favourite place to write?

At the moment, my very favorite place is in my comfy chair in the living room facing my big picture window that looks out over nothing but rolling hills. I do a lot of staring and thinking, and it affords me a view that's always changing but not too much to distract me.

What do you need to begin a play?

A lot of different things move me to create a play.

Usually it's people, strange unbelievable real life people whose stories (or what I imagine their stories to be) intrigue me.

A strong image can inspire me.

Short stories,

Song lyrics.

I try to be receptive and observant to the world around me, it lets me see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

What do you need to finish a play?

A deadline...

and a kick in the ass.



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

The hardest thing that I have discovered lately, is getting over the feeling that I should be doing something else. Something more "practical," that "makes money." For this year, this one glorious year, I get to be writer in residence at Dancing Sky Theatre, so I *am* getting paid to write. It *is* "practical," I *am* "making money." But do you think I can shake that feeling that I'm indulging in some sort of guilty pleasure? No. Perhaps because I grew up Catholic? It's most annoying. The hardest part of writing a play, for me, is...well... writing a play. There is nothing more agonizing, frustrating, mind boggling and emotionally taxing that writing a play. But it's a challenge I accept over and over again.

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

Being rich and famous.

Definitely.

Other than that, I guess you could say that it's that feeling of sitting amongst your audience on opening night, and seeing them react to the work that you've done. Sometimes, if you're lucky, people can see their own lives up on stage and it comforts them, changes them, angers them, saddens them, moves them or inspires them. I have been lucky enough to have that happen to me once or twice and there's nothing else that can compare to that feeling.

Finding a Place in the Shade

By Rodney McLean

This is a tale of high adventure. It is the story of the creation and development (thus far) of my first play, *A Place in the Shade*.

Characters:

Rodney McLean: Playwright
And an incredibly talented supporting cast who have, I believe, changed my life for the better.

Act I Scene i

Setting: *Moose Jaw Festival of Words 2000. Glen Sorestad, poet, is reading.*

McLean: (*Listens and thinks*)

“Today I Belong to Agnes”. What an unusual title.

(*He continues to listen. We hear his thoughts.*)

Glen reads poems about his mother and her journey with Alzheimer’s.

I remember as a young boy going to the hospital and visiting my dad’s cousin dying of cancer.

I remember shaving him one day, a daunting task for a ten year old. He was on pain medication and confused me for his son who had just come back from WWII. He was so glad to see me; I didn’t spoil the myth.

Perhaps that’s why Glen’s poems resonate so strongly with me.

This book has touched me. Deeply.

Scene ii

Setting: *Nowhere in particular. This scene lasts nine years.*

McLean: I find myself thinking a lot about “Today I Belong to Agnes” especially when I hear about others who have this condition... or is it disease?

I recommend the book. It’s the best advice I can give.

I think about writing a play.

Act II Scene i

Setting: *McLean’s apartment, Regina. Desk and computer. 2009.*

McLean: Just finished reading “The Artist’s Way” by Julia Cameron and completed six weeks of Morning Pages. My writer’s block is broken.

I do some basic research on play structure. I send an email to Glen telling him of my intentions to use his poetry as inspiration and outline (that might help me follow through) while asking if he has any objections. He is gracious, as always.

I start with a prologue to set the tone. I am in full dramatic throat. Three months of steady writing pass and, one day, I realize, “Well that’s it then. I’ve written a play. A prologue, three acts, and an epilogue. Whew!”

Hard work, and I think I learned more about myself than anything else.

A play. My play.

I sit at my desk and think, “Now what?”

Scene ii

Setting: *University of Regina Theatre Department*

McLean: Through a series of unlikely connections, and the magic of email, I am off in two directions. One is to contact the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre in Saskatoon. The other is here—to the UofR Theatre Department’s Play Reading Group. I’ve been once before, to observe, so I have an idea what to expect but I’m really nervous. I feel like an imposter.

I sit and listen. These people are good. The characters come to life and I am relieved when they laugh at the humour.

They are also insightful. And honest! I’m nervous about the feedback but it is given in a supportive way and helps a lot. I’m not sure about all the suggestions but I’m open minded. One participant says he’d pay to see the play. I wonder if he is really being honest but I’m encouraged to keep going. I survive!

I then make an appointment with Terry Jordan, Writer in Residence at the Regina Public Library, to see what comments he has on a draft I left with him a month ago. There is so much going on in my head.

Scene iii

Setting: *McLean’s apartment.*

McLean: I make some changes and send it to the SPC, applying for their Playwright’s Colony. I wait, not expecting too much.

The phone rings. It’s Heather Inglis the dramaturg with SPC. I think, “Dramaturg? What’s a dramaturg? I’ll have to look that word up.” She has good news. For me, incredibly surprising news. I will be one of four writers going to Amma’s House, near Wynyard, for a week of intensive writing

and dramaturgy. (*There’s that word again.*) I am speechless.

Scene iv

Setting: *SPC Playwrights’ Colony—Amma’s House, near Wynyard*

McLean: I arrive early. Keener or what? A young woman arrives shortly after. It’s Heather Inglis, the dramaturg. She’s full of energy and enthusiasm. We have an initial meeting and I sense very quickly that I have much to consider. I learn that I have built a boat but that it is not necessarily well suited to the type of voyage I have envisioned.

At no point do I sense I must change a word of my play, but I’m encouraged to experiment.

I look at the play with new eyes, more critical, and I write. I rewrite.

I “kill” off characters at Heather’s urging as my canvas is too “full.” I learn that more is not always better, especially for professional theatre, but I sometimes find it hard to let characters go. I listen and learn. I get feedback.

I go for thought-full walks.

At the end, I have two acts, no prologue, no epilogue and several possible titles. One becomes the eventual “winner”, “A Place in the Shade”. It came from adding begonias to the play including advice from my mother on where begonias should be planted. Titles are tough!

Heather says I should submit the play for consideration to the SPC’s Spring Festival of New Plays.

I’m unsure what Spring Festival is. I only know that it involves a public reading of some kind—and more work.

Do I really have a chance?

Well, I’ve invested a lot of time and energy and, now, so has the SPC—along with financial resources.

I owe it to them, and myself, to give it a shot.

Nothing to lose right?

Oh, just my ego. What if I am not accepted?

I decide to go for it. Nothing to lose; everything to gain.

It’s a long shot but what the heck; Heather and the other playwrights at Colony are supportive and I’m eager to keep improving.

Scene v

Setting: *McLean’s apartment (The phone rings.)*

McLean: It’s Heather again! I’m in the

IN THE AIR

by Rod MacIntyre

COMING SOON!!
To Dancing Sky Theatre,
Meacham, SK
May 6 – 22nd, 2011

Written by Rod MacIntyre

Music by Gareth Cook

Based on a story idea from Dancing Sky Theatre

Directed by Angus Ferguson

Starring (well, the actors haven't been contracted yet)

Produced by the WildRice Writers' Group

This is a story about a World War I pilot, Sandy McPherson, and his mechanic—Karl von Lidst.

(It's forty-three below. Dark. A tarp covers the plane's cowling. SANDY runs outside from the cabin with a bucket of steaming oil. He crawls under the tarp with it. In the front of the two cockpits sits a corpse wrapped mummy-like in scarves.)

KARL: I'm glad I'm not out there. You'd never know it, but it's forty-three below right now—and that's Fahrenheit not Celsius. It's 1938 and Celsius hasn't been invented yet. Well it has, but nobody knows about it except for a few Swedish scientists. That fellow under the tarp is Sandy, Alexander Bertrand McPherson. He can land that thing on a postage stamp like a butterfly with sore feet.

SANDY: I've got to get this hot oil into the engine before it freezes up—again. You got to set the blow pot under the motor to warm it up, then pour the hot oil into it, attach the batteries, which have also spent the night near the tin stove in the shack, prime the carbs, and hope like hell the thing fires up before you kill the batteries—again. You can't do any of this with mitts on, so you freeze your hands and burn them in the same operation.

KARL: Usually that's my job—or part of

it anyway. I was Sandy's mechanic since 1919. That's when this story begins.

My name's Karl and I'm dead. My body is frozen stiff in the front seat of that plane.

SANDY: It's a damn good thing it's not July or you'd be stinking to high heaven.

It's about how they meet...

SANDY: ...I just about make it back, but had to put her down a half mile short of where I could see our engineers busy building bridges. But it's a very bumpy landing and if I didn't break my legs, I can't feel them even though they're still attached to the rest of me.

So I'm down, and all I've got is my flare gun. Do I shoot it off to show the engineers where I am?

KARL: You'd be showing the same to every sniper within a thousand yards.

SANDY: And you were tucked into the dirt a few feet away from me. You could have killed me easy.

KARL: If you weren't dead yet, I wasn't going to make you that way. You were my ticket *out*.

SANDY: I drag myself a few feet from the Moth. I decide I'll wait for the engineers to come for me. I know they saw me go down.

Just as I get settled, the earth beside me moves.

(KARL sits up from beneath some foliage. Dried blood caked beneath his missing eye. He raises his hands in surrender.)

SANDY: Holy shit! *(Points flare gun at KARL.)* Stay where you are or I'll light you up like a Christmas tree!

KARL: No, please don't shoot. I surrender.

SANDY: Yeah, okay, just don't come lunging at me or something really stupid.

(Aside) I didn't join the war to shoot one-eyed Huns with a flare gun. I was going to do it from the cockpit of a plane. And what the hell happened to his eye? What was he doing here?

KARL: I'm your prisoner. You have to take me behind your lines.

SANDY: Yeah, yeah, okay—you're my prisoner, but I can't walk to my lines. We'll have to wait.

KARL: I'll carry you.

SANDY: You can't carry me!

KARL: Why?

SANDY: You've only got one eye.

KARL: I still have two feet. *Dumkopf*.

SANDY: If you stand up now, you'll get a bullet between your eyes... your eye and that other hole in your head.

KARL: If I lay here too much longer, I will welcome a bullet.

SANDY: Well then you're damned if you do and damned if you don't, eh?

KARL: What will we do then?

SANDY: Got a coin?

KARL: I had an iron, ten-Pfennig coin minted in 1916. It would have bought two eggs. I gave it to him.

SANDY: Heads or tails?

KARL: I had no idea what he meant, but I'm thinking a head is better than a tail, so I say, "Heads."

SANDY: Okay. 'Heads' we stand up and get shot; 'tales' we lie here and rot.

KARL: I carried him to the engineers.

SANDY: Just to make it look good, I held the flare gun to his head.

KARL: And that's how we met.

It's about the loves of their lives...

SANDY: Her name was Theophany, "The image of God"...

KARL: Which, thank God, was shortened to "Tiff."

TIFF: They know my name. But what they don't know is that I was a PK—a preacher's kid—who believed, as I was taught by my father, that we are all the same in the eyes of the Lord and that we are all the same distance from the Kingdom of Heaven—all except pilots—my father would add. Despite their physical proximity to the pearly gates, they chewed gum, drank rum and did not keep Holy the Sabbath Day. I was never to go near one.

So what harm a paint salesman?

(SANDY hides his gum, stashes his rum and takes out a bible)

SANDY: ... and she came sashaying into the paint shop one day asking for a gallon...

KARL: ...litres hadn't been invented...

SANDY: *(Shuts KARL up with a look)*

KARL: ...yet.

SANDY: ... asking for a gallon of paint.

TIFF: Could I have a gallon of white paint?

SANDY: Interior or exterior?

TIFF: I don't know. It's for a fence.

SANDY: That'd be exterior.

TIFF: It's for an indoor fence...

SANDY: Interior then.

TIFF: ...part of which extends outside.

SANDY: I see.

TIFF: Do you?

SANDY: Not really, no. ... And things

grew more complicated from there.

But for Karl, it was different:

SANDY: *(Using his best radio-soap-announcer's voice)* While he was away making a fortune staking out gold claims in the north, Karl fell in love. *(Schmacting)* "Oh my Cherie, it is for you I live and die."

TIFF: *(Schmacting right back)*. "Oh Karl, you are so brave and strong. And rich."

KARL: That's not what it was like at all.

SANDY: Well then?

KARL: *(In "real" play time)* Her name was Ina, and she and her brother Robert hauled my skin and bones into their camp where they patched me up and fed me—saved my life. No white man could survive out there alone, never mind lost and alone. We didn't understand each other much and I had a hard time explaining my glass eye when I took it out at night. She and her little boy thought it was watching out for bad spirits when we slept. I wasn't going to tell them otherwise. Little Charlie was fascinated by that eye. And I think I loved Charlie just about as much as I loved Ina. I stayed with

SPC 24 Hour Playwriting Competition 2011

4PM Friday April 29 - 4PM Saturday April 30

University of Regina (Education Building 561)

Rules and Regulations

- Open to all professional and non-professional playwrights.
- Two Categories - OPEN and STUDENT
- Scripts must be written on the premises. - New material only.
- Only one page of notes is permitted on the premises at the start of the competition.
- Entrants are accepted on a first come/first serve basis.
- An entry fee of \$30.00 must accompany each application. Entry fees are non-refundable

FIRST PRIZE (in each category) - \$500.00

For more info and to download a registration form go to: <http://www.saskplaywrights.ca/24hour.htm>

them for about a year. It was the best year of my life.

And finally, it's about the price we pay to remain a family.

SANDY: I think we've asked Karl for enough.

KARL: Money?

TIFF: Yes. Archie needs another operation. The doctor is recommending Toronto—it'll cost...

KARL: Cost is no matter...

TIFF: No, it doesn't matter what it will cost. No price is too high. And if you'll help out Karl, we'll be so grateful. Words simply cannot express...

SANDY: We'll forever be in your debt.

KARL: I have no more money. I gave it all to you six months ago.

(Beat)

SANDY: You gave us...everything?

KARL: What I had. Yes. I told you—I said, 'What good is money to me?' And I gave you what I had.

SANDY: We have nothing then.

TIFF: You have the plane.

SANDY: We have the plane—Karl owns half.

TIFF: You could sell it.

SANDY: It's our livelihood—how could we make ends meet without it?

TIFF: You're barely making ends meet now. You have other options.

SANDY: Name one.

TIFF: The residential school in...

SANDY: *There are strange flights flown in skies unknown*

over rock and bush and streams.

The northern lakes 'neath their snowy flakes

are dark in their wintry dreams.

The heavens all grey have nothing to say

when a man is lost in their midst

but together they shout for all get out

when burying Karl Von Lidzt.

Rod MacIntyre is a fiction writer and editor. He has also worked in radio, television and theatre. Rod's plays include: The Sins of St. Dave, Harvest Moon, Nice Guy and the Other Party. He travels extensively giving his performance-like readings and workshops across Canada. He was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (1947) graduated from the University of Saskatchewan (1971) and presently makes his home in La Ronge with Sharyn and his two cats. He has ridden his motorcycle from sea to sea to sea to sea, (to see) playing golf along the way.



A Farewell from Heather

The theatre is marked by comings and goings. Plays open and they close. People we adore come and go. I think one of the reasons I'm attracted to theatre is its ephemeral quality. The production of a play can only be experienced for a short while and then it ends. A truly great experience in the theatre is precious to us because it lives on only in memory after the lights go down and the actors go home. The play script, alone, survives. It is a treasure map that contains the rare alchemical formula that made the journey that evening so unforgettable.

Every story must end, and in ending new possibilities emerge.

It is hard to imagine that it was three and half years ago I started my sojourn as dramaturg at SPC. Hard to imagine because the time was so full and also because it has flown by so quickly. Like leaving the end of a satisfying night at the theatre, I leave SPC richer than I came. Although it was my job to support SPC's members, I have found that I was supported by this membership in ways that I could not have dreamed of. Although my job was to share what I knew about plays, the gift I have received is to learn more about how to write a play than I could have imagined.

Writing is a hopeful and courageous act. In having the opportunity to read your plays, I am leaving SPC wiser and more optimistic about Canadian Theatre than I was when I arrived. As I embark on a new chapter in my life, I take something of what I have learned from each play I have read with me.

Bon Voyage and Happy Writing.

Heather

2011 National Exchange Program – Alberta Bound

Want to be *Alberta Bound*? This year's exchange between the SPC and the Alberta Playwrights' Network (APN) will see one SK playwright receive a workshop and staged reading at *PlayWorks Ink* in Calgary from Nov. 3-6, 2011. In turn, one AB playwright will take part in the *Spring Festival of New Plays*.

Deadline: March 7, 2011.

For full submission details, visit the SPC website at: <http://www.saskplaywrights.ca/events.htm#exchange>

Submitting Your Play to the SPC for Script Services

Membership in the SPC gives playwrights access to script services provided by the SPC dramaturge and the dramaturgical committee (DC). Script Development usually begins with a one on one consultation with the dramaturge. Playwrights then use this feedback to continue working on the play, resulting in a new draft and submit this draft for further discussion.

Members can also apply for workshops with professional actors. These are subject to the availability of funds and approval by the dramaturgical committee (DC). This volunteer committee consists of three to four SPC members (two of which must be playwright members). The DC reads and responds to all submissions asking for a workshop or applying to competitions outside of Spring Festival and the 24 hour playwriting contest. Members can also request, at any point in the development of the play, that their script be sent to the DC for their feedback.

The dramaturgical committee meets monthly September to April.

The deadline for submission to the committee is the 15th of each month.



From left to right : Aaron Shingoose, Tala Tootoosis, Kristin Friday, Mark Dieter, Daniel Knight and Pauline Whitehead read Simantha Whitecalf's play "The Beaten Path" at an evening of readings which wrapped up the SPC Aboriginal Playwrights Circle in March 2010. Photo by Ken Williams.

**The SPC accepts new script submissions and workshop requests from Sept 1 – Apr 30.
We do not accept submissions or requests for workshops between May and August.**

Members are eligible to receive FOUR script services per year.
This can take many forms IE:

- Submitting one play with two subsequent drafts for dramaturgical consultations and then applying for a workshop.
- Submitting two new plays with a subsequent draft of each.

(See details of how to apply on pg 20 and online at: <http://www.saskplaywrights.ca/usingspc.htm#Submit>)

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How To Apply for SPC Script Services

1. Format your script: All plays must be submitted in a Standard Play Format. Plays that are incorrectly formatted will be returned to the playwright for reformatting. (Go to <http://www.saskplaywrights.ca/usingspc.htm> to see an example).
2. Please download our [SPC Submission Form](#) from www.saskplaywrights.ca
3. This form must be filled in and attached to every submission. If your submission doesn't include this form it will be considered incomplete.
4. You are asked to let us know what service you want and how it will aid in the development of your script. If you are unsure what your script needs, you can leave that to the discretion of the dramaturge and/or the dramaturgical committee.
5. Email a digital copy of your submission to: spcdramaturge@sasktel.net
6. And, if this is the INITIAL SUBMISSION you are submitting of this play, please mail a hard copy to:
Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre
BOX 3092 Saskatoon SK
S7K 3S9
7. If you do not receive an email confirming the receipt of your script within 14 days – PLEASE CALL the office to make sure that your script didn't get lost in cyberspace.
8. After you have received services you will be asked to complete a Script Services Report. <http://www.saskplaywrights.ca/documents/SPCScriptServicesReport_000.doc> You cannot access further Script Services until this report is received. Please either mail your Script Services Report to the SPC office or email it to: sk.playwrights@sasktel.net.

For more information on SPC script services and application procedures:
email spcdramaturge@sasktel.net
or phone 306-665-7707

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