



Playworks

CHERYL JACK

A message from the new SPC president

Hi everyone. As your new president, I am honoured to serve such a great membership and solid organization. I have been involved with the SPC for the last five years and I know it is an important part of the arts community. As a professional theatre artist, it is often difficult to find a home where you can truly explore theatre without the extreme pressure of production, getting the job, or just being acknowledged as a creative force. In our instant world we sometimes forget that 'time for development' as artists is key to being the best we can be. My hope is that this organization will continue its longstanding tradition of supporting the playwrights of Saskatchewan to help them develop as writers so that a strong voice will continue to be heard across this country.

I live by the philosophy that all of us are doing the best work we can do. When we write, act, direct or design, we are striving to do the best we are capable of

in a given rehearsal, performance, presentation or draft. If we as an organization can help to support, give insight and perhaps inspire, then we will have done something for our membership.

I realize that writing is a solitary experience. We hunker down with keyboard, pen, paper; we write, stare at the page, eat, drink coffee, go for walks, drink more coffee and try again. We may get on a roll and things spill out or we may come up with one line — or nothing. It is a journey of isolation and solitude in our heads, hearts and spirit. Eventually we will allow an outsider to peek into our private journey. This can be a very difficult part of the process. As a fairly new writer, I find it makes me feel quite sick to my stomach. However, the SPC has made this leap a lot easier for me. I know I will get some kind of feedback that may help me keep working. As a writer I need this kind of support.

Saskatchewan is on the cusp of opening up to a new creative horizon. I am happy to be able to behold the rising sun sparkling on our province. Keep writing everyone, and we will continue to support you in our small, humble ways.

My best to all of you
Cheryl Jack
SPC President

HEATHER INGLIS

Artists are brave people

We are gearing up for Spring Festival and I'm looking forward to watching the plays in this year's line-up grow between now and the end of May. I hope that I will see many of you at the readings and the Spring Festival Bar.

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This year we are offering a workshop for playwrights of all levels, lead by Spring Festival veteran Stephen Heatley. The workshop will focus on exploring the nature of dramatic action. The workshop will run Saturday, May 23rd from 10-6PM and Sunday, May 24th from 10-2PM at the University of Saskatchewan. The fee is a mere \$50 per person. There will only be 16 spots available, so make sure you don't miss this opportunity; watch for details in the next e-zine and on the SPC website.

Artists are brave people.

They put the fruits of countless hours of work, their guts, their humour and their pain up for public consideration in the form of plays, paintings, performances, novels, songs, sculptures, poems, and the list goes on. When they do this, they expose themselves to both praise and criticism. It takes great courage to put one's work up for a public critique but that is exactly what artists do. More than that, when a work of art is presented to the public, the public expects that they are being asked to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the work.

I think most of us want to be praised by audiences. I think it is human to want to hear good things about who we are and what we do. At the same time, we know on some level that we are not perfect and that at best our art is as imperfect as we are. If we look, we can find what may be considered 'flaws' in many 'so-called' great works of art. (Or are the so-called flaws what make the work great?).

Most artists want to grow. They want to learn from each experience so that their work evolves and becomes richer. In order to grow, one must look clearly at what is less effective and learn from that. We all know this. It does not make it pleasant all of the time. To look at flaws in our work can feel like an attack on our ego. On some level we fear that to acknowledge what we could do better may make what we have done less valid. We fear that if our work is less than perfect, we will not be worthy.

This being said, I think it is important to acknowledge that part of the thrill of public presentation is that we do not know how an audience will respond. If we were assured of only praise, I think both the risk and the

reward of public presentation would be diminished.

Audiences have every right to like or dislike any particular work of art. Their reasons for disliking a work may have nothing to do with the artist's skill. They may respond negatively to a work because they didn't like the way it made them feel, or because they are challenged by the vision of the world presented. They may feel they could have told a better story themselves; sometimes they are even jealous of the work.

Regardless, to present art is in some way to ask for feedback from an audience. Artists need both praise and constructive criticism to understand what their work does and how it works. The SPC offers playwrights an opportunity to test drive their work in an affirmative environment, before it hits the less forgiving world of public performance.

When we as artists and supporters of the arts meet our colleagues after viewing their work (or hearing a reading of it) what is the best way to respond? Should we support unconditionally? Should we support only if we feel the work achieved a standard quality that has truly earned our affirmation? Should we be brutally honest about what we think positive or negative? What do we achieve when we are stingy with our support? Is it harmful to provide false hope as we give support that does not address the work's weaker points?

These are tricky questions rife with personal preference and issues of ego. I think there are many approaches to answering these queries.

I like George Bernard Shaw's:

"Do not do unto others as you expect they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same as yours.

See you at Spring Festival!

Heather Inglis
SPC Dramaturg

CATHERINE HARRISON

Thanks for the show

It's opening night. I've come to the show on my own because I'm so nervous that a date is completely out of the question. I sit in the audience flipping through a copy of the program with one hand, cradling an overfull glass of wine in the other (god bless the Refinery volunteers behind the bar, they must have sensed my buzzing nerves) and I watch the audience file in. I smile stiffly at my fellow artists, who have come out to show their support. I take a long swig of my wine when I spot Cam Fuller sneak into the back row. I have come too early and left myself too much time to try to sit still. I take another long swig of my wine. I'm beginning to get a sense of why writers are such stellar drinkers. Another swig. The wine cannot compete with the stomach churning and the cold sweat beading on my palms. If the show doesn't start soon, I may pass out.

What has me sweating and drinking like it's going out of style, you ask? Up until now, in my career as a playwright, I have always been a performer in my own work produced by my company 400lbs of Sunshine. I have been on the other side of the curtain, waiting for Clare Middleton to stop hogging the hole in the curtain so that I can see who's shown up to our premiere. I have been there through the whole rehearsal process and I know the piece inside and out and I have been a part of all the artistic choices that have been made. Ah, but not this time. A month ago, I handed over the script into the very capable hands of the director and cast and stood back. I had nothing to do with the rehearsal process, other than approving some judicious cuts to the script, and here I am, on opening night, waiting to see the final result. It's all going to be a surprise, and that makes me feel intensely vulnerable. I notice my glass is empty. Damn, the lights are going down, no time to run and get another drink.

I watch the show. No amount of table readings, dramaturgy sessions, SPC workshops can truly prepare you for sitting in the dark watching talented people perform your work. I have never judged myself as harshly as I did during that first performance. All of a sudden I could see the weaknesses in my writing, the places where no amount of excellent acting could spice up a

boring character, the places where the moments weren't truthful or the transitions happened too quickly. It was a revelation. On the flipside, I was also able to see the strengths, and to feel where the audience was connecting to the story like I never had before. It was a torturous mix of self-flagellation and self-congratulation.

Then it's over. We all flock downstairs and descend upon the food, and the wine is flowing and now it's time for yet another drama to unfold. The beautiful smiling performers have put on their party outfits and are mingling, drinks in hand, accosted with hugs and congratulations from family and friends. The playwright (me) is desperately elbowing her way to the bar, glassy eyed and fuzzy haired, nerves still jangling, rendering her incapable of stringing together coherent sentence.

And there you are as an audience member; and regardless of your relationship to the artists involved in the show, there is always a debate about what to say to them about your experience. Sure, if you loved it, then your job is easy (and yes, it is a job), because praise is always well received. But what if you didn't like it? Is it your role to give criticism, or to show your support of the project even if it wasn't your taste? What do you do?

Every artist is different; every situation is different, so honestly, all I can tell you with certainty is how I personally view the situation. As a writer and a performer, I never view any work as the definitive performance or the masterpiece script. I can always become a better performer and a better writer. I do this work because I want to tell good stories that people can identify with that bring new perspective into their own lives.

Therefore, in order for me to know whether or not I am achieving this goal, I need to hear from peers, theatre patrons, friends, family, total strangers, mentors and teachers about how my work affects them. I want to know if they were able to connect to it, and if not, why that was. These are important discussions to have in order to create good art. For me it's not enough to

simply say 'thanks for the show', I want to have a conversation with you. Some people need time to let things sink in before being able to have these discussions, so emails at a later date, or a good chin-wag over a pint at O'Sheas are equally valuable. And I can promise you, no one will ever have a harsher criticism of the show than the playwright themselves.

So, next time I see you, let's have a drink, have a conversation and inspire each other to get out there and make good art. Cheers.

Catherine Harrison
Playwright/actor

ROB VAN MEENEN

To stand or not to stand

When did it get so bloody difficult to see a play?

No, I'm not talking about getting tickets to a show you've put off seeing until the final weekend, or dodging the body movements of the restless giant obscuring your view from the seat in front of you. I'm asking - when did I start thinking less about what was happening on stage, and more about my own performance?

I can't help it. We live in a rather small artistic community. I haven't been to a play in years where I didn't know some, if not all, the artists involved, or at least see a few comrades-in-arts amongst the audience. What does this mean? As much as I'd like to experience the play (read judge), I know my reactions (read acting) are as much on display as those of the performers. And I thought I had the night off!

And, sure, you can find ways to hide during the performance. Pick a back corner, stay out of the spill, the tricks are there for the taking. And if all else fails, the truly gifted can claim artistic possession - "No, honey, I was too involved to laugh out loud."

But the final curtain is always looming in the distance. Oh ye house lights, why shine you so bright!

"Okay, it's really over. Here we go. Now, how much did I like it? No, seriously, did I like it that much? Look to the left, what's she doing - just wants to get her coat? What about him - leg cramp? There's a pack of grey-hairs - are they just worried about missing the bus? Too late. We've reached the tipping point. It's now or never, buddy...it's time to...make your stand!"

Or not. That (sigh) is the question.

I'm sorry. I am an artist who cannot get out of his

head. It's the by-product of being asked so many penetrating questions by scheming directors and dramaturges. Always with their 'why, why, why'. And now you expect me to have a genuine unguarded reaction to something. No, things must be held to account. It is my duty to uphold the artistic standards of my community!

Always, you ask?

No. There are exceptions. Namely, if you are, what I like to call, 'alone and known'. The meaning is clear, I hope: if you are a figure of any significance or standing in your artistic community, and everyone around you is on their feet at show's end, you should probably get your ass out of that chair, and take one for the team (even if you only liked it a little). Just a weensy bit. Any larger point you'd like to make by not standing, will be overshadowed by your surely collectively viewed self-aggrandizing and rude behavior. But then again, if you really did hate it, have at'er! I mean, we're talking about integrity here, right?

But not just that. Personally, I treat my 'standing O' like I should have treated my virginity - I want to save it for when it's really special. I'm not going to just give it up to every show that comes my way. And this is the problem. What was and is special about a standing ovation, has been diminished by its over-abundance. How are we to really know we've created or experienced something transcendent anymore?

Theatre is a collaborative art form - we collaborate in its creation, and we collaborate with an audience in its actualization. And when our audience starts telling us just what we want to hear - "Yes, we love you, we really, really love you" - I think everybody loses. We stop talking

honestly. In fact, we stop the conversation. It puts that final little dot at the end of the story - "Well that was lovely...now let's get home to bed."

Some people tell me standing up is about showing love and support. C'mon people, this isn't a grade school pageant. There's a reason camcorders are handy for those special moments. Some say it's about appreciation for all the hard work. Well, I'm sorry. Lots of people are out there in the world doing lots of hard work, and

barely get a thanks, let alone applause.

For me, if you come to my show - if you shell out the bucks, and give me a couple of hours of your time - I'm the one who owes you the ovation. Just give me an honest opinion when we're through. That's something I'll proudly sit through.

Rob van Meenen
Playwright/actor



On your mark, get set...WRITE!

SPC 24 Hour Playwriting Competition

FRIDAY, MAY 1 to SATURDAY, MAY 2
UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

ONE PAGE OF NOTES 30 COMPETITORS 24 HOURS TO WRITE

HOW IT WORKS

Professional and aspiring playwrights from across the province gather in the University of Regina's Education Building Room 561, to write from **4:00PM - Friday, May 1 until 4:00PM - Saturday, May 2, 2009**. Starting with only one page of notes, participants compete for **First Prize: \$500**. Second and Third Prizes will also be awarded. Computers, printer, paper, caffeine, water and lots of food will all be provided.

Competition Categories: **Student** (university/high school) and **Open** (everyone else)

Registration: first come, first serve basis; 30 participants only (15 per category)

Entry Fee: \$30.00/person - includes one-year membership to the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre and a ticket to the **Awards Brunch held Sunday, May 3, 2009**

REGISTRATION FORMS AVAILABLE

Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre, Room 700, Bessborough Hotel, Saskatoon

Email: sk.playwrights@sasktel.net

Website: www.saskplaywrights.ca

Mail: 24-Hour Competition, Box 3092, Saskatoon, SK S7K 3S9



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Spring Festival of New Plays 2009

University of Saskatchewan, John Mitchell Building
May 25 - May 30, 2009

***Two Rooms* by Mansel Robinson**

Murdoch is a white cop. His young wife is Muslim. Two rooms, two confessions...

Mansel has been writer-in-residence at the Berton House in Dawson City, the University of Windsor, the Regina Public Library and most recently at the Surrey Public Library. He is currently working on a group commission for Blythe Theatre in Ontario. *Bite The Hand*, produced in 2008 at Persephone Theatre, will be published by Scirocco Drama in 2009. *Ghost Trains* and *Spitting Slag*, translated into French by Jean Marc Dalpe, were short-listed for the 2008 Governor General's award in the translation category. *Two Rooms* is Mansel's ninth play to be workshopped at Spring Festival. He lives in Saskatoon.

***Interrogating the Sphinx* by Ian C. Nelson**

A dyed-in-the-wool classical actor and a method actor blind beyond the footlights meet on a beach. Amidst an artistic debate they dig up an actress longing to reprise her role as Beckett's Winnie. Will they find Happy Days? Or will an intrusive Arab throw a rhinoceros into the plot? "A veritable feast of the absurd."

Bilingual director, dramaturge and actor Ian C. Nelson has written, translated and adapted a number of plays. *Double Blind* (written in collaboration with Kevin Power) was in the 2003 Spring Festival. *The Armoured Heart* (published in Write On! Theatre Saskatchewan Anthology) he translated into French under the title *Le Coeur blindé*. *Après le deluge* appears in volume 3 of Le Théâtre Fransaskois. *Le Sablier*, the original French version of this play has been broadcast on Radio Canada and is slated for publication in a future volume of the Le Théâtre Fransaskois anthology. Ian is also author of *The Scarlet Coat Serial*.

***Singing the Farmers Market Blues* by Betty Ternier Daniels**

Alexandra sells at the Battle Creek Farmers Market. Rick owns the market site. When he threatens to sell to Wal-Mart, Alex campaigns to save the land from development. She hadn't reckoned on falling in love. Rick hadn't expected his estranged wife to want him back. In the ensuing battle, romance and idealism collide.

Farmers Market Blues is the first in a trilogy that reflects Betty's love for rural Saskatchewan. Temporarily transplanted to an acreage east of Saskatoon, she continues to spend summers on the family farm near North Battleford. During the past dozen or so years she's written and directed for community theatre, taught English and drama as a sessional instructor, and pursued a lifelong interest in gardening and food. She and her husband have two adult children, a dog and two cats.

***Diligence* by Cheryl Jack**

Toby is found in a field, naked, shivering and cold. He believes he has shifted and is capable of being in two places at once. Martha, his sister is beside herself: another member of her family has decided to check out. People tell her life will be fine, but it's not. It's not fine.

Cheryl co-wrote the play *Lou* for the Saskatoon Fringe Festival in 1998. Cheryl's script, *Out In The Cold*, was work-

shopped and given a public reading at the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre's Spring Festival in 2004. She adapted this piece for CBC radio, and it was broadcast in 2006. Her film version of *Out In The Cold* premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival in October of 2008 and has played at numerous film festivals throughout North America. Cheryl's most recent stage play, *At the End Of Her Rope*, had its world premiere at Persephone Theatre in March of 2008. Cheryl attended the National Theatre School of Canada and graduated from the Acting section. She has been a theatre artist for many years and is a member of the Playwright's Guild of Canada.

***Random Acts* by James Misfeldt**

In a world of random acts where there are no hard distinctions between what is real and unreal, life becomes a computer game where a woman on the mall parking lot can be blown away, justice is arbitrary and life-and-death depends on Russian roulette.

In a number of plays from *Another Zoo Story* and *Birds of Paradise*, to *A Promising Career* and *Swamp Fever*, and now, *Random Acts*, plus the novels "Blue Angel" and "On A Slow Boat To China", James has been searching for a new realism which moves beyond separate subjective realities to a shared inter-subjective reality from which we can ground truth and justice for all.

***My Rabbi* by Joel Bernbaum**

My Rabbi was conceived from frustration. Religion seems too often to push us apart as opposed to bringing us together. Developed over beers in theatre school, in collaboration with Kayvon Khoshkam, *My Rabbi* follows two Saskatoon high school buddies as they journey to find and maintain connection to their religions, families and to each other.

Born and raised in Saskatoon, Joel is excited to return home after working and studying out of province. A graduate of the Canadian College of Performing Arts and the Carleton University School of Journalism, Joel recently workshopped his play *Operation Big Rock* at the Belfry Theatre in Victoria, and spent the winter performing in *Seussical the Musical* and *The Big League* with Vancouver's Carousel Theatre. He is honoured to be participating in his first Spring Festival.

New This Year at Spring Festival: Playwrights Workshop with Stephen Heatley

Festival veteran Stephen Heatley will lead a workshop on the mechanics of writing dramatic action. The workshop will take place the last weekend of Festival - for the full day Saturday, May 30th and a half-day on Sunday, May 31st. The workshop is open to playwrights of all levels of development.

The workshop fee is \$50. A complimentary SPC membership will be given to all participants. Only 16 spots are open; scholarships are available upon request to those requiring assistance. Contact the SPC office to participate.

Come be part of Festival and take advantage of this terrific opportunity to dig into the nuts and bolts of how to build a terrific scene for the stage!

SPC Playwrights Colony 2009



Front Row L to R: Heather Inglis, Mike Thompson, Rob van Meenen, Will Brooks
Back Row L to R: Cheryl Jack, Betty Ternier Daniels, Mansel Robinson, Jamie Lee Shebelski

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