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THE GLADSTONE VARIATIONS



Convergence Theatre Co-founding Artistic Directors, Aaron Willis & Julie Tepperman

Gladstone Variations is taking reservations now

By [GLENN SUMI](#)

THE GLADSTONE VARIATIONS Variation 1: The Tearful Bride by Rick Roberts, directed by Aaron Willis, and Requiem For A Hotel, by Mike McPhaden, directed by Ruth Madoc-Jones; Variation 2: The Card Trick, by Brendan Gall, directed by Alan Dilworth, and I Grow Old, by Julie Tepperman, directed by Rebecca Benson. Presented by Convergence Theatre at the Gladstone Hotel (1214 Queen West). Runs to July 15, Wednesday-Sunday 7 pm, no show July 6, July 11 at 2 pm only.



Alan Dilworth (left), Brendan Gall, Mike McPhaden, Rebecca Benson, Julie Tepperman, Ruth Madoc-Jones and Aaron Willis are worth checking out.

If you're passing by the Gladstone Hotel and see actor Richard Greenblatt sprawled out on the sidewalk in a pool of blood, don't worry. The 2 Pianos, 4 Hands co-writer/performer might be down on his one tuchus, but that's not real blood. It's just a play. Actually, it's one of four that are running simultaneously as part of The Gladstone Variations, the most ambitious project in the Fringe's history.

Created by Convergence Theatre, the same artists involved in last year's site-specific AutoShow (the Fringe hit that featured little playlets performed in seven cars in the Annex), Gladstone groups four plays set in and around Toronto's oldest hotel. Audiences check in, get to see two separate plays as part of Variation 1 or 2, and 90 minutes later they can decide whether to check out the other double bill later on during the festival.

Right now, three writers, four directors and I are sitting in one of those impossibly cozy leather booths in the Gladstone's Melody Bar, one of the few public spaces not being used by the Convergence team, although one play refers to its legendary karaoke nights.

Even this early in the morning, it's hard not to feel the hotel's mishmash of eras. Enter a room, a lobby or a hallway and you'll swear you can see ghosts from the past flitting about in the filtered light.

"You get a real sense of layers of history here," says playwright Brendan Gall, who came up with the catchy title. "There's this notion of not removing wallpaper, necessarily, but maybe painting over it, so all of these eras share the same space, they bleed through. Things seem like one thing but suggest another."

Convergence's artistic directors, Aaron Willis and Julie Tepperman, got the idea for the show sitting in an Ottawa hotel room while visiting director Rebecca Benson, who was then working on the interconnected-narratives classic La Ronde.

"We were talking about La Ronde and also Alan Ayckbourn's House & Garden, two separate plays where characters exit one play and enter the world of another," explains Tepperman, who's penned one of the Gladstone scripts and also shares producing duties.

"The hotel seemed like a great setting for getting into these private spaces," adds co-producer Willis, who's also directing one of the pieces and played the slick MC character in last year's AutoShow.

Willis and Tepperman, who are a couple and the main producers, sit on either side of me like protective parents. Benson and Alan Dilworth, who joined Convergence later, are like responsible godparents. Writers Gall and Mike McPhaden, both trained in comedy, are the subversive kids. Ruth Madoc-Jones, with her scratchy voice, comes across as the exotic knowing aunt. Missing is writer Rick Roberts, who's in Bosnia this week shooting a film.

John Krizanc's Tamara might seem like an obvious point of reference, as would the films of Robert Altman, where characters and stories collide into each other.

"This is a more controlled environment than Tamara," says Willis. "There aren't options for people to walk wherever they like."

And the film reference isn't quite right, either, although director Dilworth says the Gladstone's hallways allow for amazing "Barton Fink-like perspectives."

"It's more a weird hybrid of theatre and film," offers Benson. "In film, the camera shows you what to look at. Here, we're fine-tuning how we can control how an audience views a certain scene. How can we predict, for instance, where someone's going to stand in a stairwell?"

Director Madoc-Jones compares the experience to street theatre.

"You rely on the actors' savvy or experience to use their voice to rein in an audience if they need to," she says. "If they feel the audience lagging, they can wait till they catch up. They can get you to move in a bit closer, manipulate you as to where they want you to stand and look."

Confused? Don't be. Here's the scoop:

At 7 pm sharp (except for one matinee performance), you join one of four groups of 15 people (max) at different locations in the Gladstone. Then, guided by a stage-manager figure called the Audience Wrangler, you traverse fire escapes, lobbies, sidewalks and rooms while following your characters, occasionally spotting people from other shows, not to mention regular Gladstone folks.

Yes, it's a logistical nightmare, especially since characters sometimes leave one play to show up seconds later in another.

"If you need someone to knock at the door at a certain time, he or she has to be there," laughs Tepperman, who talks about using a stopwatch and walkie-talkies. "You've got to be incredibly precise. It's like choreography. At 7:06 pm in each script, for instance, characters and audiences are at a specific point."

Already during rehearsals, Gladstone patrons and staff have wandered into scenes, offering to help out a bag lady character, for instance, or attempting to break up an outdoor altercation. One impatient hipster, waiting in line while a character used the lobby ATM as part of a scene, stormed away furious.

"The response from the Gladstone management has been great," says Dilworth. ☒ "People stay at the Gladstone because of all the stuff that goes on here. They expect it."

"They might even be disappointed if someone doesn't bang on their door," adds Gall.

Of course, the fact that the plays are set in one of the two much-renovated hotels on a strip that's gone through massive gentrification isn't lost on any of the creators. Themes of displacement, poverty and class differences come up continually in the works.

"Most of us are bourgeois theatre artists," says Madoc-Jones without a trace of irony. "And you run the risk of offending someone or sounding patronizing when you write about people who aren't in your same situation. People like Rhonda [the bag lady character, created by McPhaden] are still around the neighbourhood. They appear a little bit lost and displaced. Mike has found a character who represents that and has given her tremendous dignity."

"We don't have strict language cues for class and place, as in England," adds McPhaden. "But we make snap judgments by the way a person speaks. We just don't codify it or care to acknowledge it as much."

Each one of the Gladstone Variations team has his or her separate career, which makes Convergence Theatre almost seem like the Broken Social Scene of the theatre world.

"If so, please let me be Feist," says Dilworth.

"I'll be Jason Collett," pipes in Gall.

Not that they're in this for the money. With limited audiences of 30 per Variation and a staff of about the same size, it's going to be hard to turn a huge profit.

"The flip side of the crappiness of not making much money is the liberation and artistic freedom," says Gall. "This play could never happen if it were produced by a regular theatre."

"The Fringe is like the YouTube of theatre," adds McPhaden. "It's practically free, user-generated content for the enjoyment of the masses. And part of the satisfaction comes from knowing that people like it."

That said, Convergence is considering remounting AutoShow, and if enough people check into the Gladstone Variations, they could conceive of another version, possibly tied into a dinner-theatre deal.

Theatre critics, meanwhile, are scratching their heads about how to review a show that's got one title for two separate programs. How does the team want it reviewed?

"We've talked amongst ourselves and come to the conclusion that we're all okay with 4Ns," says McPhaden.

"It makes sense because there are four stories," adds Gall.

"And," says McPhaden, "if you want to go even higher, we'll be okay with that, too."