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13 Convergence Theatre: Necessary Producers

A DIALOGUE BETWEEN JULIE TEPPERMAN
AND AARON WILLIS

The two of us met while attending George Brown Theatre School's three-year acting conservatory in Toronto and were married in 2004. We co-founded and are still co-artistic directors of Convergence Theatre, a Toronto-based, artist-driven, indie theatre company. Since forming in 2006, Convergence has created and produced three original plays – *AutoShow*, *The Gladstone Variations*, and *YICHUD (Seclusion)* – as well as co-produced the Canadian premiere of Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play*.

With each new project, Convergence explores innovative ways to push the boundaries of intimacy between audience and performer in an effort to create unique, surprising, immersive audience experiences. Our productions to date have had large ensembles (between 25 and 40 people) and have taken place in site-specific locations (*The Gladstone Variations* had the audience following characters through Toronto's historic Gladstone Hotel), in non-traditional venues (*AutoShow* comprised seven 10-minute plays which took place in cars, and *Passion Play* was a four-and-a-half-hour epic which took place in Toronto's Withrow Park and Eastminster United Church), and in traditional theatre spaces that are completely reimaged (*YICHUD (Seclusion)* transformed Theatre Passe Muraille into a synagogue).

Convergence exists on a project-by-project basis, receives no operating funding, and we are its only staff. Having to do everything necessary to get the work up onstage makes us “necessary producers” of our own work, and we continue to face substantial obstacles. When we were asked to address the question of “Why theatre now?” it seemed natural to explore our challenges in the form of a dramatic dialogue between us – a Platonic dialogue in which we work towards asking this question of one another. At the time we crafted it, *Passion Play* – a massive production with a 40-person ensemble and a budget of \$150,000, our largest

yet – had just closed after two years of work, and we were immersed in post-production tasks. We were exhausted and burnt out from seven years of non-stop creating and producing, and wondering where to go from there.

Julie: I don't think I want to create theatre anymore.

Aaron: Please elaborate.

J: Not like this. I lie awake in bed trying to answer that awful question "What's next?" and I'm remembering *all* the hours and hours of unpaid work we've put in over the last seven years. You and I, no staff, working out of our one-bedroom apartment –

A: Sometimes *in* the bedroom!

J: – always juggling a gazillion other theatre gigs at the same time.

A: Sometimes I feel like I have three full-time jobs. If only there were more hours in the day ...

J: No! We can't go on like this. We will suffer, the work will suffer.

A: So what's the solution? Quit?

J: I don't know ... I just ... how did we get here? How did this happen?!?

A: Do you seriously want me to answer that at 3 a.m.?

J: Yes!

A: Okay, well ... we started Convergence Theatre because we wanted to be more than just actors.

J: We wanted to create acting opportunities for ourselves, but in addition to that you wanted to start directing and I wanted to start writing.

A: We wanted to choose what we work on, with whom, and how. Take some control over our careers.

J: But we have *zero* control! Seven years later, what've we got? Nothing but fond memories!

A: I wouldn't say nothing ... Some of the most profound and enriching relationships, both professionally and personally, have come about as a result of our starting Convergence.

J: Okay, I would agree with that.

A: All four shows have been artistically successful – two have been remounted, one toured –

J: I don't need our bio!

A: My point is, we're doing well! We've opened a lot of doors for ourselves in the theatre community, which has led to other professional opportunities for each of us, we've created work for over 150 people, and we've become known as really efficient, excellent producers.

J: But we never wanted to be producers! We became producers because nobody else was going to create these opportunities or mount these

shows for us. We're producers by default, we're producers *by necessity*.

A: "Necessary Producers"?

J: Yes! And it's killing the artist in me.

A: Let's back up ... Convergence Theatre aside, tell me why, way back when, you decided to become a theatre artist in the first place.

J: I saw the movie *Annie* when I was five.

A: That's why you wanted to be an actor. But seriously – why make theatre?

J: Well ... theatre asks us to engage more fully with our society. It challenges us to look within ourselves, to examine the choices we make and how we treat each other. At the end of the day, people ultimately crave communal experiences. Which is what theatre is: a live, communal experience.

A: Exactly! Theatre isn't like other art forms – you need other people to create it and to witness it in a communal setting – friends and strangers, converging under the same roof and partaking in a ritual. It's about shared space. For a few hours we all agree to enter into another world together. Our experiences while in that world will differ depending on our own experiences and world views, but we do it communally, in real time, laughing collectively, crying collectively, sharing moments of recognition.

J: I think people need theatre now more than ever. We're in the middle of a technological revolution that's having a major sociological impact. On one hand we've never been more connected; on the other hand we've never been more isolated. Theatre demands that we break down those barriers of isolation; it asks us to come out from behind our screens.

A: You're not talking like someone who wants to throw in the towel.

J: You're missing the point – it's the harsh realities of creating theatre that's killing us, not our beliefs! This kind of life isn't sustainable. Look at it this way: a big show like *Passion Play* took roughly two years from start to finish to produce. Say I put in an average of 30 hours of producing work per week (recognizing that I'm also working many other theatre jobs at the same time). That's 3,120 hours of unpaid work over two years! I was also an actor in the show, so part of what I'm doing as a producer is fundraising my own salary so I can be paid as an actor for roughly 8 weeks of work.

A: A smart business person would ask, "Why not also fundraise your salary as a producer?"

J: Sure, that's always the hope, that there'll be something left for the producer in the end, but we all know that the producer's budget line is the first to go when other budget lines increase.

A: You were saying ...

J: So, 2 years = 104 weeks, 8 of which are paid acting work, which leaves 96 weeks of unpaid producing work. Those 96 weeks are sucking the desire to create theatre right out of me.

A: So that's it then? You quit?

J: That's harsh.

A: But you're maxed out?

J: Aren't you?

A: Sure, it's demoralizing. We (and so many artist-producers like us) put way more time and energy into making the work happen than actually making the work.

J: The administration vs. creation balance is waaaaay off.

A: It's no wonder we're burnt out. There's no infrastructure to sustain us or support our growth. When you think that *Passion Play* cost \$150,000 to put up, and we not only successfully raised that money with our partners, but created an impactful piece of theatre ... well, you'd think we'd be able to build on that somehow.

J: It's a horizontal ladder.

A: If we worked in a law firm we'd have made partner by now!

J: And after all this work, there's nothing left in Convergence Theatre's bank account to move forward with ...

A: Just you and me up in the middle of the night wondering what to do next.

J: By the way, I *hate* that – when people come up to me after a show and ask, “What are you up to next?” The dead body of the last play is still warm!

A: It makes the work seem totally disposable.

J: It's indicative of our theatre community's misplaced emphasis on quantity. Of course everyone is striving for quality, but there's this feeling that we've all gotta keep pumping out work in order to stay in the game.

A: Why?! So we can work two more years to bring yet another project to life only to have it disappear forever after what, a single three- or four-week run? Even if a production is successful and it sells out, at the end of the run we have no way of extending the show or making it live again.

J: We just don't have the infrastructure or the funding to support longevity. The future feels bleak.

A: You're right – it's totally crazy to be doing this. Why does anyone do it? If you and I were able to make a living by being hired to act, direct, write, and teach, would we ever self-produce again?

J: I dunno ... I admit I get high on being in a position of control.

A: The original impulse was to be in a position to choose, remember? To have some control over how our careers unfold – more specifically to have control over how our projects unfold.

J: Gone are the days of waiting for the phone to ring with the offer of a gig. It's about being our own bosses.

A: But it's more than just about control, it's about being an artistic leader, a connector. Isn't that what all indie artists want, to some degree? To create, to initiate, to take risks?

J: Yes. To choose what we work on, how, and with whom is central. Also, as artistic leaders we're in a position to consider who the work is for and what the larger impact could be.

A: That's a whole conversation in itself – getting people to attend. How often do you go see an indie show and recognize more than half the audience?

J: Almost always. We're so used to putting on costumes and performing for our friends.

A: Even the granting bodies recognize the trend of low attendance and recommend budgeting for an overall average audience of 30 per cent ... that's just sad.

J: The theatre community is constantly complaining that there's "an audience problem" and that it's so hard to get "bums in seats" –

A: I hate that – it reduces people to a body part.

J: We're the problem, not the audience! On the whole, theatres still haven't found effective ways other than traditional marketing strategies to get people excited about attending live theatre. Especially young people.

A: If you build it they will come? No! One expensive ad in a newspaper does not an audience make!

J: Why do you think we've had a good track record of getting people out to see our shows?

A: In part because we don't have a season, which means we're not trying to sell five shows a year. But a big reason is that our productions tend to challenge people's perceptions and expectations of how and where theatre can take place.

J: The uniqueness of the location is a big reason why our attendance has been consistently high, I think.

A: It's never a gimmick. The location always serves the play or, in the case of *The Gladstone Variations*, is integral to the play, but it's become clear that people crave a unique live experience.

J: One of the most exciting "aha" moments for me was sitting in the car during *AutoShow* and watching people's faces as they approached. I thought, "We're on to something here."

A: Which continued right on through to *Passion Play* – watching 100 people follow Queen Elizabeth across Danforth Avenue [*Figure 13.1*].



13.1 Maev Beaty as Queen Elizabeth in *Passion Play* by Sarah Ruhl (June 2013, Toronto). Photo by Keith Barker.

J: Or during the pre-show for *YICHUD* – people danced the hora and improvised with the bride and groom – it’s amazing to connect with audiences on that level.

A: Yes – exploring different ways to push the boundaries of intimacy between performer and audience has always been a touchstone for us. We want our audience to feel that they’re an integral part of their theatre-going experience; we invite them to be engaged participants, as opposed to simply passive observers.

J: Another reason why we’ve been successful at both getting people out to our shows and fundraising large amounts of money is because you and I make serious efforts to stay engaged with people. And this is by far one of the most stressful administrative burdens we’ve taken on, because maintaining relationships takes a lot of time and energy.

A: The Stratford Festival has whole departments devoted to donor relations – “Gifts Managers” – as well as people whose full-time jobs it is to work on audience development, group sales, and so on. At Convergence it’s just you and me. Granted, we’re smaller, but size is relative – what we do is still a lot for two people to manage.

J: If I’ve learned anything from self-producing it’s that people give to us because it’s *us*. They like us. They’ve built a relationship with us, be it socially or through doing community theatre with us or through our teaching work. They become invested in seeing us and our work succeed. Sometimes the particular project is even secondary to the fact that they’re wanting to support you and I. Because we put in time with them.

A: And putting in time ... well ... takes *time!* It’s good to be talking about the audience before anyone else – they’re our customers, right? In one respect, they’re the people we should be thinking about the most, and putting the most energy into staying connected to. If they don’t keep showing up, spreading the word, the whole endeavour is pointless.

J: These “relationship values” also extends to our relationships with the artists we engage.

A: What did Mike Nichols say is the key to casting?

J: No assholes!

A: So true! And as producers it’s important to show the professional artists we engage that we value them, and one way of doing that is making sure we always pay them, no matter how small an amount. Asking people to work for free means asking them to subsidize our dream with their time and energy, to care as much about our baby as we do, and that devalues them and their work.

J: And this is why our budgets are often so high – with such large ensembles, 70 per cent or so of the expenses goes to paying people. That’s

another reason why I think we've been successful with grants and fundraising. We're not sinking money into lavish sets, we're paying *people*.

A: Yeah, just not ourselves! ... I want to get back to something you said earlier ... you used the word "burden" – is maintaining relationships, specifically with donors, really a burden to you?

J: Not necessarily the actual face time with people. Most of the donor relationships we have feel mutually enjoyable. But it's so hard to create work-life boundaries.

A: When a donor calls an artistic director they call her office number; when they call us they call our cell phone. Maybe we should pay for an office line ...

J: Out of our own pockets?!

A: So what makes it a "burden"?

J: When you have 200 donors, that's 200 thank-you notes, all with personal touches so it doesn't feel generic. It means making sure people get their incentives depending on their donor level, it means following up, checking in, taking care ... all of that is very time-consuming. The amount of time I spend on email alone makes me want to cut off my fingers!

A: You take expressing gratitude very seriously.

J: But we have to! How many times have we donated to a show and had no acknowledgment of the gift and no follow-up about the incentive? It's embarrassing!

A: This has actually been a big issue for us when we've partnered with larger institutions. We bring the donors to the project and then their staff spell their names wrong in the program! In the end it makes us look bad.

J: And how can we ever go back to those people and make future asks when we've abused their trust? I've become totally control-freaky about it because it reflects so poorly on our values. I mean, fundraising isn't about taking the money and running ... it's all about gratitude and relationship building, inviting people who give to recognize that they're an integral part of the picture. And that just takes time and constant care, there's no away around it.

A: Reminds me of that "Tent Talk" you moderated for the Fringe a few summers ago – that panel of "non-theatre-goers."

J: Oh yeah ... that guy who I met randomly at a concert at SummerWorks who wasn't even aware that he was at a theatre festival! He insisted he disliked going to the theatre, and I managed to convince him to see a show that I thought he'd like based on his favourite movies. I gave him two comps, and he came and really loved it. After that I put him on our

e-list, and I wondered if he'd see our show the next summer but he didn't. On the panel, I asked him why he didn't come, wasn't he reading our emails? He said, "Anything with the word 'theatre' in it I just delete or it goes into my spam."

A: Amazing!

J: And I was like, "But you know who I am!" And he said, "I know who *you* are, not the name of your theatre company." Even when I emailed him to sit on that panel it took three times before he responded, and it was the email that had his name in the subject line that finally got his attention.

A: It just proves that the personal connection wins out every time.

J: But we have 3,000+ people on our e-list! How do we keep in touch with 3,000 people *and* pursue funding *and* keep up relations with donors *and* get people to come *and* make the work???

A: It's exhausting.

J: The problem is there's no money for us to pay someone to do all the admin work we need support doing. Because we operate on a project-by-project basis, we can't access operating funding via grants.

A: Such is the way for artist-driven, non-incorporated, non-charitable theatre companies like us.

J: Theatre. Company. That still doesn't quite feel like it adequately reflects who we are and what we do.

A: "Where's your theatre?" Love that question! The idea of not having a venue puzzles some people, even though most theatre companies across the country are non-venued.

J: Are you saying you want a venue?!

A: No! Just agreeing that the term "theatre company" has an old-school ring to it.

J: Epiphany: If I had a T-shirt store and the T-shirts never turned a profit and even started *costing* me money to make, I'd shut down the store, right?!

A: Right.

J: Because businesses are meant to make money, not lose money.

A: Right. And the overall idea behind a not-for-profit is that we're only ever meant to break even. Money comes in for a show and it gets put directly into that show. We start at zero and finish at zero, with nothing much left in the bank for the next project, not to mention our overhead costs.

J: We've been putting all of our energy and resources into the product – the shows – and very few resources into the business – our company. It's as if we've been making T-shirts for \$100 but can only sell them for

\$25 and have to raise the other \$75 ourselves. That's the worst business model ever!

A: I just read in a Soulpepper show program that "less than half the cost of the season is covered by ticket sales with much of our mandate being non-revenue generating." They, like most theatre companies, rely on "philanthropic support," which makes up 40 per cent of their annual operating revenue.

J: That's how the arts generally work – in theatre, the expenses are almost always going to be greater than the box office revenue, and so we have to fundraise the rest ourselves.

A: Maybe we should seriously consider changing the scale of the work we do. Maybe massive-budget shows with huge ensembles aren't the smartest business model?

J: But whether the projects are small or large, the problems we face are still the same.

A: If I had a great idea for a one- or two-person show, you'd be against that?

J: That's not the point. I won't be forced to only do small shows because they make more economic sense. We should all be doing the shows we need to do, period.

A: And our dreaming shouldn't be dictated by the flaws in the system. We should be dreaming big, all of us! And figuring out ways to make big dreams work, instead of settling.

J: There must be a way to build on all we've accomplished these past seven years ... try to flip the horizontal ladder into a vertical position.

A: Well, if operating funding would allow us to create some infrastructure and sustainability, why not bite the bullet and put together a board of directors so we can incorporate and be eligible for operating grants? Then we'd finally be able to hire someone to do all the admin work that bogs us down. Of course, there'd still be a ton of oversight, but we could hire an actual producer, not a necessary one.

J: But just because we're eligible for that kind of funding doesn't mean we're guaranteed it. The number of arts organizations has increased exponentially in the last 5–10 years, while the funding pool has substantially decreased. There's a lot of competition out there for operating funding ...

A: True, but once we're incorporated, we can apply for charitable status. We already operate like a not-for-profit, so why not take it a step further so we can provide our donors with tax receipts and increase our funding potential?

J: Do I need to remind you why “going charitable” is such a terrible idea for us?

A: Okay ... let’s re-cap: Our first two productions, AutoShow and The Gladstone Variations, started at the Toronto Fringe Festival and were fairly cost-effective and low-risk from a financial point of view. When we remounted Gladstone the budget was 20 times larger because we were no longer producing within a festival. It took us one year to raise those funds, and we were limited as to who we could ask for donations because we couldn’t provide tax receipts. However, with YICHUD and Passion Play we created legitimate partnerships with theatres who are registered charities and who could provide our donors with tax receipts. This enabled us to make asks to foundations and increased the amounts that individual donors gave because of the tax receipt incentive. That said, for our next production –

J: If there is a next production –

A: – unless we create another legitimate partnership with a theatre who has charitable status, we have no way of accessing funds from the foundations with whom we’ve built relationships, and our individual gifts will likely decrease because we can no longer provide tax receipts. And so I ask you again, what’s wrong with considering incorporation, charitable status, and establishing a board?

J: You mean a board that can hire and fire us?

A: That situation is a bit extreme ...

J: Talk about management! We’ve acknowledged that the administration vs. art balance is already off. Why add another gigantic burden to our plate just so we can provide tax receipts? Time and time again we’ve seen small theatres get crushed under the administrative weight of becoming a charity because they felt it was the only way to grow but they couldn’t actually sustain it.

A: I wish we had in Canada what they have in the United States – their tax laws allow for something called “fiscal sponsorships,” where any nonprofit can sponsor an organization or individual artist who is then permitted to use the nonprofit’s charitable number for the duration of the project. Canadian tax laws are much more rigid and don’t allow one charitable entity to “umbrella” a non-charitable entity unless it’s a legitimate partnership, such as a co-production.

J: You should read Jane Marsland’s paper that she wrote as a research fellow at the Metcalf Foundation: “Shared Platforms and Charitable Venture Organizations: A Powerful Possibility for a More Resilient Arts Sector.”¹ Jane, an avid arts advocate, champions the creation of a Canadian version of what you’re talking about. That’s the future ...

A: In the States, and also in Europe, they have a much better track record for philanthropy and their tax laws reflect that.

J: Becoming a charity is totally antithetical to the mindset we need to create art. The whole concept behind not-for-profits is that they require oversight, which is why the rules for non-profits in Canada are way more stringent than they are for any for-profit small business.

A: And that level of oversight discourages risk, and risk is essential in art making.

J: I maintain that theatre is a business, not a charity! A theatre is not Run for the Cure or the United Way. When I think of those charities and then I think of theatres as charities ... that makes no sense to me.

A: So if the current model no longer reflects the ways in which we and so many artists like us are working, it's incumbent upon us not to change the art making but to change the models.

J: Exactly! Don't conform and "go charitable" just because it's the only model available to us right now ...

A: Society has this messed-up idea that art and commerce don't mix. But they absolutely do and ought to mix more often.

J: Artists often make excellent business managers.

A: Some of the most successful theatres are successful because they've placed artists at the centre of their organizations. Sure, not every artist has those skills or wants to be filling those roles, but we should remember that producing is a creative endeavour ... I don't think it's generally recognized that way.

J: And this is exactly why artist-driven companies are currently the primary incubators of new work in English Canada.

A: Artists know how to live and work on a shoestring budget. Artists know how to squeeze everything they can out of a dollar. Artists understand the value of in-kind donations, exchanges, and sharing of resources. Artists adhere to deadlines, they get "bottom lines" – there's no bottom line more unforgiving than "the audience is coming on this date and the show must go up no matter what."

J: Artists know how to collaborate, problem-solve, be flexible, adapt, improvise, and can be experts at conflict resolution.

A: And yet there continues to be this "us and them" mentality ...

J: Remember those statistics that were going around after the Harper government slashed some important arts funding for touring programs in 2008?

A: Yes! According to the Conference Board of Canada, in 2007, 1.1 million people across the country were employed in the arts and culture sector, which contributed \$84.6 billion to the GDP. That's comparable

to jobs in agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, oil, and gas combined.²

J: I get it, I get it, the arts have value, the arts make money, the arts can and should be a central part of a society's economic well-being ... you're preaching to the choir.

A: Which brings us back to theatre as a business.

J: Right, we're a small business and our product is theatre. We have three revenue streams when we're doing a show: box office, project grants, and fundraising. But what about the revenue streams when we're not in production mode? When we have no play to sell, therefore no box office.

A: And not being incorporated, we're ineligible for operating grants.

J: What if we fundraised for our operating in a grass-roots way like we do for our shows?

A: You mean "crowdsourcing"?

J: Yeah, but for our operating funding: "Give us the \$25 you spend on lattes a month, and help us pay our Convergence Theatre bank fees for three months." We could approach our larger donors as well. Imagine someone funding a part-time producer for six months.

A: What's the incentive?

J: They contribute to our ability to plan our next steps, thereby becoming our "Operating Angels" and thus contributing to the health of our company and the birth of our next show.

A: Still, the larger donors will need a tax receipt ...

J: What about focusing on education and outreach? Bringing theatre workshops into schools and communities.

A: These are good ideas, but the challenge remains that you and I will still spend most of our time administering these programs. We need to be able to pay someone to administer them.

J: Or we need someone who is willing to come on board for little to no money and raise their own salary via the administration of these fundraising initiatives.

A: Hmmm ... or what about creating the \$100 T-shirt?

J: Huh?

A: Look to the product itself. What if our next large-scale show is created with a for-profit commercial mindset? It's still high-quality theatre, but we create a product that people will pay for.

J: Why would people pay big bucks for "high-quality theatre" when they can go to the movies for \$13 or just stay home and stream really good TV practically for free?

A: Why. That is the million-dollar question. What do people want and what will people pay for?

J: Can we create a product, a show, that can sustain itself over time? A show that could run indefinitely? A show that can reach beyond a typical theatre-going audience? What would attract the non-theatre-goers? What will get them in the door and get them and their friends coming back for more?

A: There's a serious paradox at work here, though. We used to think that if we stayed as a small, project-to-project operation, we could just focus on the art making. We could go dormant between projects, each of us working our usual freelance jobs, and the Convergence producing machine would come to life again when we had an exciting idea.

J: That didn't happen though, mainly because we never really went dormant. We've just been working non-stop and careening towards burnout.

A: Yes – so the paradox: if we stay small, and keep going project to project, the energy and time required to get each project up is unsustainable. On the other hand, if we attempt to grow, think more long-term, and think “for-profit,” we just increase the stress and workload and end up burning out anyhow.

J: Right. We can't be full-time creators and full-time administrators. Basically we need to find a way to fund and grow our small-scale business, by creating a model that serves and enhances the things we're already doing really well, as opposed to conforming to a system that would hamper us and eventually kill us.

A: We need to determine what kind of structures we need to invent in order to help artists like us grow and thrive both artistically and economically.

J: A model that allows us to be financially prudent while still allowing us to take artistic risks and explore new artistic territory.

A: We need to create the kind of organization that can live healthily somewhere between those two extremes and still authentically reflect our artistic visions and values.

J: And also a better working culture in the arts – it's not just about making the art, it's about *how* we make the art. Again, it comes down to building and maintaining healthy relationships with the groups of people who make our work possible, namely, our audience (which includes donors, sponsors, and *potential* donors and sponsors), our artistic partners, and our producing partners.

A: I'll add to that the importance of mentorship. Sure, we're all poor, but larger theatre companies can do a much better job of sharing their knowledge and resources beyond just, “Feel free to use our photocopier after hours”! Exchanges between large- and small-scale theatres and

between senior, emerging, and mid-career artists is the only way to create a healthier arts ecology.

J: There's a quote I love that Nightwood Theatre once used in one of their brochures. It's by an American director named Anna Shapiro. She says, "I'm pretty sure the only way you get to have a life in the theatre is if somewhere in your life you come upon a group of people who, although they don't need you, make room for you."³

A: Yes! And we've been very fortunate – a lot of people have made room for us. But even more so, we've created our own spaces.

J: And maybe that's the key to our survival, to our sustainability and our future growth: we must make room for other people. We can no longer be just a two-person operation. We must expand and continue to put artists at the centre of Convergence Theatre, under our artistic leadership.

A: Which means sharing and expanding our core artistic and working values.

J: And making sure that we, as a smaller theatre company, don't end up replicating the problems of larger theatres.

A: Which inevitably comes down to our not conforming to current models that we know won't work for us –

J: But choosing and creating new structures that allow us to work flexibly and grow at our own pace.

A: You sound a lot more optimistic than when we started talking.

J: Don't worry, I'm not! I'm just not sure we can give up without really investigating all the questions we've raised. Where will the money come from? Can we do better than just survive? I don't know. Will we ever be able to grow in a way that reflects our working ecology?

A: Do you remember the transcript of the speech by Sean Holmes, the artistic director of the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in the UK?

J: Yeah, it was about the launch of their "Secret Theatre" season.

A: Something he said stuck with me: "maybe the existing structures of theatre in this country, whilst not corrupt, are corrupting ... Structures forced by economic realities of course, but also by an unconscious acceptance of those structures."⁴

J: We have collectively become disillusioned with the traditions in which we are working. And so it's our prerogative, our duty, to imagine different structures for making theatre in the face of our own field's failure to provide career paths and growth for us and future generations of artists.

A: We have to empower ourselves and each other as *spaceholders*, as creators of an artistic context. Which brings us back to impact: *because we existed, something changed*. That's really what it comes down to – relationships and impact.

J: You're reminding me of the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* – repairing the world.

A: What about it?

J: I really do believe that theatre is an integral part of repairing the world. Theatre is essentially my religion, the lens through which I see the world. When we were doing *YICHUD*, I realized that the same things that draw me to theatre draw me to Judaism: culture and community.

A: To be an active member of a larger community – I think that's a universal human desire.

J: If we can excite people about a live shared communal experience at the theatre, surprise people with what theatre is capable of, then we may just be able to create theatre-lovers for life, one theatregoer at a time.

A: We accept that the world is not in great shape. It's broken and needs more fixing than we can conceive of. The sheer amount of problems in the world, and the myriad of forces working against us as artists, as people, as citizens, makes us all feel powerless and hopeless at times.

J: Powerlessness and hopelessness – those too are communal experiences.

A: Maybe it's a little over-the-top idealistic, but why would we work ourselves to the edge of burnout for little to no money if we didn't truly believe that we are somehow contributing to building a better society? Theatre should reflect back to us what humans are capable of, help us ask ourselves how we ought to live.

J: Now more than ever, theatre can and must be a bulwark against despair.

NOTES

- 1 Jane Marsland, "Shared Platforms and Charitable Venture Organizations," *Metcalf Foundation*, June 2013, <http://metcalffoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Shared-Platforms-and-CVOs.pdf>.
- 2 Conference Board of Canada, "Positioning Canada's Culture Sector in the Global Market," in *Compendium of Research Papers: The International Forum on the Creative Economy* (Gatineau, QC: Conference Board of Canada, 2008), 46–51, <http://www.sfu.ca/bcreative/files/resources/CreativeEconomyCompendium.pdf>.
- 3 Anna Shapiro, quoted in Patricia Cohen, "Who's in Charge of This Show? She Is," *New York Times*, 24 June 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/28/theater/28cohe.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.

4 A season launch speech given on 17 June 2013 by Sean Holmes, artistic director of the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in London, announcing their “Secret Theatre” season. A reprint of the speech can be accessed here: Sean Holmes, “Maybe the Existing Structures of Theatre in This Country, Whilst Not Corrupt, Are Corrupting,” WhatsOnStage.Com, 18 June 2013, http://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/06-2013/sean-holmes-maybe-the-existing-structures-of-theat_31033.html.

Contributors

Catherine Banks's plays include *It Is Solved By Walking*, *Bone Cage*, *Three Storey*, *Ocean View*, and *Bitter Rose*. *Bitter Rose* aired on Bravo! Canada. *Bone Cage* won the Governor General's Award for Literature (English) Drama 2008, and *It Is Solved By Walking* won the Governor General's Award in 2012. *It Is Solved by Walking* has been translated into Catalan by Tant per Tant and was one of three Canadian plays that toured Catalonia in November 2012. She is currently completing *Miss N Me*, a play about a rural hairdresser who drives to New York City to meet her idol Missy Elliot, and her adaptation of Ernest Buckler's remarkable novel *The Mountain and the Valley* for the stage. Scirocco Drama published *Bitter Rose* with *Three Storey*, *Ocean View* in the fall of 2014. Banks was awarded Nova Scotia's Established Artist Award for her body of work (2008) and the Queen's Jubilee Medal in 2012.

Alan Dilworth is known for his award-winning direction of contemporary tragedies and reinvented classics. He has brought over 25 new Canadian plays to the stage, including his own SummerWorks Jury Prize-winning *The Unforgetting*, Erin Shields's SummerWorks Jury Prize and Governor General's Award-winning *If We Were Birds*, Andrew Kushnir's Toronto Critics Award-winning *The Middle Place*, and Pamela Sinha's multiple Dora Award-winning *Crash*. These, along with his work on Edward Bond's epic masterpieces *The Bundle* and *Human Cannon*, have established Alan as a director of sometimes harrowing but always humanizing productions, known for their stage imagery and "operatic minimalism." In 2013, he was awarded the inaugural Christopher Plummer Fellowship Award of Excellence for his work on classical text. Alan is a resident artist at Soulpepper Theatre Company (*Twelve Angry Men*, *La Ronde*) and

at the Theatre Centre (*Small Axe*). He is co-artistic director of Sheep No Wool (the Edward Bond Festival, *Montparnasse*, *Passion Play*). Alan conducts ongoing research in the performance of spare, poetic texts with a focus on Bond, Sophocles, Euripides, and verbatim text. He has an MFA in Directing from York University and degrees in International Relations and Education.

Barry Freeman is Assistant Professor in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough and the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. Barry is an Executive Editor of *Theatre Research in Canada* and an Associate Editor of *Canadian Theatre Review* and serves on the board of directors for Theatre Ontario and the Paprika Festival. His research, which involves contemporary Canadian theatre, ethics, globalization, and interculturalism, has been published in *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *alt.theatre*, *Research in Drama Education*, and *Performing Ethos*. In 2011, Barry was awarded the Richard Plant Prize for outstanding scholarly essay in English by the Canadian Association for Theatre Research for the article “Navigating the *Prague-Toronto-Manitoulin Theatre Project*: A Postmodern Ethnographic Approach to Collaborative Intercultural Theatre.” His current book project, *Staging Strangers: Theatre and Global Ethics*, examines the impact of globalization on the ethics and aesthetics of contemporary Canadian theatre.

Kathleen Gallagher is Professor and Canada Research Chair in Theatre, Youth, and Research in Urban Schools at the University of Toronto. Dr Gallagher’s award-winning books include *Why Theatre Matters: Urban Youth, Engagement, and a Pedagogy of the Real* (University of Toronto Press, 2014); *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* (University of Toronto Press, 2007); and *Drama Education in the Lives of Girls: Imagining Possibilities* (University of Toronto Press, 2000). Her edited collections include *Drama and Theatre in Urban Contexts* (with Jonathan Neelands, Routledge, 2013); *How Theatre Educates: Convergences and Counterpoints with Artists, Scholars, and Advocates* (with David Booth, University of Toronto Press, 2003); and *The Methodological Dilemma: Creative, Critical and Collaborative Approaches to Qualitative Research* (Routledge, 2008). Dr Gallagher has published many articles on theatre, youth, pedagogy, methodology, and gender and travels widely giving international addresses and workshops for drama practitioners. Her new Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded project is a collaborative ethnography with India, Greece, England, and Taiwan, titled *Youth, Theatre,*

Radical Hope and the Ethical Imaginary: An Intercultural Investigation of Drama Pedagogy, Performance and Civic Engagement.

Nicholas Hanson is Associate Professor at the University of Lethbridge, teaching courses in Theatre for Young Audiences, improvisation, and Canadian theatre. His recent articles have appeared in *Canadian Theatre Review*, *The Lion & Unicorn*, and the *New Canadian Realisms* anthology. Nicholas recently completed a four-year term as the Artistic Director of Lethbridge-based New West Theatre, the largest professional Albertan theatre company outside of Calgary and Edmonton.

Dustin Scott Harvey's work has grown to encompass a myriad of people and places come, gone, and soon to be. Through the exploration of site and exploitation of media art, Dustin creates meaningful moments that offer new ways of being together while shedding crooked light on how it is we've grown apart. His recent work is about a beauty found in the connections between strangers. These projects include theatrical walks with the help of iPods, live film events, site-specific performances, viewer-responsive audio installations, and immersive text message experiences. Each production is about creating powerful, shared experiences that are thoughtful, intimate, and temporary. Based in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, his productions have been produced in Denmark, Wales, Ireland, Montreal, Toronto, St John's, Calgary, Victoria, and throughout Halifax. His works include *Departure*, *Folkloremobile*, *Farewell*, *The Common*, *(We) Are Here*, *Another City*, *Best Wishes*, *Cowboy Show*, and *Winding Up Godot*. His writings about performance have been published in *Canadian Theatre Review* (issues 126, 134, 159). He has a BA in Theatre Studies from Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and a postgraduate diploma in Acting from the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in London, England.

Naila Keleta-Mae is Assistant Professor in the Department of Drama and Speech Communication at the University of Waterloo, where she researches critical race, gender, and performance studies. Her scholarship has been published in journals and magazines including *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *alt.theatre*, and *CanPlay*. Dr Keleta-Mae gave the TEDx Talk "Imagine & Do," and she has been awarded the New Scholars Prize by the International Federation for Theatre Research, the Abella Scholarship for Studies in Equity from York University, the Susan Mann Dissertation Scholarship from York University, and a

Canada Graduate Scholarship from SSHRC for her doctoral studies on black performance in Canada. Dr Keleta-Mae is also a poet, recording artist, playwright, and director who has performed in Canada, France, South Africa, and the United States of America. She has released two full-length albums, been produced by bcurent, Black Theatre Workshop, and University of Waterloo Drama, and been published by the *Toronto Star*, Playwrights Canada Press, Fernwood Publishing, and Frontenac House Publishing Ltd.

Andrew Kushnir is a Toronto-based playwright, actor, and community arts worker. He is creative director of Project: Humanity (PH), an organization raising awareness of social issues through the arts. His produced plays include *Captain Princess*, *foto*, and *The Middle Place*. *The Middle Place* has toured Toronto high schools, was produced for general audiences by Theatre Passe Muraille and Canadian Stage, and has toured nationally by PH to the Great Canadian Theatre Company and the Belfry Theatre. It received two SummerWorks Festival Jury Prizes and the 2011 Toronto Theatre Critics Award for Best Production of a Play, and it earned Andrew a Dora nomination for Outstanding New Play. He is playwright in residence at the Tarragon Theatre and is developing new work in residency at the Theatre Centre (with Alan Dilworth) and at Buddies in Bad Times (with collaborators Paul Dunn and Damien Atkins). He is developing a new musical commission, *Alexandria*, for Acting Up Stage and the Belfry Theatre (with composer Reza Jacobs), as well as a new verbatim theatre piece, *The Teachers* with Dr Kathleen Gallagher at the University of Toronto. Andrew is a graduate of the University of Alberta's BFA Acting program as well as a Loran Scholar.

Laura Levin is Associate Professor of Theatre at York University and Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Theatre Review*. She is author of *Performing Ground: Space, Identity, and the Art of Blending In*, a book on the relationship between body and environment in contemporary performance. She is the editor of *Conversations Across Borders* (Seagull) and *Theatre in Toronto* (Playwrights Canada), as well as several journal issues on topics ranging from performance art to performance and public space. She has published a number of essays on contemporary theatre and performance art with a focus on performing gender and sexuality, site-specific and urban performance, and disciplinary histories of performance. Her publication "Can the City Write: Letting Space Speak After Poststructuralism" was awarded the 2010 Richard Plant Prize by the Canadian Association

for Theatre Research. She is Director of the Performance Studies (Canada) Project, a SSHRC-funded research project on the development of the field of Performance Studies in Canada and Director of the MA/PhD in Theatre & Performance Studies at York.

Edward (Ted) Little teaches socially engaged and activist theatre at Concordia University, where he is Chair of the Department of Theatre. He is Associate Artistic Director of Teesri Duniya Theatre and was editor-in-chief of *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage* from 2002 to 2012. Between 2007 and 2012 he was co-investigator and leader of the Performance Working Group for *Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and Other Human Rights Violations*. His current projects include an interdisciplinary, SSHRC-funded Insight Development web and book project with Elizabeth Miller and Steven High. The website, *Going Public with Oral History, Documentary Media, and Theatre*, features short interviews with socially engaged practitioners from around the world reflecting on the process, politics, art, and significance of “going public” in an era of multimedia authorship. The companion book is scheduled for publication in 2015. Other publications include *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance*, co-edited with Steven High and Thi Ry Duong (University of Toronto Press, 2013); and “Partners in Conversation: A Reflection on the Ethics and Emergent Practice of Oral History Performance” (co-authored with Steven High), in *History, Memory, Performance*, edited by David Dean, Yana Meerzon, and Kathryn Prince (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

Ann-Marie MacDonald is an author, playwright, and actor. Best known for her plays, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and *Belle Moral: A Natural History*, and her novels, *Fall On Your Knees* and *The Way the Crow Flies*, she also enjoys a career on stage, most recently in Tarragon Theatre’s production of “More Fine Girls.” Her work as a screen actor has earned her a Gemini Award and a Genie Nomination. MacDonald’s writing has been honoured with numerous awards including the Chalmers, the Dora Mavor Moore, the Governor General’s, and the Commonwealth Prize. She hosted CBC Television’s *Life and Times* for seven seasons and currently hosts the flagship documentary series *Doc Zone*. Her latest novel is *Adult Onset*.

Jackie Maxwell began her work as Artistic Director of the Shaw Festival in 2002. Her select Shaw Festival credits include *Major Barbara*; *Ragtime*;

Come Back, Little Sheba; Age of Arousal; An Ideal Husband; The Entertainer; Mrs. Warren's Profession; The Stepmother; Saint Joan; The Magic Fire; Gypsy; Bus Stop; Pygmalion; Rutherford and Son; Three Sisters; The Coronation Voyage; Merrily We Roll Along; Candida; and Picnic. She has worked extensively across Canada as a director and dramaturge for companies such as Tarragon Theatre, Canadian Stage Company, Mirvish Productions, Centaur Theatre, Theatre Calgary, and the Charlottetown Festival, and she was Artistic Director of Factory Theatre from 1986 to 1994. Recently, she directed *Good People* at Arena Stage in Washington, DC, having made her United States directorial debut in 2007 at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre with the acclaimed production of *Saint Joan*. Jackie is also a well-respected teacher for institutions such as the Banff Centre for the Arts, National Theatre School, and the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto. She is the recipient of a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, an honorary Doctor of Laws (Queen's University), an honorary Doctor of Humanities (University of Windsor), and a Gascon-Thomas Award (National Theatre School).

James McKinnon is Programme Director of the Victoria University of Wellington Theatre Programme. His research focuses on adaptation, particularly contemporary appropriations of canonical classics, as well as the pedagogical applications of adaptation-based dramaturgy. His work has appeared in recent issues of *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Teaching Learning Inquiry*, and the recent anthology *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and Its Mutations*. At VUW, he teaches courses in dramaturgy, modern and postmodern drama, and dramatic theory and criticism, and has directed two original theatre productions, *Shit Show* (inspired by Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*) and *Mystery Play*, derived from the English liturgical plays and other sources. Current and forthcoming projects include a multimedia, practice-based inquiry into the legacies of Futurism, and an investigation of the influence of devising on tertiary drama and theatre programs.

John Mighton is a mathematician, playwright, and bestselling author of *The End of Ignorance: Multiplying Our Human Potential*. He is currently a Fellow of the Fields Institute for Research in Mathematical Sciences and has also taught mathematics and math education at the University of Toronto and lectured in philosophy at McMaster University, where he received a master's in Philosophy. John is the founder of JUMP Math, a charity whose mission is to improve the teaching of mathematics. The

JUMP program is used as classroom resource for math by over 100 000 students in Canada and the United States. John recently published an article in *Scientific American Mind* on the principles of teaching used in JUMP. John's plays, which include *Half Life*, *The Little Years*, and *Possible Worlds*, have been produced around the world and have received a number of national awards including two Governor General's Awards and the Siminovitch Prize. John was named an Officer of the Order of Canada for his work as a writer and social entrepreneur.

Playwright, poet, essayist, and teacher **Daniel David Moses** is a Delaware from the Six Nations lands in southern Ontario, Canada. He holds an Honours BA in General Fine Arts from York University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. His plays include his first, *Coyote City*, a nominee for the 1991 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama; *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, included in the *Norton Anthology of Drama* (2nd ed., vol. 2); and *Kyotopolis*. He is also the author of *A Small Essay on the Largeness of Light and Other Poems* (Exile Editions, 2012), and co-editor of *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* (Oxford University Press), the 4th and 20th Anniversary Edition of which appeared in 2013. Other recent publications include *River Range*, a CD of a suite of poems with music by David Deleary, and, as editor, *The Exile Book of Native Canadian Fiction and Drama*, an anthology, both published by Exile Editions in 2010. His honours include a James Buller Memorial Award (for the play *The Indian Medicine Shows*), the Harbourfront Festival Prize, and a Chalmers Fellowship. He teaches playwriting in the Department of Drama at Queen's University as an Associate Professor.

Julie Salverson writes plays, essays, and opera and has published extensively about the artist as witness, historical memory, ethics, and the imagination. She gives workshops and presentations for diverse groups using creative arts methods to share stories, analyse community issues, and address difficult dynamics. She edited *Community Engaged Theatre* (2011) and *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* (2010), published by Playwrights Canada Press. Her feature "They Never Told Us These Things" appeared in *Maisonneuve Magazine* (Summer 2011). She was a 2009 runner-up for the CBC Literary Awards (creative nonfiction) and in 2008 received honourable mention from *The Malahat Review* (with Peter van Wyck). *Shelter*, her cartoon chamber opera about the atomic bomb (libretto) premiered with Edmonton Opera in November 2012

and played in Toronto in June 2014 (Tapestry New Opera/Edmonton Opera). Julie works with War Horse Awareness Foundation in Alberta exploring arts/equine programs with front-line service providers. She is Associate Professor of Drama at Queen's University and Adjunct Professor at the Royal Military College of Canada. She is completing the book *Lines of Flight: An Atomic Memoir*.

Julie Tepperman is an actor, playwright, educator, and co-artistic director (with Aaron Willis) of Convergence Theatre, creators of the hit plays *YICHUD (Seclusion)*, *The Gladstone Variations*, and *AutoShow*, and co-producers of the Canadian premiere of Sarah Ruhl's three-part epic *Passion Play*, winner of a Dora Award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble. Julie has acted on stages across Toronto and was a company member with the Stratford Festival for two seasons. Julie's playwrighting credits include *YICHUD (Seclusion)*, published by Playwrights Canada Press; *I Grow Old* (as part of *The Gladstone Variations*), with four Dora nominations and listed number 2 in *NOW Magazine's* "Top Ten Toronto Productions of the Decade"; *ROSY* (as part of *AutoShow*); and a reimagining of the August Strindberg play *The Father* (Winnipeg Jewish Theatre/Manitoba Theatre Centre's Master Playwright's Festival). Julie was playwright in residence at Theatre Passe Muraille in 2010–11 with the support of the Canada Council. She is currently developing an opera for teens with the support of Tapestry New Opera and co-creating *Brantwood*, a site-specific musical extravaganza, through Sheridan's Canadian Musical Theatre Project. Julie is a graduate of George Brown Theatre School and the Stratford Festival's Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre Training.

Judith Thompson is the author of the plays *The Crackwalker*, *White Biting Dog*, *I Am Yours*, *Lion in the Streets*, *Sled*, *Perfect Pie*, *Habitat*, *Capture Me*, *Enoch Arden*, *Such Creatures*, and *Palace of the End*. She is currently developing and acting in the one-woman play *Watching Glory Die* with Ken Gass and the Canadian Repertory Theatre Company in Toronto and at work on a commission for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Entitled *The Thrill*, the play had its world premiere August 2013. Judith is also currently at work on a play entitled *Who Killed Snow White* with Nightwood Theatre. She has written two feature films, *Lost and Delirious* and *Perfect Pie*, as well as multiple television movies and radio drama. A highly esteemed Canadian playwright, she is the recipient of two Governor General's Literary Awards and an Officer in the Order of Canada. In 2007, she was awarded

the prestigious Walter Carsen Prize for Excellence in the Performing Arts, and in 2008, she was awarded the Susan Smith Blackburn Award and the Dora Mavor Moore Outstanding New Play Award for *Palace of the End*. Judith is the founding artistic director of R.A.R.E Theatre Company, whose recent production of the play *RARE* – created and directed by Judith Thompson in collaboration with nine performers with Down syndrome – was a hit and Patrons’ Pick at the 2012 Toronto Fringe Festival and enjoyed an extended run when remounted at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts. Judith is currently Professor of Drama at the University of Guelph and lives with her husband and five children in Toronto.

Aaron Willis is an actor, director, educator, and co-founding artistic director of Convergence Theatre (with Julie Tepperman). Directing credits include *The Thing Between Us* (mcguffin company), *The Crucible* (Theatre Erindale/UTM), *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* (Baro Theatre), *Passion Play* (Convergence/Outside the March/Sheep No Wool), *Miss Caledonia* (Tarragon Theatre), *When The Ice Breaks* (Down n Out Productions/Campbell House Museum), *Other People* (Mutual Friends Co-op), *YICHUD (Seclusion)* (Theatre Passe Muraille/Convergence Theatre), *The Gladstone Variations – The Tearful Bride* (Convergence Theatre; Dora nomination), and *AutoShow* (Convergence Theatre/Toronto Fringe 2006). Acting credits include *Murderers Confess at Christmastime* (Outside the March/SummerWorks 2013), *YICHUD (Seclusion)* (Theatre Passe Muraille/Convergence), *The Incredible Speediness of Jamie Cavanaugh* (Roseneath Theatre), *Zadie’s Shoes* (GCTC), *Abattoir* (Kaeja d’Dance/Harbourfront Centre), *The Russian Play* (Factory Theatre), *Wrecked* (Roseneath; Dora nomination – Best Performance TYA), *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare in the Rough), *(nod)* (Theatre Gargantua), *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* (The Co.), and *Well* (Tarragon Theatre). Film/TV credits include *Reign* and *Flashpoint*. Aaron served as Assistant Director on *EVITA* (2010) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012) at the Stratford Festival’s Michael Langham Workshop for Classical Theatre Direction. He has a Honours BA in Drama from the University of Alberta and is a graduate of George Brown Theatre School.