

BANFF

PLAYWRIGHTS LAB

To mark the 50th edition of the Banff Centre Playwrights Lab in 2023 we have created an anthology of 50 articles written by artists who participated in the Lab between 2013 and 2023.

Many thanks to all 445 Lab participants during the past decade, and to the 538 playwrights that have developed new works via the Playwrights Lab since 1974.

**The Playwrights Lab is a program at
The Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity**

— 2023 —

BANFF

CENTRE FOR ARTS AND CREATIVITY

Founded in 1933, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity is a learning organization built upon an extraordinary legacy of excellence in artistic and creative development. What started as a single course in drama has grown to become a global organization leading in arts, culture, and creativity across dozens of disciplines.

From our home in the stunning Canadian Rocky Mountains, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity aims to inspire everyone who attends our campus – artists, leaders, and thinkers – to unleash their creative potential.

Banff Centre acknowledges with deep respect and gratitude, our home on the side of Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain. In the spirit of respect and truth, we honour and acknowledge the Banff area, known as “Minhrpa” (translated in Stoney Nakoda as “the waterfalls”) and the Treaty 7 territory and oral practices of the Îyârhe Nakoda (Stoney Nakoda) – comprised of the Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Goodstoney Nations – as well as the Tsuut’ina First Nation and the Blackfoot Confederacy comprised of the Siksika, Piikani, Kainai.

We acknowledge that this territory is home to the Shuswap Nations, Ktunaxa Nations, and Metis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.

We acknowledge all Nations who live, work, and play here, help us steward this land, and honour and celebrate this place.

banffcentre.ca

Contents

2013

- Anita Majumdar – *SUN* 5
Mieko Ouchi – *A Studio of One's Own* 6
Mieko Ouchi – *From Quintet to Colony* 7
Emily Pearlman – *Inviting in the New* 8
Mieko Ouchi – *The Plays that Shape Us* 9
Wanda Graham – *wrestle the dragon Banff* 10
Mieko Ouchi – *Fighting Words* 11
Evan Placey – *THE FEAR* 12
Mieko Ouchi – *Community. Space. Distance.* 13
Brian Quirt – *In Review: The 40th Banff Playwrights Colony* 14

2014

- Karen Hines – *On Writing and (Almost) Being Stalked by a Cougar* 16
Marjorie Chan – *Where I am at the Moment* 18
Elena Belyea – *Productivity's a Funny Word* 19
Marjorie Chan – *SHIP HAPPENS* 20
Anita Majumdar – *Expectations* 21
Marjorie Chan – *Writer's Block* 22
Jenna Rodgers – *The Importance of Listening* 23
Bryony Lavery – *The Bear* 24
Marjorie Chan – *FIRST READ* 26
Susanna Fournier – *Play Fighting* 27
Ruth Little – *Banff and the Thinking Body* 28
PJ Prudat – *write and play, catch the light, nevermind the clock* 29
Marjorie Chan – *Reflections* 30
Brian Quirt – *In Review: Banff Playwrights Colony 2014* 31

2015

- Liz Engelman – *A Turg's Eye View* 32
Bruce Barton – *Playwright as Architect* 33
Trey Anthony – *A Writer's Life Discovered* 34
Joanna Garner – *I destroyed the play again...* 35
Michael Greyeyes – *Magic in the mountains* 36
Kate Hennig – *Time and Space* 37
Jani Lauzon – *Time.* 38
Ho Ka Kei (Jeff Ho) – *Sitting with nothing* 40

2016

- Carmen Aguirre** – *Broken Tailbone at Banff* 41
Gary Mok – *The mountain in my mountain* 42
Brian Quirt – *Inclusion & Equity at the Banff Centre Playwrights Colony* 44
Marcus Youssef – *Critical “Innovations”* 46
Mieko Ouchi – *Notes from the Lab: The Evolution of Mariam* 48
Jay Dodge – *Red Phone.* 50

2017

- Mieko Ouchi** – *Why Theatre for Young People Matters* 52
Brian Quirt – *Banff Playwrights Lab: Why We’re Changing Our Name* 54

2018

- Brian Quirt** – *Banff Playwrights Lab 2018: Performing to a Changing Audience* 56

2020 – Covid Reflections: essays contributed by playwrights during the first year of the pandemic

- Mike Van Graan** – South Africa – *Greetings from Lockdown, Level 4* 58
Chloé Hung – United States 60
Miriam Boolsen - Denmark 62
Tom Holloway – Australia 64
Wang Chong – China 66
Silvia Peláez – Mexico – *The Unexpected* 68
Andrea James – Australia 69
David Harradine – United Kingdom 70
Jovanni Sy – Canada – *By the banks of the Bow* 72

2023

- Jenna Rodgers** – *Stories in the Forest* 74

*This anthology edited and designed by **Brian Quirt**. 2023*

INTRODUCTION: 50 Years of Supporting Playwrights and Theatrical Storytelling
by Brian Quirt – Director, Banff Playwrights Lab

The Banff Centre began with a single drama course in 1933. Forty years later, playwrights Tom Hendry and George Ryga launched an annual gathering of playwrights known as The Playwrights Colony to foster theatrical writing across Canada. This year we are marking the 50th edition of that program, since 2017 entitled The Banff Playwrights Lab.

The Playwrights Lab has evolved in response to the changes in Canadian theatre under the direction of its program directors: Sharon Pollock, Fran Gebhard, John Murrell, Kim McCaw, Bob White, Keith Turnbull, Linda Gaboriau, Maureen LaBonté and Vicki Stroich. I thank them and acknowledge their leadership and contributions to this program over so many decades.

I was invited to become Director of the Lab in 2012/13. In collaboration with Associate Dramaturg Leora Morris, and current Dramaturg Jenna Rodgers, we launched a series of initiatives to broaden the scope of the program and challenge it and its participants to explore theatrical storytelling and play making for the 21st century. Read more about our approaches to the Lab in my essay on page 44.

These initiatives included an annual focus area, which began in 2013 with plays engaging with outrage or outrageousness. In subsequent years, as you'll read in the essays in this anthology, we have focused on political theatre; interdisciplinary performance; theatrical form; theatre for young audiences; audience participation/engagement; large scale plays; writers creating multi-lingual plays; and, as we returned to Banff following the Covid pandemic, hybrid plays working with digital and in-person elements.

I began asking Lab artists in 2013 to write short essays capturing their experience at the Lab. I wanted them to share how being a part of this temporary community of theatre makers and storytellers affected how they write and create. It is a pleasure to bring all 50 essays together in this anthology to showcase these wonderful artists and amplify their observations about creating new work, the shifting landscapes of the theatre world, and their personal reflections on how and why they tell stories.

The Playwrights Lab marks its 50th edition in 2023 with a focus on plays and stories engaging with the land / sky / water, which we felt was an appropriate way to acknowledge the land we work on at the Banff Centre, and the many landscapes – physical, social, political, and theatrical – that storytellers are examining as we all find our feet following the pandemic years.

The Playwrights Lab is one of the longest running writing programs at the Banff Centre. It is the playwrights, storytellers, dramaturgs, theatre makers, artists and administrators who have gathered on the side of Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain for 50 years, as people have for millennia, to share stories with one another, and in time, with audiences around the world.

Thank you to all those who have contributed to the Lab over the ten years that I've been honoured to be its Director, and from whom I've learned so much including: Renelta Arluk, Roman Borys, Kyle Brenders, Allison Brock, June Fukumura, Amiel Gladstone, Howard Jang, Heather Kitchen, Tambry Kopp, Nathan Medd, Eden Middleton, Leora Morris, Mieko Ouchi, Casey Prescott, Diane Ragsdale, Kelly Robinson, Kodie Rollan, Julian Sleath, Jake Tkaczyk, Heloise Veillette, Marcus Youssef – and Nancy Webster.

A huge thank you to current Lab Dramaturg Jenna Rodgers, who has brought superb organization, artistry and enthusiasm to every aspect of the Lab over the ten years of our collaboration on this remarkable undertaking. Read more about the history of the Lab and a full list of participants at banffcentre.ca.

SUN**by Anita Majumdar**

So I was told I was getting the Margaret Greenham Theatre during my time at the Banff Playwrights Colony. I thought that was strange. Strange because I was in Banff, the most beautiful place on earth. "Shouldn't I be in a studio with a window so I can look at the scenery...or something?"

But then again, I work in theatre. I made my choice long ago. If I wanted outdoor scenery I would have been a park ranger. But it made me think how theatre artists rarely spend time in an ACTUAL THEATRE, save for tech and performing for an audience.

So there I was in the Margaret Greenham Theatre being shown how to turn theatre lights on for myself. Again. VERY STRANGE. I'm used to the I.A.T.S.E guy with a big voice and a small tool-belt telling me that only *trained technicians* can flick a light switch on and/or off. Not here. Because I write choreography into all my work, I was given my mornings at the Colony to choreograph the dances I had written into this play.

On my first morning I found myself in a dark theatre and thought again, "Wow. Here I am in Banff and I'm inside a dark theatre with no windows."

The irony of no daylight wasn't lost on me. *Same Same But Different* is a play in which the sun appears on stage as a silent character that speaks to the story's relationship to shadism: a by-product of colonialism, where a person of colour wishes for fair skin colour. Describing the sun to the team of *Same Same But Different* has been challenging. "What do you mean, Anita? So the Sun appears indoors? What does that look like to you?"

But then. In Banff. There was light.

After showing my dramaturg the first draft of the opening dance for the play, we turned off all the lights save for one spot light and I danced the opening again in silhouette and found myself on the verge of tears. I pointed to the light. "This. This is what it looks like to me. When I said the Sun appears indoors, *this* is what I meant."

I was suddenly given a glimpse of a basic working version of what I had been writing and dreaming for 2 years. Seeing my vision actualized in the theatre was profoundly moving. But what was more moving was finally being understood. Since age 15, the theatre has been the place that best suited the way I imagine. And now access to an ACTUAL THEATRE reminded me of why, to this day, I am so deeply in love with the theatre. It's a place where magic happens. My kind of magic.

A place where the sun can appear indoors.

Anita Majumdar is an award-winning actor, playwright, trained classical Indian dancer and illustrator. Her most produced work, the *Fish Eyes Trilogy*, toured extensively for 14 consecutive years and was published with Playwrights Canada Press. She's currently commissioned to write a new play for Nightswimming entitled, *A Girl Has No Gym*.

A Studio of One's Own **by Mieko Ouchi**

As the Senior Playwright in Residence at this year's Banff Playwrights Colony, I wasn't sure exactly what this would entail. I have been lucky enough to come out to work at the Colony in past years, but never with a title.

And it turns out my own studio.

Upon arrival, Colony Director Brian Quirt and Associate Dramaturg Leora Morris handed me a key with a smile, and I knew I was in for something special. Studio #4... a beautiful space with expansive windows on four sides designed by the late Michael Evamy. The views? A tiny glen where deer come to nibble, and a lovely 100 foot pine with one particularly comfy branch that offers a local squirrel a good square-on view of his favorite TV show... me!

That first afternoon I discovered a small book that every artist who has worked here has written in. Some have left lengthy descriptions of what they were working on; other's marks have been more poetic. Always welcoming. Moving to see how many friends, colleagues and much admired but never met writers have sat at this same desk, looking out at the same old tree stump collecting moss. Playwrights sure... including past Senior Playwrights in Residence Daniel MacIvor and Vern Thiessen and another playwright from this year's Colony Colleen Wagner, but also novelists, poets, screenwriters, non-fiction writers, travel writers.

There is something in reading those missives and encouragement to future writers and adding my own name and small message to the end that seems like an important step in my ongoing journey of feeling less fraudulent as a writer, more confident that I have chosen the right path and that it has indeed chosen me. Reading one writer's droll scrawl "I was not the smartest person in the room. And I was alone." made me smile. Fellow traveller. Passing poet CA Conrad's studio the other day and seeing his snowman made me smile too. Whimsy is alive and well in these woods. Something much missed Tom Hendry, playwright, mentor and Colony champion would have appreciated. I've thought of him many times here.

I hosted my first *play.write.night* evening at my Studio this past Wednesday. Fellow playwrights Wanda Graham (Sambro, N.S.), Greg MacArthur (Edmonton) and Anita Majumdar (Toronto) visited and we ate, drank and talked late into the night. I am looking forward to hosting my next *play.write.night* next week when the second wave of artists hits the Colony along with special guest, playwright and former Theatre Arts Director John Murrell, as we expand joyously into a larger, more boisterous form. Magic.

From the woods,
Mieko.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

Inviting in the New
by Emily Pearlman

An early morning flight paired with the brilliant plan to begin packing at 2am the night before has left me ready for Banff on 3 hours of sleep. I am about to snuggle into the window, pretending my winter hat is a neck pillow (they told me to bring one – April is unpredictable) when my seatmate opens a conversation with me. I learn quickly that he is in transition, moving from small town Quebec to Red Deer, Alberta. He wants to improve his English. He thinks the English language is beautiful in a way that makes no sense to me. Which surprises me - isn't the beauty of the *French* language agreed upon across the board? He asks me where I am going, and when I say that I am going to the Banff Centre to write, he gets very excited and opens his laptop. 3-hours-of-sleep Emily has her guard down and so spends the next 45 minutes reading poetry and song lyrics that he has been writing since 1997 in an effort to practice expressing himself in a different language. The work is uneven, but has these pockets of brilliance that can only stem from things lost in translation. He hasn't slept in 40 hours because he is too excited about all the new things coming. I don't out and out decide that I should follow his approach, but as I take the shuttle from Calgary to Banff, I fall asleep soundly for the drive out of the city, and then actually get woken up by the scenery. The mountains are so distracting and huge that I can't sleep. This continues while I arrive at the Centre – there are deer to walk by while you figure out things. Small huts in the wood in which to discuss playwriting practices. Unlimited pineapple to be eaten. New things coming...

Emily Pearlman is a theatre artist based out of Almonte, ON, whose work can be found at www.playwhereyoulive.ca. She has co-created performance works in collaboration with theatre makers, dancers, musicians, audio-makers, schools, and communities. At the Playwrights Colony, she wrote *Collapsible* – later performed in a haunted house with actors supported by a chorus of children.

From Quintet to Colony **by Mieko Ouchi**

Wow. What a difference a week makes.

After a quiet but highly productive week of intense writing with fellow playwrights Wanda Graham, Greg MacArthur, Anita Majumdar and Emily Pearlman and her dramaturg Laurel Green (Calgary), as of today we have somehow grown from 5 to 25! And we continue to bring together writers from coast to coast and beyond.

This week we are joined by a joyous and fresh new wave of playwrights: Pierre Brault from Ottawa, Motion (fresh off her stint in the Banff Spoken Word Program) from Toronto, Kerry Sandomirsky from Vancouver and Jovanni Sy from Richmond, as well as two playwrights from the U.S., Greg Moss (Albuquerque, New Mexico) and Colman Domingo (New York) who is doing an independent playwriting residency in the Leighton Colony at Banff, plus Canadian Evan Placey who now resides in England.

We were also pleased to welcome a new slate of collaborators who will be working with the writers: Kim Collier (Toronto), who will be working with Greg MacArthur, Mel Hague (Toronto) who will be working with Motion and Miriam Weisfeld (Washington, D.C.) who will be working with Greg Moss, with more arriving later in the week.

And of course we also welcomed the talented company of actors who will be working with the playwrights over the next two weeks: Shelter Elter (Edmonton), Tracey Ferencz (Toronto), Kris Joseph (Edmonton), Richard Lee Hsi (Edmonton), Monice Peter (Calgary), Pamela Sinha (Toronto) and d'bi young anitafrica (fresh off a stint as Faculty for the Banff Spoken Word Program) from Toronto, who will also be staying on at the Banff Centre doing her own playwriting residency after the Colony.

Tonight, I am most thrilled to be hosting my second *play.write.night* evening for playwrights, where we will be joined by special guest John Murrell, playwright, translator and librettist and former head of the Playwrights Colony, Artistic Director/Executive Producer of Theatre Arts and Executive Artistic Director of Performing Arts at the Banff Centre, for a collegial evening of sharing amongst writers.

I can't wait to see where this fresh burst of energy takes us.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

The Plays that Shaped Us

by Mieko Ouchi

Earlier this week, I hosted my second *play.write.night* evening for Colony playwrights, where we were joined by the lovely and generous John Murrell, playwright, translator and librettist and former head of the Playwrights Colony, Artistic Director/Executive Producer of Theatre Arts and Executive Artistic Director of Performing Arts at the Banff Centre.

Along with current Colony Director Brian Quirt, I had imagined the evening as a chance for playwrights from the Colony to spend an evening in an unusual forum. With each other. In the rehearsal hall, in the best of all worlds, playwrights are warmly welcomed, but even in these situations we can feel a kind of separation as the script is explored by our collaborators: actors, directors, designers and technicians. We are most often the only playwright in the room. *play.write.night* is an opportunity to change that.

After dinner, we gathered at the Painter House in the Leighton Colony. As host for the night, I kicked things off with an exercise stolen shamelessly from my good friend and former Colony Senior Playwright in Residence, Vern Thiessen. To begin, I asked each writer to pick their 3 best Canadian plays... defining "best" as they saw fit... influential, inspiring, educational, life changing. The only rule was it couldn't be written by anyone in the room. Then I opened it up for people to share about these plays, the plays that had got them writing, the plays that kept them writing and the ones that challenged them to push further. Fantastic, joyful, eye-opening stories that cut through the small talk immediately to what mattered. What moved us. What shaped us. What challenged and changed us. Hearing people talk about their own work in the context of what had come before was revelatory. It confirmed we are all in this beautiful struggle together. It reaffirmed our powerful connection to the past while we continue to push forward.

Eventually structure was left behind and we just talked. Late into the night. As John left, he thanked me for a creatively invigorating night. I must agree. I have dug into my own play today with renewed energy.

Onwards in the struggle friends –

Mieko.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

wrestle the dragon
by Wanda Graham

...for I am a playwright, a guest of the Colony in Banff

every morning since I've been here I've woken up
with sore feet and tired legs which to me is odd
because I sit here every day all day hardly moving
from my writing table and chair atop the Great Divide

out my window – the ancient riverbed is visible –
the extinct glacier course is marked in the hillsides still
embedded fossils litter the parking-lots and walkways
limestone, sandstone, tree-line, lighted by pristine looking snow

deer graze and ignore me, daws rip apart a road-kill squirrel
and take turns driving off its pal who sniffs the air frantically
lost, seeming unprepared – making me wonder, unprepared
for what, O Squirrel, can you really smell death on the air?

Through it all, breakfast lunch and dinner too I become unglued
by the beauty of this place reflected in the sky above me –
absorbed into the Banff artists' micro cauldron that spits us
peak to peak that makes our temperatures inside and out rocket and
plummet from winter through summer back to spring all in one day

and makes our heads bow finally too humbled to bask in one more
thing of beauty, one more passionate moment or embrace of any intensity
to sleep

I come here to wrestle a dragon, to "wright" ideas into a "play" as
traumatizing as the transitioning can be sometimes, and unbeknownst to me
I am inspired, challenged to put it on the line. I live in the valley by day
but each night I dream-climb and bring back the pieces I need
to wake come morning in this environment and this program
certain that in a careful, thoughtful way it can facilitate and absorb
even a quiet level of panic...

Wanda Graham's play *Stealth Strike* was workshopped at Banff and chosen by Dapopo Theatre for a one on one
with Sharon Pollock who championed to direct it. Current projects include a spoken-word opera, production 2023;
a collaboration with an Austrian actor/puppeteer and a libretto for singers featured at Playwrights Atlantic Retreat
May 2023.

Fighting Words by Mieko Ouchi

Today I had the wonderful privilege of having a morning in the theatre. As writers, sadly, this is actually quite a rare opportunity outside of production.

In the Margaret Greenham Theatre I had the opportunity to work with Banff Playwrights Colony Company actors Richard Lee Hsi and Sheldon Elter on a new play I am writing for teen audiences called *I Am For You*. The script is about violence, and involves what happens when a student teacher interrupts a fight between two girls in a high school drama room and introduces them to fighting through a different lens, through the art and craft of stage combat. The play also explores Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as this is the play the school drama club is prepping to perform.

As you can imagine, a play like this, full of physical contact and choreography is difficult to fully capture on paper. This seems especially hard to write when you are sitting alone in a room, without the benefit of bodies in front of you!

So, this morning in the theatre, with Richard and Sheldon, both actors with stage combat training and experience, I was able to play with and explore skills I only vaguely remember from theatre school and my work as a professional actor. Fencing stances and quadrants. Thrusts and Parries. Retreats and Advances. Unarmed combat. Slaps, hair-pulls, throws, punches, falls. With their help I was able to begin to see the action of the play in 3-D again. A crucial, critical step in the process leading towards production.

This upcoming fall my company Concrete Theatre will premiere the play in Edmonton schools and professional theatre spaces. Watching Richard and Sheldon this morning on stage, I realize, I can't wait. I can't wait for young people to see it. I want them to experience something visceral, authentic and relevant. I hope they will be as engaged as I was. And that the play may illuminate some new perspectives. Encourage some different thinking. Help them see things in a fresh way.

Back to the fighting words –

Mieko.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

THE FEAR

by Evan Placey

Fear drives my writing. Staring at a script on a laptop gives me the same queasiness as people get when they see a tarantula confidently doing a pas-de-eight across their bathtub. Staring at words I've put to a page instills a wave of nausea-inducing questions: is it good enough? Will anyone care? Should I toss it in, go to law school and do real estate law in an office with no windows? And once these questions are subdued with a good dose of YouTube videos, comes the good kind of fear that drives most of us playwrights: If I don't say this, if I don't write this, the world will not know.

So what better place to entertain these fearful questions than in a calming, idyllic setting of Banff. But upon arrival, my dream of tranquility was replaced by a new fear brought on by those I'm sharing the space with. I don't mean my fellow artists (though their talent and brilliance is truly scary), but the wildlife. Making it alive from my bedroom to Painter House in the woods where I'm writing feels like a Herculean effort. I have prepared: if I see a grizzly bear, stretch my arms and do lots of movement (perhaps an Irish jig?). If it's a black bear, move slowly and talk soothingly, *rockabye black bear, in the Banff trees, please let me see my 30th birthday...please...*. And if it's a cougar, well, at least my epitaph will be unique. So far all I've seen is my deer-friend, Martha. She is no Bambi. We've acquainted each other six times and she just stares at me disdainfully (she's not really feeling the structure of my play). She even came to my writing room window yesterday to check in and chastise me again as she nibbled grass. *A play for young audiences? Isn't it time to grow up, Evan?*

Fear is the reason I'm drawn to often writing for young audiences. Fear for the world we're leaving them; fear for the questions we're afraid to ask them; fear for the conversations we're not having with them; and a fear that we (the big bad grown up world) aren't listening to their voices.

What an honor to reconnect with my Canadian roots to ask these questions with the support of Brian and Leora (Uncle and Mum at Banff); Stephen (my dramaturg who arrives this eve) and Mieko (expert and wine-provider extraordinaire). I just hope I don't get mauled by a cougar before I finish my rewrites.

Evan Placey is a Canadian-British playwright and screenwriter who lives in London, UK. At the Banff Centre Evan developed *Scarberia*, which was produced at Young People's Theatre, Toronto, and nominated for 5 Dora Awards. Evan's plays include *Pronoun*, *Girls Like That*, *Consensual*, *WiLd!*, *Jekyll & Hyde*, and *Holloway Jones*.

Community. Space. Distance.

By Mieko Ouchi

Sitting last night at the Banff Springs Hotel around a table of chatting, animated playwrights and theatre artists who come from coast to coast of Canada and parts of the U.S. I realized what a beautiful thing it is to have the opportunity to connect with writers outside of your community. From other countries. And what a rare thing it is too.

A few days ago in the Vistas Dining Hall, I had a chat with visiting Dutch art historian who is writing a new book during her stay at the Leighton Artists Colony, who said she was surprised by the size of Canada and the ease in which we seem to travel to different communities. In her experience, people in Holland consider the 50-minute drive between Amsterdam and Rotterdam to be virtually insurmountable. She said if you move to Rotterdam from Amsterdam, you can kiss your old friends goodbye. They will never visit! For Canadians like me, this is hard to imagine. In some large North American cities, this is the time it takes for people to commute from their home in the suburbs to work. This is roughly the distance from Banff to Calgary. In July, I am flying to Fredericton, New Brunswick to work as Festival Dramaturg at a new play festival and I will be flying 9 hours. And that's within my own country.

It made me think about the unique challenges space and distance creates for artists in Canada. The internet, skype and all the ways we stay virtually linked help of course, but there is something so powerful about being in the same room with each other as artists. Can that ever really be replicated or replaced?

Today, we are going to have having a chat with our three American Colony artists about American Theatre: Colman Domingo from New York, Greg Moss from Albuquerque, New Mexico and Miriam Weisfeld from Washington, D.C. As artists from different parts of an equally large country, I wonder what they will have to say about this conundrum.

How do we stay essential and connected to our local community, while keeping our relationships to other cities, countries and their communities alive? How do we live local, think national and work internationally? How do we do it all?

No easy answers. But looking around that rare, beautiful, collegial table last night at my fellow writers and artists from the Colony, there are moments when we get darn close.

Mieko.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

In Review – Banff Playwrights Colony 2013

by Brian Quirt

The 40th edition of the Banff Playwrights Colony concluded on April 28, 2013, and its artists have dispersed across Canada and the United States. This was my first Colony as Director, and I left Banff on the mid-afternoon shuttle deeply pleased by the work so many had accomplished during the program.

Over the three weeks, plus the two-week Colony Retreat in February, we brought 30 theatre artists to Banff, offered key creative time to 13 playwrights working on 14 plays, hosted three American artists, conducted more than 25 readings and workshop sessions with the Colony acting company, celebrated Anita Majumdar's Governor General's Performing Arts Award mentorship prize to work with John Murrell, and spread the word about the Colony widely via its e-newsletter and daily tweeting (for posts and photos, search #playwrightsColony2013).

In the final week we celebrated Tom Hendry's crucial contribution to establishing the Colony in 1974 by reading his play *15 Miles of Broken Glass*. 40 years later, adding to the foundation that so many have helped shape has been joyous indeed.

Aside from all the meals we shared together and all the play readings, and the remarkable writing that everyone accomplished, a few special moments stand out to me:

- Watching Mel Hague, dramaturg at Toronto's Obsidian Theatre, and attending the Colony to work with Motion, talk late one night with Woolly Mammoth dramaturg Miriam Weisfeld from Washington, D.C, about current Black American playwrights they love. And a few minutes later, seeing Mel have a similar conversation with US playwright and performer Colman Domingo. This is theatrical exchange at its best.
- Seeing Senior Playwright in Residence Mieko Ouchi guide actors Sheldon Elter and Richard Lee Hsi work through a series of stage combat exercises on the Margaret Greenham stage, inspiring the first draft of her Theatre for Young Audiences play *I Am For You*.
- Arriving one day at the Greenham Theatre to learn that playwright/choreographer Anita Majumdar had created several fabulous new dances for her upcoming play *Same Same But Different*.
- Taking photos of the Colony participants in the MacLab Bistro after our Speakeasy presentation, during which the writers read excerpts of their works-in-progress. The energy, connection, passion and community that existed that night, and throughout the Colony, was exceptional.

Thank you to all the writers:

Meg Braem, Pierre Brault, Wanda Graham, Greg MacArthur, Anita Majumdar, Greg Moss, Motion, Mieko Ouchi, Emily Pearlman, Evan Placey, Kerry Sandomirsky, Giovanni Sy, Colleen Wagner, and guest writer Colman Domingo.

And also to our exceptional Colony Acting Company:

Sheldon Elter, Tracey Ferencz, Kris Joseph, Richard Lee Hsi, Monice Peters, Pamela Sinha, and d'bi young.

We were also enriched by the contributions of our guest dramaturgs:

Stephen Colella, Kim Collier, Katrina Dunn, Laurel Green, Mel Hague, Guillermo Verdecchia, Miriam Weisfeld.

And a special thank you to Associate Dramaturg **Leora Morris**, who brought grace and great organization to every aspect of this year's Colony.

Brian Qirt is the Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto. He has been Director of the Banff Playwrights Lab since 2013. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, directed the premieres of many Nightswimming commissions, and created and toured 8 of his own productions: nightswimming.ca.

On Writing and (Almost) Being Stalked By a Cougar

by Karen Hines

It's 11 a.m. and I'm walking along the snowy, hilly trail I call "my trail." It's more like a thoroughfare on the way to other more actual "trails" – but this road is snowy and car-free and has the benefit of passersby, now and again, which is good because of the cougar that is stalking me.

I have no evidence of this cougar, and sightings on and around the campus are extremely rare. But cougars go for quiet, solo people, and in this place, I sometimes get all thoughtful and drifty: with my own cougar after me, I am a menace to myself.

When you get to Banff, you can feel your mind expand. It is a nearly physical feeling, though that's physiologically impossible. As though the brain and the flesh of the walls inside your skull pull away from each other and there is room. Room to create, ostensibly – but there are also potent forces at play in this Bow Valley, and people have been known to go a little cray-cray. The first time you come here, you may think the mountains will tip over onto you. I am a Banff vet, however – been a few times in different capacities – and I am cool with the intensity.

As I walk, I hear a "snap" in the woods. Branches, of course, can only be snapped by bears and cougars (deer step over branches), but the bears are asleep, I've heard, and so this must be a cougar. I peer between the tall fir trees ... and see a cougar. It is black, though, so it must be a panther and despite my delight at having sighted the first Banff panther, I am scared bloodless.

Last year was a busy one with productions and family matters that kept me on deck and in service to the real world at a time when I was supposed to be writing. All that I could manage for an entire year was to scrawl in three thick notebooks. I never went backwards through those notebooks until my first day here, when I opened to a random page in notebook #1 and read: "It's a circus, but it's all doctors!" I felt fear.

I hear another snap. The panther is actually a large stump (decoy!) and I realize the real cougar is hiding. I pull out my iPhone and call my imaginary husband to talk about "my process." I have a real husband, but supportive as he is, he's a bit inured to my process talk after 16 years of it, whereas this dude is tireless, fascinated and doesn't mind that I yell. He's also a good front: when I yelled to myself without the phone, the snapping in the forest turned out to be a labradoodle, whose master didn't want some crazy lady patting him. I walk along, gushing to my darling about this place, the Japanese play structure I have discovered....

Here, there has been room inside my skull for 600 pages of notes, now transferred to index cards and post-its and spread out like a magical road in the brilliantly designed writers studio I have been assigned whose desk wraps around half of it. There is bulletin board on one of the rare patches of wall that is not window and I have thumbtacked up orphan concepts and images. When I fill all the formal surfaces, there will be the floor. My floor for two weeks, which no man, child nor dog will step on. There is forest all around me and a little hollow that a mule deer has curled up in once or twice: my fuzzy muse. The contents of those notepads spill out by the hour and though some of them are, yes, flaky midnight thoughts, I have the place and time here to observe this fractured backlog as one huge document and find the sense in it. The year I thought was lost is being found in the woods, and I may have just long

enough for this creature to squirm to life so it can accompany me home: a living, breathing thing in four acts....

Another snap. This one accompanied by a “swish.” I am nearly back to campus – if I cry out, perhaps I will be helped by a brave violinist. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a shape just down the hill: golden, massive and f**king fast. I spin around, open my mouth to holler.... It is a Honda Civic.

I walk the rest of the way back to my studio, thinking about that doctor circus. Why *couldn't* there be a play wherein a team of specialists perform medical feats in three rings? Some ankle surgery in one, a radical diagnosis in another, a gentle admonition in the third.... I am on a roll. I am a Banff vet now and I know how to ride these rolling waves of snow, fear and magic. Like how you would be if you were lucky enough to ride a mule deer: respectful, filled with delight and awe.

Karen Hines is a prize-winning performer, director and author of many plays, including the two she was writing at the time of this blog: *Crawlspace* and *All the Little Animals I Have Eaten*. Both plays have since been presented across Canada, in English and in French, and both feature a lot of animals, and the ghost of one cougar.

Where I am at the Moment by Marjorie Chan

I'm at the Banff Centre. I'm the Senior-Playwright-in-Residence for the 2014 Playwrights Colony. I don't really know what that means, particularly the 'senior' part. I don't feel senior in any sense of the word. Every time I sit down at the computer, it is completely new. The blank screen is always a yawning chasm of unkn.

At dinner the other night, another playwright was challenging the definition of 'emerging playwright' as used by a writer, who is quite acclaimed. I wouldn't describe the writer in question as 'emerging' but I certainly can't deny her impulse to describe herself that way.

Give or take a month, my first professional play premiered 10 years ago. In that time, I've had 5 major premieres and dozens of smaller projects. So, I acknowledge that 'emerging' is not an accurate definition and would never describe myself as such. But if I am not 'emerging', then, if one follows that logic, am I 'emerged?' Where on earth have I 'emerged' to?

My main bodies of work as a writer could be grouped as either text-based plays inspired by Chinese history or libretti for chamber operas. As well, I have worked as a writer on things that have no real classification—works of non-fiction theatre, plays for cellphones, text for music, text for dance etc.

I am working on 3 different projects while here in Banff. Each one is completely different than the other, and each offer a multitude of unique challenges, which I have never faced before. It's all new. And it's scary.

And as you probably know, Banff is nestled among the Rocky Mountains. Have you seen these mountains? Well, when I see them, this is what goes through my head (in roughly this order):

First, various *doge-like* comments, such as 'wow', 'so high', 'amaze', 'omg snow'.

Then my brain kicks with better vocabulary, 'majestic', 'jaw-dropping', 'stark', 'impressive'.

And then...and then I think...

How small am I.

I'm small.

I'm really small.

Theatre is small.

Theatre is not rocket surgery.

Finish the damn script.

And really, that is where I am at the moment. The majesty of the mountains reminds me of the insignificance of my scripts. In the grand scheme of things, they do not matter. However, these projects will get finished because I want to finish them. The question of where might have I 'emerged'? Well, I'm here, at the Banff Centre.

Born in Tkaronto (Toronto) to Hong Kong immigrants, **Marjorie Chan** works variously as writer, director and dramaturge in opera and theatre as well as in the intersection of these forms and roles. Plays developed at the Lab: *China Doll*, *a nanking winter*, *Chinoiserie*, *Dim Sum*, *Lose Some*, *Lady Sunrise*, and *The Year of the Cello*.

Productivity's a Funny Word

by Elena Belyea

Confession time: Ever since I was a bowl-cut wearing, zit-ridden teen, I've salivated at the thought of attending the Banff Playwrights Lab. This means I can honestly say this past week has been a teen dream.

Since my arrival last Sunday (bleary-eyed, fuelled by Tim-Hortons), I've been working on two projects—wrapping up a play I've been writing over the past year as part of the National Theatre School's Playwriting program, and beginning another which will take me into my third and final year at NTS. Throughout the past 7 months, my curriculum has left little breathing room, jam-packed with weekly deadlines, workshop readings, and regular classes. I figured my time at the Banff Centre—a glorified school field trip with no obligations other than reading, writing, and r&r—would mean endless productivity.

Turns out: productivity's a funny word. I spent the first couple days flailing in my newfound "free time," before making the realization my "work" as a writer isn't always going to be through writing. More than half the time, it's not. It's through reading, walking, and exercising, fanning heated conversations, getting lost in the woods, or escaping into the city for a night of cheap wings and Banff's annual "Rock, Paper, Scissors" competition.

For the most part, that's what I've been up to. Brian and Jenna of the Lab were generous enough to provide me a studio that I've been using to do physical explorations to help focus my writing. I've also been collaging, painting, and finishing a mask I'll be using to generate new material for my upcoming play.

Also, I write. I mean, obviously I write. But so far, one of the most significant parts of my journey from ankle-biter to big kid playwright has been, and continues to be, figuring out how to provide for myself, so when I set out to create, I'm equipped emotionally, physically and mentally to tell the stories I want to tell.

Elena Belyea is a queer/non-binary playwright, performer, producer and Artistic Director of Tiny Bear Jaws. She's work produced across Turtle Island and internationally and received numerous awards (including for her play "Cleave", developed during her time at the Lab). They're also half of queer sketch duo "Gender? I Hardly Know Them".

SHIP HAPPENS

by Marjorie Chan

I'm writing in a boat. Yes, I am in Banff. That might be unfathomable, but it's true!

I am fortunate enough that along with my position as Playwright-In-Residence, the Banff Centre arranges a place for me to write in the collection of studios called the Leighton Colony. The place I have been assigned during my stay just happens to be Number 3, The Henriquez.

Envisioned by Richard Henriquez, the Number 3 (an incredible pedestrian name for so grand a lady), the studio is a reworked fishing boat repurposed for a new life as a writing studio. The studio spent the first part of her life as Elsie K, a fishing boat, owned by Bob and Elsie Karliner. When she was built in 1948, the couple poured champagne over her bow. She remained a fishing vessel for salmon and halibut over the years until her conversion for the colony in 1984.

I'm so pleased to be working here. It's comforting warm wood interior and cozy set-up is an ideal environment for dreaming and scheming up new works. There is one tricky thing about Elsie though.

I discovered it is possible to lock oneself out of the boat. At one point while writing, I decided to step outside for some fresh air and perspective. No sooner had I stepped out in my stocking feet, then I heard the dreaded click behind me. I knew what had happened but in blind hope tried the doorknob anyway. No such luck. I stood, on deck, without my phone, boots, or jacket and considered my options. I could walk over with any shoes to another Leighton studio and beg some other artist for use of their phone. This was undesirable, as respect for solitary studio artist time is as sacrosanct a rule as don't litter as it will attract bears. I could walk back to the residences, but there is still snow on the ground. I'm like a cat, I don't like my feet wet. I could enjoy the sun and wait until someone came by on the path (if anyone ever took this path again ever, my brain added). I could lie down on the deck and wait for nightfall and my inevitable fate to be stalked by a cougar in the woods. (I remembered unhelpfully that cougar attacks tended to happen to women about my size-weight.) As all these things flashed through my mind, an overdramatic soundtrack to my predicament was being played on my laptop, still streaming a classical station. I could hear the music...from inside the boat! A window was open! I went over to the open window and peered in. (Not sure what I was expecting to see. All that was there was my messy work station.) There was a screen door on the inside, which I knew to open inward. I gave it a little push. It opened, making me tantalizingly close. Now, the question was, would I fit? Boat windows, in general are not that big. Nothing to do but try. In a skirt. In the woods. On a boat. I thought head first might give me more control, but perhaps more loss of dignity as I was in a dress. Also, what if I got stuck? Feet first it was. Luckily, there were many handholds and places for me to step on the window's ledge. (It was easy to imagine, in some other life, I was just helping to dock the boat not breaking in.) Legs in and flailing at air, hands still hanging on. Now the really tricky part, my mid-section (not particularly helped but the delicious array of desserts available at every meal at the Banff Centre!) A little wiggle, genetic flexibility and poof, I was on the floor and inside the boat!

I sat at the computer, picked up my still warm coffee and was back at writing within a minute. Just in time, in fact, for a tour of new arrivals to the Centre having a walk around. I gave them a little wave. Nothing to see here. Just a writer in a boat.

Born in Tkaronto (Toronto) to Hong Kong immigrants, **Marjorie Chan** works variously as writer, director and dramaturge in opera and theatre as well as in the intersection of these forms and roles. Plays developed at the Lab: *China Doll*, *a nanking winter*, *Chinoiserie*, *Dim Sum*, *Lose Some*, *Lady Sunrise*, and *The Year of the Cello*.

Expectations

by Anita Majumdar

The Banff Centre offers very few “shoulds” to the playwrights they invite here; there’s no set procedure or expectations for artists here.

And yet every time I come here, my inner schoolgirl starts thinking, “Real writers write THIS way. Real dancers dance THAT way.”

I arrived to the Banff Centre for the Playwrights Colony 14 and echoing in my ears has been Marjorie Chan’s recent article in response to the closing of THE WANDERERS in Toronto and the unjust expectations placed on artists of colour creating diverse stories.

This is a passionate topic for me...the ways in which mainstream try to dictate how artists of colour should tell their stories. But I’m getting off track. Here I am, in an empty theatre with mirrors, then later a giant dance studio with big windows and Bluetooth stereo and...“I got nothing”!

“I just don’t feel like it”, I told myself. And then, “What’s wrong with me?” Artists across this country would give their right arm to enjoy these resources. I found myself using phrases like, “Real dancers should dance 6-8 hours in a studio.” By these standards, I should have packed my things and left.

And then one night I was in the dance studio and realized the way in which I had accused mainstream sources of demanding a particular kind of form from its artists of color, I was demanding a particular kind of form from my own artistic process, using traditional constructs of process to gauge the success of my own. But the fact is, the true mark of a successful process is if I’m moved to generate new ideas.

Being in this dance studio on this particular evening, I had an honest realization: I “flitter”. I flitter around finding my “happy” and when it no longer makes me happy I flitter over to something else that does. I get bored easily and in order for me to see a movement piece with fresh eyes, I need to do something else and come back to it so I can find “happy” again. Which means I can only dance one piece at a time for short spurts. This would also be true of my nomadic arts career. I act until I need something else. I write until I need something else. I dance until I need something else. But I always come back.

The moment I acknowledged my process, ideas became effortless. Thoughts spilled out so rapidly I could hardly keep up. But only when I let go of numbers; whether it was 15 minutes or 2 hours, I finally released myself of “shoulds”. Something my Dyslexia/ESL teacher from elementary school would be very happy to (finally) hear all these years later.

Anita Majumdar is an award-winning actor, playwright, trained classical Indian dancer and illustrator. Her most produced work, the *Fish Eyes Trilogy*, toured extensively for 14 consecutive years and was published with Playwrights Canada Press. She’s currently commissioned to write a new play for Nightswimming entitled, *A Girl Has No Gym*.

Writer's Block by Marjorie Chan

There is a funny little block outside the boat cabin. What is it? Is it a sculpture? Is it the execution block of some strange nighttime ground squirrel cult? It is mysterious – its purpose unknown except for me to puzzle as I pass it by. I've decided that it is a writer's block. At first, I tried perching on it to think, in the hopes that illumination might come. Also it is a good spot to watch the hill opposite for the loping pine marten gambol about. This funny weasel visited the boat briefly, much to my delight. In any case, no illumination nor additional spotting of the pine marten have occurred while sitting there. Lately, I have taken to giving the block a dirty look as I pass, on my way into the studio. Screw you, writer's block, I think, as I shoot it daggers. It's not very mature or productive, but I get some satisfaction at doing it. Whatever works.

I often facilitate writing groups or mentor writers individually. Writing can still be a mysterious, illusive creature requiring specific conditions and often, time, time, time. My suggestion if someone is stuck, truly stuck – I ask quite frankly, "Is this a project you really want to, or have to pursue?" If the answer is no, then fine, chuck it, cut your losses or put it in a drawer for the time being. If the answer is yes, well these are some of my strategies:

Get outdoors, go for a walk, take a notebook or a laptop with you. Walk until you feel that you write. Then find somewhere to do so. Rinse. Repeat. Sometimes you will walk a long time, but you will get there. If you want to really be strict with yourself, don't go allow yourself to go home until you have accomplished what you set out to do. I call it Writer-out-of-Residence. If you ever see me in Toronto at an all-night coffee shop and a laptop – that's what I am doing!

Write something different – I always have a B project, usually smaller, less involved or in an editing stage. It could be another play or (even some blog posts!). It means that when you have run out of steam on your primary project, you can still use your muscles and keep them warm! (I think I just equated being a writer to being an elite athlete. I can assure you, that for me that is where the resemblance ends!)

Do something completely different for 10 minutes! No writing, no brainstorming, no thinking. Dance, or paint, or clean the toilet. One time, I looked outside my back window and saw with pity that the winter birds were struggling with the bird seed strewn on the ground. I got in my car and went to the local hardware store and looked at bird feeders. But they were very expensive, so I went home empty-handed. I looked online and found a clever design for a 3-milk carton bird feeder. I rummaged in the recycling bin, and found two suitable soy milk cartons. There was a carton in the fridge but it wasn't empty. So, naturally, I baked some cupcakes and used up most of the soy milk. Then I set to work, with duct tape, scissors, 3 milk cartons, and made a rather impressive bird feeder. I hung it from the tree and filled it with seed. I had just settled in my kitchen chair, with a glass of the last of the soy milk to watch the dusk birds at the feeder, when my sister came home from work. I proudly showed her the bird feeder, now chattering with chickadees and starlings. She took one look at me, and said, "Don't you have a deadline Monday?" So, anyway, do something different, but don't get distracted.

In any case, whatever you do, wherever your writing block resides, don't stress too much about it. It's there, it's waiting in the woods. You know it is. You can look into the trees, squint past the trees and in the right light, the right angle you can almost see it. You can feel that it's just on the other side, but where? It's there. And then who knows, out of the blue, when you least expect it, the pine marten might come to visit.

Born in Tkaronto (Toronto) to Hong Kong immigrants, **Marjorie Chan** works variously as writer, director and dramaturge in opera and theatre as well as in the intersection of these forms and roles.

The Importance of Listening

by Jenna Rodgers

It's 12:34am, and I am sitting down to write a post.

I've just had an engaging dramaturgical conversation about female representation in the theatre over mugs of green tea. I'm tucked away in some cranny far away from my room. I've learned that it is as important to keep my working and living spaces separate as it is, at this hour, to avoid being found.

Not that I like hiding. I don't. I like talking. Probably a little too much. My time at the Banff Centre has been *full*. I am surrounded by an incredible and diverse group of playwrights whose stories spark ideas in my mind that fuel a fire in my belly. We have an acting company full of talented performers who write, question and engage with the writers on a level that continues to exceed expectations.

There are great minds gathered at the Banff Centre from across the country to participate in "The Summit", a National Arts Centre process that examines Indigenous work on Canadian soil. This environment makes me want to stop talking – to remember the importance of listening.

Listening – *really* listening – is a dramaturgical skill. I think. I'm still learning. What I do know is that, here in Banff, I am surrounded by excellence. And often I feel like all I can do is try to keep up. This contract is national in scale. At this point in my career, it is an incredible privilege to be here. The stakes are high. The perfectionist in me is chomping at the bit. I need to represent myself well. I need to say yes to everything. I need to succeed. The realist in me understands that *needing* these things are silly.

So I ask myself, what do I want? I want to make the most of this experience. I want to connect. I want to listen. I want to engage. I do not want to spend my wee hours hiding in a forgotten lounge, tucked away in a corner of our residence at Lloyd Hall. But it's something that I *actually* need to do. Seriously. Surrounded by this artistic excellence, it's a defence mechanism. If I didn't hide, I'd never get any work done.

Jenna Rodgers (she/her) is a mixed-race Director and Dramaturg who gratefully resides on land called *Moh'kins'tsis* (Calgary), on Treaty 7 Territory. She is the founding Artistic Director of Chromatic Theatre, the Dramaturg for the Playwrights Lab at Banff Centre, the Board Co-Chair of LMDA, and the Director of Theatre Alberta's Artstrek Program.

The Bear

by Bryony Lavery

“My brain to me is the most unaccountable of machinery – always buzzing, humming, soaring, roaring then diving, and then buried in mud. And why? What’s this passion for?”

–Virginia Woolf...

Dear Virginia,

I’m sitting in my room in Lloyd Hall in extraordinary Banff waiting for the bear of creativity to wake up from hibernation and come and make something with me.

The machinery in my head is doing all the activities you listed but....

It’s not going well.

That bear is *still* asleep.

On the desk, next to my laptop, are my travelling kit of powerful-charged-objects-which-help-me-write...a silver Buddha, a jade Krishna, a blue Egyptian bead, a tiny sailing ship and three tiny gold tablets that say, variously, *wish love happiness*.

I *wish* The Big Idea would come. I’d *love* that. That would be *happiness*.

Please send help.

–Bryony.

Dear Bryony,

As always, you left something out of your packing....

Those helpful quotations you have pinned on the notice-board of your workroom at home...

Remember...

“Yet it is in our silences, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top...”

Be patient and stop whining,

–Virginia

Dear Bryony,

Virginia has asked me to write some advice to you...I send you this that I wrote in an earlier time to my fiancée....

“You once said that you would like to sit beside me while I write. Listen, in that case I would not write at all. For writing means revealing to oneself to excess; that utmost of self-revelation and surrender, in which a human being, when involved with others, would feel he was losing himself, and from which, therefore, he will always shrink as long as he is in his right mind...that is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around one when one writes, why even the night is not night enough...”

Lots of love and good luck,

–Franz Kafka

Dear Bryony

“Everything, sooner or later, transforms itself into a story: the clothes we wear, the roads we walk, the currencies we use, the places we come from, the places we go.”

Love

–Ali Smith

Dear Bryony

“As a queen sits down

Knowing a chair will be there

Or a general raises his hand and is given field glasses

Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.

Something will come to you.”

Patience!

Sincerely,

–Richard Wilbur

You heard them, Bear.

I’m waiting....

Bryony Lavery’s play *Frozen* won the TMA Best Play Award, the Eileen Anderson Central Television award was produced at Birmingham Rep, then the National Theatre, then on Broadway where it was nominated for four Tony awards. Theatre writing credits include: *Beautiful Burnout* (National Theatre of Scotland/Frantic Assembly), *Stockholm* (Frantic Assembly), *The Lovely Bones* (adaptation), *Frozen* (Theatre Royal Haymarket); *The Book Of Dust* (adaptation; Bridge Theatre). She developed *Slime* at Banff Playwrights Colony.

FIRST READ

By Marjorie Chan

I haven't been sleeping. I'm told that it is the altitude, and in part, I believe that to be true. It may also be true that I have been writing, and so my brain filled with the worlds of my plays and of course the anxiety of writing it. It is also true that my dreams have been particularly vivid. Mingled images of home, of characters from the play, of the mountains here in the Rockies. They are vivid, but I am never able to capture it. They slip away so quickly, leaving me grasping in twisted sheets, eyes open, wondering.

I have a recurring dream that occasionally I have had for years. I dream that I enter into a theatre, usually I have a notebook, or a pile of little books. It is daytime, and the theatre lights are up. I look around, there are often others. They have their own tasks and are busy with them. They don't pay me any mind, nor do they chase me away. There are actors. I recognize them as actors because they are stretching and laughing with enthusiasm. People are easy but there is an energy in the air. At some point, someone makes a coffee (usually a woman – I can't believe my dreams are gendered!). I walk over and help myself to some. Then someone calls for attention, we're about to start, and everyone settles in a theatre seat, including me. As I raise my coffee to my lips – I wake up. I wake up every time at exactly the same moment.

I have this dream all the time. It is the most pedestrian dream I can imagine. It completely mimics an everyday scenario of mine. Anyone in theatre would recognize it as the first day of rehearsals. I experience it in real-life at least half a dozen times a year. Why would I dream of something so mundane? I often joke that it is so boring a dream, that it wakes me up. I told my boring dream to a non-theatre friend. She was thoughtful and shook her head slightly. She was envious. She told me I was actually, 'Living the dream'. How many people live so closely to their dreams, that even when not awake, their subconscious reaches for their daily life?

Yesterday, I had my first reading for a brand-new play. Opening night, first public performance, first day of rehearsal, first public reading, they all pale to the table-read of a fresh-off-the-printers first draft. Theatre is a live, performative medium. On a page, on a post-it, on a computer...it is nothing. Incomplete. Some plays read well, others don't. A good play can't be tested on the page alone. No, the real test is when it is heard, read aloud, placed onto a stage.

I won't lie. This is the most nerve-wracking part of being a playwright for me. Not opening. But right now. I really have no sense of how the play will land. It has been in my head for the most part, its story and structure shared but with a few. I have not heard it read aloud, except in my own voice. I hate it and love this moment all at the same time.

And then.... And then when the first reading is over, I wonder what the fuss was about. The actors were amazing. The parts of the script that are working exceed the parts that need work. The notes to tackle for the next draft seem logical and clear to me, and far from overwhelming. In all, productive and ready for the next stage.

So, last night, I slept.

Born in Tkaronto (Toronto) to Hong Kong immigrants, **Marjorie Chan** works variously as writer, director and dramaturge in opera and theatre as well as in the intersection of these forms and roles. Plays developed at the Lab: *China Doll*, *a nanking winter*, *Chinoiserie*, *Dim Sum*, *Lose Some*, *Lady Sunrise*, and *The Year of the Cello*.

Play Fighting

by Susanna Fournier

“A lot of people get confused between dogs fighting and dogs playing because in both they go teeth-to-teeth. But in play the energy and body language is different. Play may look and sound dangerous, but for the dog it's wild and fun. Teeth-to-teeth is how dogs play fight.”

I've written a play that involves dog training and I'm chatting with Yvonne Spence, a local dog trainer and dog lover here in Banff. She's invited me to attend the first class of her obedience course to see her and the dogs in action. *First day of school*. There's nothing quite like it, no matter what species you are.

When Yvonne asks the owners to bring the dogs into the gym for training, what follows is 5 minutes of the best theatre I have ever seen. A huge dog runs in, pulling his owner behind him, does an excited lap around the gym and promptly pees on his area of the mat—two mid-size dogs, instantly friends, prance in tangling each other (and their owners) in their leads—a black herder is being *dragged* in, his legs locked straight out in protest—a lab trots in cause for her this ain't no big deal—a *howling* collie frenetically circles her owner unable to be still or quiet—and a 10-week-old puppy trips in, still not used to the size of his feet. The silent order of the gym transformed into a mad house.

It's hysterically funny and sweet. The dogs hide neither their unabashed enthusiasm and joy nor their anxiety/confusion. No matter what they are feeling they get to work as soon as commands and treats start coming their way. I'm not sure who feels more on display, the dogs or the owners. Yvonne stays calm, loving and firm throughout, she's spent her life with dogs – in this balancing act between chaos and order.

I think of bringing my play to Yvonne's class. Would my play *sit, stay, come*, when I called it? We'll have to practice (a lot). And the more I think of the play coming to me, I think of how I approach the play. *Play*. There's a reason this word is both a noun and a verb. Can I create a workshop space and way of *playing with the play* that can withstand chaos and order, delight and frustration, triumph and disaster like Yvonne's class does? Can the actors and I wrestle with the play? Take it, and ourselves, off leash? Push at it until it pushes back? Can we snarl at it? Can we get the play to snarl back? Are we *playing* or *fighting*? Sometimes it is hard to tell. That's part of the wildness. That's part of the fun. That's part of going teeth-to-teeth.

Susanna Fournier is an award-winning theatre-maker, actor, and educator. Her work is rowdy and 'impossible'. In 2018/19, her company, PARADIGM productions, produced her critically acclaimed trilogy, *The Empire* (Playwright's Canada Press). She's worked on two plays at the Banff Centre Playwright's Lab, *The Philosopher's Wife (Part 1 of The Empire, 2014)* and *take rimbaud (2016)*. www.susannafournier.com

Banff and the Thinking Body

by Ruth Little



“Place and mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered.”

–Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

I’m in love with a mountain range. And like all love, it sharpens the senses, makes everything seem porous and possible.

It’s not reciprocal, this love. The mountains that encircle Banff could kill me in a hundred ways and weathers – with rock and tree, with ice and water, tumult, jaw and claw. But that edge of unknowing is in fact the mountains’ greatest gift. Their deep but unpredictable rhythms – geological, seasonal, Circadian – their currents of water, wind and cloud; their creeping shadows and fits and starts of life on the eye’s periphery: all remind us, again and again, that we live by patterns and their disruption. We make meaning out of sudden movement – a disturbance of the system – the changes that charge moments with new potential and kinetic energy.

In art as in life. The carefully chosen stone of a cairn arrests the eye in its ridge-wandering, asserts the human longing for pattern and path, and is suffused with the story of the unpredictable – the narrative of the climb, the risk and the reward. Working at the Banff Playwrights Colony with Bryony Lavery means walking with her too – inhaling the warm vapour of spruce bark and pine resin, breaking the ice crust at the edge of Bow River, answering the alarmed chatter of red squirrels, noting what she calls the ‘insolence’ of mule deer grazing on the lawns outside our rooms.

Research, it’s all research, the act of searching closely. Every high-altitude breath, every storm-broken treetop speaks of energy, order and disorder, chance and change, at every level of scale, within us and around us. “To know...with the knowledge that is a process of living” – that was why Nan Shepherd went to the Cairngorm mountains, and why we bless these generous, self-creating mountains of our own. The process of making – the role of the ‘wright’ – is a process of living. Cairnwright, walkwright, playwright; they make their spoor on the upland trails and draw our eyes to the untrod places. I am learning. I am smitten.

Ruth Little is a theatre and dance dramaturg. She was literary manager at Soho Theatre, the Royal Court, the Young Vic, and associate director of Cape Farewell. Dramaturg for Akram Khan Company from 2010-2020, she is currently associate artist at Sydney Theatre Company. Ruth joined the Banff Playwrights Lab in 2014 to develop Bryony Lavery's play *Slime*.

write and play, catch the light, nevermind the clock

by PJ Prudat

Years ago, a mentor once told me while reading my tea leaves, that I would feel overwhelmed by the impossible task of my 'needing to grasp at every seed of pollen around' me. She advised then that my desire to hold on to these 'seeds' or *ideas*, would be more fulfilling for me if I were to only cultivate what I could hold in my hands at any given time and that the rest were meant to be out of my reach...until they weren't and I could make space for them when it would be meant to be.

As an actor at the Banff Centre Playwrights Colony, I cannot help but find myself wanting to do everything, see everything, *and experience* everything. Yes, I did just have to have 3 desserts with my fantabulous buffet style lunch. There's yoga, rock climbing, hot springs, real mountains to climb, ponder over and yodel from, pirate artist parties, dinners, zoomba, movies to watch, exhibits to see, karaoke songs to sing and mechanical bulls to ride. I'm not going to even comment on the air. This land, this rock-scape, hold ancient and sacred stories, like grandparents do. And all of this happens outside of the miraculous art that's being created around us.

Each script workshop I have been privileged to attend and work from, as a member of the Playwrights Lab Acting Company, has been gloriously fulfilling to experience. Nothing has ever felt the same twice; each playwright and each of their works are deliciously different from the next, and I cannot seem to get enough. I am getting happy and full, on art. I have been so fortunate to witness these extraordinary artists craft their works in these early stages. To talk with them and be moved by what moves them. Everything is in creative mode. And to top it all off, these remarkable seeds of pollen flying around the Banff Centre have inspired me to create, to write and expand on more of my own ideas. Sneezy yes, but, oh, so fortunate, indeed.

I saw this same mentor last week, though the time we had to catch up was rather fleeting, really only a 'hello, goodbye, see you soon.' There have been many beloved artists here in these past 12 days, all of them working, inspiring away in the heart of this centre. Time has sprinted to the fourteen-day finish line, and I feel that it has all been so completely ephemeral, as only theatre can be. Many artists have already left and yet I still have that deep desire to *hold on* to everything before it flies away, before I have to fly away home, myself. Whenever I leave the mountains, I feel deep waves of melancholy, as though I am saying a last farewell to my grandparents. Time catches in my throat and is gone the next breath. Holding those seeds and putting them to paper... and here where it is true, the mountains will always be.

There was a Raven bird outside the high window the other day.... Her massive wings caught the sunlight and her black feathers beamed. She swooped low and then high again, flashing white light and then, a flurry of black silk, mountains behind her as far as the eye could see...and it was as if she was saying 'hurry up, roll with me on the winds if you can!' And then she was gone out of sight.... Guess I'll just have to come back.

In 2021, **PJ Prudat** was elated to be a part of the Playwrights Lab, where her play, *kiskisiwin nimihko (blood memory)*, found its feet, and has grown in form and voice from there. PJ is a Treaty-6-born, proud Métis-nehiyaw playwright & actor. PJ holds creative residencies with Nightswimming and the Theatre Centre and is a Co-Artistic Director at Shakespeare in the Ruff. She is guided by Indigenous and ancestral stories of these lands and is currently pursuing her MFA at UBC in *Creative Writing*.

Reflections

by Marjorie Chan

It is the last few days of my residency with the Banff Centre and I am madly writing towards the last of my three readings. In truth, this is normal for me, as I remember these fevered moments in the days leading up to a reading in the two previous times I had been invited to the Playwrights Colony, including for my debut play, *China Doll*. Hard to imagine it has already been 10 years since I began my playwriting career with its debut in 2004. But my relationship with the Banff Centre goes back even a bit further to 2001. At that time, back when there was still radio drama, CBC held a unique initiative called the Radiophonic Workshop at the Centre, bringing writers, actors, and radio producers together to write, and record short dramas, all in the space of a few weeks. I was engaged several times as writer/actor, providing short scripts when not acting in others. It was a creative whirlwind that I thrived in and taught me to write quickly.

One year, I was commissioned for a 20-minute script for the Radiophonic Workshop. I emailed it ahead of time (from an internet café in Paris, but that is part of another story). The day after I arrived in Banff, I had my scheduled reading of the script with actors. When I entered the rehearsal room and saw the scripts on the table, I did notice something awry. The scripts seemed to be quite thick. Well, perhaps it was a font thing, as going between Mac and PC back then, was even more problematic than nowadays. In any case, the script was mine and had my name on it. The actors and the producer/director, Bill Lane, settled to read my offering for the 20-minute drama slot. Almost 2 hours later, we put our pages down, with me looking sheepishly at the assembled. Producer Bill Lane said the words that likely have launched my entire career as a playwright, “Thanks Marjorie. This is going to be a very good play someday. Can you go upstairs and write me a 20-minute radio drama?”. That play that we read became *China Doll*, which continued development at the subsequent Playwrights Colony eventually leading to production by Nightwood Theatre in Toronto.

Now as I sit contemplating the amount of writing I must achieve today, I am heartened by another memory of Banff. In those days, the dining hall was where the Kinnear building sits now, overlooking the mountains and much closer to the woods. The tables were round, and most significantly, the artists and the participants of the Banff International Research Station for Mathematical Innovation and Discovery were deliberately grouped together to foster conversation. I remember sitting next to a mathematician, who told me, from his point of view, that there were absolutely no new math equations. Every permutation existed in some form or another somewhere in the whole of the universe. His job was simply to reach for them, to pluck that equation from the universal library. Artists pride themselves on the fact we create, we bring something new to the universe. But his perspective was humbling, and also freeing, especially now that I am hurtling desperately towards the end of my current play. It gives me peace to think, perhaps I just need to reach into some universal library, and take my play, already written, off the shelf. It’s there, as I wrote in an earlier blog. It’s there, and just has to be found.

Thank you, Banff.

Born in Tkaronto (Toronto) to Hong Kong immigrants, **Marjorie Chan** works variously as writer, director and dramaturge in opera and theatre as well as in the intersection of these forms and roles. Plays developed at the Lab: *China Doll*, *a nanking winter*, *Chinoiserie*, *Dim Sum*, *Lose Some*, *Lady Sunrise*, and *The Year of the Cello*.

In Review – Banff Playwrights Colony 2014

by Brian Quirt

One of the great pleasures of my work as a dramaturg is receiving the first draft of a new script from a playwright, and of being one of the first people to ever read and experience this newly emerged story. The thrill of that first draft is part of what makes my work on new plays so rewarding. So you can imagine that the opportunity to run the Banff Playwrights Colony would be a true dream for me since one of its central elements is supporting new plays as they are written and are first explored by actors and directors.

This year's 2014 Colony had a number of those fantastic first draft moments, including two new plays by Karen Hines. And, in fact, the final script reading of the Colony, on Saturday May 3rd, was an invited reading of the very first draft of act one of *Slime*, a new play by UK writer Bryony Lavery.

I had the honour of reading the play alone in my room prior to it being read aloud by the Colony acting company. It was, as usual, a thrill to be a first reader of this new play taking its first steps, just as it had been a delight to be among the first to hear Karen's new works – *The Bechdel Fail* and *The Dramaturg* – first come alive earlier that week.

During three weeks in April/May, plus the two-week Retreat in February, 28 theatre artists attended the Playwrights Colony. The Colony offered creative time to 14 playwrights working more than 20 plays, hosted two UK artists, and conducted more than 29 readings and workshops with the acting company.

The Colony isn't only about first drafts, of course. Writers attend to refine existing plays in preparation for an upcoming workshop or reading, or to expand and illuminate plays that are part way through the creation process. And the Colony is also about community and fellowship: we work hard to offer the writers myriad ways to meet and to talk with one another. For example, an elaborate pirate-themed party broke out one evening, inspired by the small ship that served as the writing cabin for Colony Playwright in Residence Marjorie Chan, bringing together the writers, actors, dramaturgs with a range of other artists working at the Banff Centre.

The Colony invited one of those artists into its fold this year: Jean Palmer, age 92, was at the Centre working on her play. She had first visited the Banff Centre in 1943, and it was a pleasure to welcome her into the Colony's activities by offering her two readings of her play by actor PJ Prudat. From Jean's perspective in her nineties, to those of our youngest participant, 20-something actor Daniel Fernandes, the Colony this year was a wonderful crossroads of experience, geography, style, culture and approaches to writing. And I was particularly pleased to have established a partnership with Montreal's National Theatre School that enabled two of its playwriting students – Elena Belyea and Cliff Cardinal – to join us at the Colony this year.

We'd asked for submissions focusing on contentious political issues and the scripts boldly took on the ethics of HIV transmission, the betrayal of political prisoners, the status of women in wartime, the idea of honour in high school, and the politics of environmental conservation. It was a fearless group of writers, and I'm eager to watch their new plays move toward production at theatres across the country in the coming years.

Brian Quirt is the Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto. He has been Director of the Banff Playwrights Lab since 2013. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, directed the premieres of many Nightswimming commissions, and created and toured 8 of his own productions: nightswimming.ca.

A Turg's Eye View

Or, What I've Noticed During My Week at the Banff Playwrights Colony

by Liz Engelman

Here at Banff, faucets flow. I don't just mean the pure crystalline tap water from your mountain glaciers, but rather the pure, unadulterated creativity that is released here. At the generous invitation of Brian Quirt, I came to Banff's Playwrights Colony with playwright Joanna Garner, who intended to continue work on her play *Dead Leaves*, which she began several years ago, a play that she was in the middle of wrestling back home in Austin, Texas. Since she's been here, faucets that were closed were released and the pressure valve was opened. In surroundings such as these, it is no surprise that more writing was produced in Joanna's first 24-48 hours than in weeks or months back home. With nothing to distract (except perhaps a daydreaming gaze out the window at the majestic mountain ranges), all flowed.

Within her first 3 days here in residence, she cracked open that play – and has completed another play, *The Orange Garden*, inspired by her father's Peace Corps experiences in Iran in the early 1970s.

For myself, this is a dramaturg's dream. To be in constant conversation with a playwright, watching the polaroid of the play find its full color as it develops. Here, with Joanna, I was lucky enough to be in conversations about both plays, two different worlds, both evolving. We talked in Joanna's boat-office (our new home away from home!), over meals, on trails. Conversations happened anywhere and everywhere. The plays revealed their true and vibrant colors.

On a walk down into town, Joanna shared something that has stayed with me through to my writing of this post. She reflected on the gratitude she felt in each moment of her being here in Banff. Usually, one feels grateful in retrospect. Here, however, she felt grateful in every moment. With that can often come the feeling, "What did I do to deserve this? How did this incredible opportunity happen to *me*?" The answer is that she made this happen, she shaped this opportunity, she made it manifest. As did we all, we who are here. And as will you, who are to come, you did too. We've all created our path to this peak experience (pun intended). Thank you, Banff, for existing so that all roads could lead us here.

And now we must leave. In less than 24 hours, we'll be headed back down the mountain and back into our lives. Reentry creep has begun. The sweet middle spot when life here became routine falls away as the present moment begins to recede and the future beckons. We all grapple with how to hold back that creep. How do we? Let's start by being as Joanna was; grateful in each present moment. For then, there is no other moment but this.

Liz Engelman is the Executive Director of Tofte Lake Center, a creative retreat for artists of all disciplines. She's taught at UT Austin, been in literary departments of theatres across the country, been President, Board Chair and Board Member of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, and is on the board of the National New Play Network and is a member of the National Theatre Conference.

Playwright as Architect: pursuing subtle gestures through expanded dramaturgy by Bruce Barton

As I just told anyone who happened to be listening on Facebook, I'm in withdrawal. Yesterday I finished my second of two weeks at the Banff Playwrights program, first at the Retreat (in March) and last week as part of the Colony. This time has been invaluable to me. I'm working on a strange beast of a project that I'd been calling *Supers* up to last weekend. It's a look at the quotidian life of superheroes – the complicated, grey zones between the simple (and usually simplistic), black and white episodes of saving the world. It's a performance about how difficult it is to live tiny when your world is urging you to live way, way big.

I'm developing the piece with my friends at Zuppa Theatre of Halifax; we go into a month of creation this summer and are looking towards a production some time in 2017. Zuppa Co-Artistic Director Alex McLean joined me in Banff a week or so ago. He'll be directing the show and last week he was doing dramaturgy duty as we wrestled with the project's form and content. During his visit Alex suggested we shift the working title to *Live Tiny*; since then I've decided that *Tiny* – or may be just *tiny* – is most appropriate.

At this point it seems that *tiny* will be a multimedia, multiple-platform event, incorporating prose, illustration, and animation. It will also be immersive and participatory, so I've been focussing on the connective tissue, the relatively stable framework that will open up space for distinct audience responses. Although I was at Banff as a playwright, then, I've been working with a pretty flexible and expanded understanding of that role. I guess I've also been working, in a sense, as the architect of a universe, one with specific conceptual and material rules, contracts, and principles.

As a result, my writing has taken me in a variety of directions and has, itself, taken many forms. So huge thanks and kudos to Banff and to Brian Quirt, who heads up the Playwrights Colony, for being so open and responsive to my evolving needs and preoccupations. In particular, my time with some terrific performers – Thom Allison, Nadien Chu and Christopher Hunt – yielded so many important insights. Their ability to run fast and long with the improvisation tasks I tossed them brought the entire process to life for me and provided a theretofore elusive clarity.

Driving this piece is a conviction that it's often the quiet moments, the subtle gestures, the tiny exchanges that host the deepest, most profound experiences. It's my hope that *tiny* will be the host of one or two.

Bruce Barton is the AD of Vertical City Performance (verticalcityperformance.com) and works extensively as a writer, director, dramaturg, and collaborator with physical theatre, devising, and dance performance companies across Canada and internationally. In 2015 Bruce became the Director of the School of Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Calgary.

tiny premiered in a Zuppa Theatre/Vertical City collaboration in 2019 at Eastern Front Theatre in Halifax. A beta version of the performance was staged in 2020 in collaboration with the Glenbow Museum and the School of Creative and Performing Arts in Calgary.

A Writer's Life Discovered

by Trey Anthony

Being fully committed to a writer's life is a new experience for me. I arrived at Banff with the third polished draft of my play, *when Black Mothers don't say I love you*. To have the uninterrupted time to really sit with the script, and partake in intimate and personal conversations with the characters is a luxury I've never had. As an independent self-employed artist my writing time is usually squeezed in between a load of laundry. Sometimes if I'm being an over-achiever, simultaneously I will pay my gas bill, book a rehearsal hall, do a speaking gig, send an invoice, check email, and of course write. I have never been fully present in my writing process.

After just one day at Banff, I came to the shocking realization that my draft was far from polished! Forcing me to do a complete overhaul of my script. I also conducted intense research on ghosts and spirits and whenever I got writer's block I took long walks in order to be refreshed, focused and ready to write again.

Being fully focused and present with my work is a new skill that I developed at Banff. I love my work! Yet, in my newfound focus sits an unexpected guilt. I come from a lineage of black womyn whose work was not often recognized, celebrated or acknowledged. Their work did not consist of writing award-winning new plays, or going on long leisurely walks for inspiration. Their work involved long hours, sweeping, cleaning, cooking, and often doing menial tasks. These womyn put my multi-tasking to shame, often balancing three jobs while trying to raise their families.

So, I may have figured out the right place for my new scene, figured out that I write my best work between 8am-3pm, and I now know the difference between a ghost and a spirit. Yet, I still haven't figured out what to do with my guilt? Guilt about being a writer, guilt about the work I do, guilt that tells me I don't deserve this uninterrupted time.

However, I continue to write alongside my guilt. Somehow knowing my grandmothers are guiding my pen and my great grandmother's spirit continues to give me unspoken inspiration. I know that the only way to pay homage to these warriors is to set aside my guilt and write their stories. Stories of hard work, stories of their dreams, and bigger and grander stories of their conflicted love and *guilt*.

Trey Anthony is a bad-ass Jamaican-British-Canadian, truth-teller, award-winning writer and wellness expert. Her award-winning play, *Da Kink in My Hair*, received four NAACP awards including Best New Playwright and has broken box office sales records in Canada, England and the United States. Trey recently adapted her play, *How Black Mothers Say I Love You*, to a film, which was shortlisted at Sundance.

I destroyed the play again...

by Joanna Garner

I destroyed the play again. Another draft, another 60 pages into the recycling. I have been writing *Dead Leaves* — a play about ghosts with original bluegrass and mountain gospel music — for over a year now. The pattern was: Write 2/3. Sit with it. Revisit it. Hate it. Throw it all away. José Rivera said, "Often, writer's block happens to you because somewhere in your work you've lied to yourself and your subconscious won't let you go any further until you've gone back, erased the lie, stated the truth and started over."

The truth of *Dead Leaves* had slipped through my fingers. Since starting the play, I have worked with a number of collaborators. They've all helped shape it in different ways, but their voices have been loud and often contradictory. Coming to Banff, I wondered if what I needed was to manifest this play in silence.

I've been considering the multiple meanings of the word "retreat." We go on retreat as a time of rest and rejuvenation. But we also retreat, pull back, move away. When must you step back in order to move forward? Banff came at just the right time: on the heels of sending another draft of *Dead Leaves* to the trash, and in the midst of months of self-producing a different play with little space to generate new work.

The first few days at the Banff Playwrights Colony, I spent morning to evening upstairs in the Painter House, padding around in socked feet, trading ideas with the trees. This time of retreat was an immediate unlocking. I returned to the core of my play, looked at its soft, lovely parts, and fell in love again. I wrote 30 pages in two days and finally, finally typed the words "End of Play." There are a lot of questions. There are a lot of places that need attention and fleshing, and now I am ready for some other voices to join mine (namely dramaturg extraordinaire Liz Engelman, who joined me at the Colony). But that the truth of the play finally surfaced. It just needed a little space.

Joanna Garner is the Senior Story Creative Director for the immersive art and story experience company Meow Wolf. As a playwright and immersive theater maker, her work has been developed nationally and internationally, including at the Banff Centre's Playwrights Lab where she developed two plays: *Dead Leaves* and the award-winning *The Orange Garden*.

Magic in the mountains

by Michael Greyeyes

I count myself extraordinarily lucky to have been to Banff, Alberta, even once. When I mention coming here, there is a typical response that reminds me, strikingly, of my good fortune: ‘Ohhh, I’ve *always* wanted to go there.’

So I am indeed blessed.

2015 was no exception. Its distance from Calgary is part of the magic. It takes a while to get here. There is a moment when the highway toward Banff turns downward and you can finally see the mountains in the distance. Your breath is caught.

This year, our company, Signal Theatre was invited to the Banff Playwrights Colony. Brian Quirt, the Director of the Colony, has expanded the notion of writing here at The Banff Centre to include interdisciplinary writing—which in our case, means movement. Dance. I wrote words too. Words, intertwined with that movement.

The Leighton Arts Colony studios were available to us, and I took advantage. Walking through melting snow, past petite architectural poems to my studio: No. 3, a boat from the Fraser River, now floating in these mountains.

Four drafts in 6 days. Each moment in the studio with our director, Yvette Nolan, we wrote even more furiously. Our piece is called *Nôhkom*, (‘my grandmother’ in Cree). We wrote together: Yvette Nolan and I, Nancy Greyeyes and Danny McArthur (our dancers), Falen Johnson (our AD). With every moment we spent in the studios, on the boat, we became a company. And the work flowed outward – changing from its first public incarnation (also in these mountains, in 2013). Everything was different. Both beautiful. But now with Yvette leading us – the work came into focus more quickly, more viscerally.

So I am certain of the magic here. It is not only from a beauty that haunts each who has witnessed it, but this place changes all of us: myself, the company, our hosts: Brian, Jenna, the other (brilliant) writers. By gathering here, we muster something.

Come listen to our work (all who wrote here) and you’ll hear each of those voices.

And the mountains that held us.

Michael Greyeyes is a writer, director, choreographer and educator. His directing credits include *Almighty Voice and His Wife* (Native Earth), *Pimootewin* (Soundstreams Canada) and *A Soldier’s Tale* (Signal Theatre/ NAC). He is the Artistic Director of Signal Theatre. Signal emits images, ideas, and stories.

Time and Space

by Kate Hennig

Time and **space** are relentless. They're annoying. They're nags.

What do you mean you finished the first draft of *The Virgin Ward*? Well, get on with the second -- you have the **time**.

Print all those scenes, lay them out under the windows, and find a new structure for the play – you have the **space**.

Don't go and eat lunch in the cafeteria, just grab a sandwich and help Elizabeth the First create her own mythology – you only have so much **time**.

Don't think about the upcoming grant deadlines, the play you start rehearsing next week, the audition, the cat – they take up too much **space**.

Stay grounded in the chronology of 16th century events. **Time**.

Stay open to the contemporary overlaps. **Space**.

Yoga in the gym. Do those character exercises from Andy McKim that you never have **time** for at home.

Uncover secrets about Mary, Kat Ashley, and the **space** between the Seymour brothers. Walk by the Bow.

Third draft? Ridiculous! Catch some jazz in The Club.

How can it keep on flowing? How can I accomplish so much?

Feel the sun cross the sky. Look at Mount Rundle through the trees.

This is the **time**. This is the **space**.

Kate Hennig is a multi-award winning theatre artist: performer, writer, teacher, director, researcher. Kate wrote this during her sixth residency at Banff. Her first was in 1980. She has had 2 subsequent residencies and hopes for more! *The Virgin Ward* became *The Virgin Trial*, which won the 2017 Carol Bolt Award and was short-listed for the Governor General's Literary Award for Drama.

TIME.

Reflections on the Banff Playwright Colony 2015

by Jani Lauzon

I have been contemplating the idea of TIME for many reasons while nestled in my writing studio, the Evamy, in the Leighton Colony at the Banff Centre. Blessed to be here with the Playwrights Colony as the Senior Playwright in Residence this year.

But TIME, oh TIME, that double-edged sword. The Colony is the ideal situation, where the song-birds cheer you on every morning on your way to the studio and where you are free to create, write, imagine, contemplate for as many hours a day as you can. Hypothetically, the stress of your everyday existence is minimized and you can focus on your creative process.

I took the Marjorie Chan (last year's Playwright in Residence) approach. I brought three projects in varying degrees of completion hoping to bring each to a new level, which I can proudly say was accomplished.

My two act play *I Call myself Princess* was interpreted by a stellar group of amazing actors; my multi-dis/performance art piece *Prophecy Fog* moved ahead leaps and bounds; and my third piece, *Only Virgins need Apply*, got a good healthy dose of research, a concept/container and four outrageous characters that I am very excited to explore in more depth. I had to consider my TIME wisely to ensure that each project received its equal share of my attention.

But I also experienced levels of guilt and anxiety. Crazy. Stupid. I know.

You see every morning I would walk to Bow Falls. Every two days I would hike Tunnel Mountain and one afternoon I spent three glorious hours at the river facing the afternoon sun, not to mention an evening soaking at the Hot Springs. I would catch myself thinking; I should be writing. I should be more disciplined. As a single parent my regime at home is extremely disciplined. I know I have a two-hour stretch to write and I fill that time accordingly. But here, those boundaries are blurred. So what's all this about guilt?

I felt I had a responsibility to produce. It's the age-old dilemma with artists. We are, for the most part, publicly funded; the arts are rarely supported and we often butt up against the stigma of being a leech on society. To top it off, the Colony is a coveted prize in a very competitive environment, already short of resources for artists. I didn't want people to get the wrong idea when I constantly posted pictures of scenic walks during my stay here.

But luckily, part of the Colony is also about networking, collaborations and the best part: conversations.

There were fascinating conversations with other writers, creators, dramaturgs and actors about what artists go through in their individual process. We spoke of the pressures writer/artists feel to prove to society that the TIME we spend creating is TIME well spent. What I found most helpful was my conversations with Robert Chafe, who as a veteran writer was extremely generous in sharing his experiences about his process. I also loved my conversations with dramaturg/director Ruth Little who holds a wealth of knowledge in her heart and mind.

And there was dramaturg Liz Engleman's BLUE/GREEN theory. According to Liz, TIME spent near green (*trees, wilderness, etc.*) and BLUE (*water, sky*) IS part of the creative process. The mind is active and engaged in those environments and profoundly connected to creative energies. It made me think of how

Indigenous peoples from around the world used to live creative lifestyles and were immersed in nature. There was no separation between expressing yourself creatively and everyday living. We would sing, dance and make things with our hands as part of our daily survival.

I am convinced that my daily walks, the TIME spent in silence, and permission I gave myself to just be, resulted in an incredibly prolific period. TIME was well spent.

Upon my return to Toronto, I hope to continue giving myself permission to be silent in nature, to rest and read and to remember that those practices are, in fact, a very important part of the creative process.

Jani Lauzon is an award winning actor and director of Métis ancestry. Her company Paper Canoe Projects produces her original work including: *Prophecy Fog*, *I Call myself Princess* and *A Side of Dreams*. She recently directed *1939* at the Stratford Festival, a play she co-wrote with Kaitlyn Riordan. She was the Senior Playwright in Residence at the 2015 Banff Playwrights Colony.

Sitting with nothing
by Ho Ka Kei (Jeff Ho)

I'm trying to recollect some of the most memorable moments I experienced at the Banff Playwrights Colony 2015 and somehow they all involve my present action: Sitting, lots and lots of it.

Sitting on the plane to Calgary: nervous and fearful that I was a "fraud" and that my play was "nothing."
Sitting on my bed: waking up and staring at the mountains and blaming their beauty for my procrastination.

Sitting at the buffet: begging my colleagues to stop me going to the dessert bar. Help please – the cheesecake is calling my name! Sitting at the library: staring at the most extensive collection of sheet music I've ever seen, taking out Rachmaninov's entire piano repertoire in search of inspiration.

Sitting by the piano: bashing my head against the keys when my fingers could play no more.

Sitting at readings: watching and listening to words fly out of a new draft written by colleagues far more experienced than me – letting their words and process inspire mine.

Sitting in front of my computer: Staring at the blank page, stomach rumbling from the triple serving of chocolate mousse (No one stopped me that day; I blame them), and having nothing to say until words just puked out of me.

Sitting at lunch with Brian: chatting about solo show creation strategies, opening my mind to the many possibilities I had to transform my puke into a play.

Sitting outside the Painter House late at night: every sound seemed to me like an impending bear attack.

Sitting close to K.D Lang: ...enough said.

Sitting at the MacLab bistro: whining and groaning with Marjorie Chan, stuffing our faces full of chicken wings AND chicken fingers AND fries while talking about the intricacies of weaving music with text.

Sitting at the sushi store: celebrating the birth of my first draft with dramaturg Nina Lee Aquino!

Sitting on the plane back to Toronto: feeling excited to continue working on my play as opposed to fearing it – feeling like I now have the process and the blue print to continue with.

My time at Banff has transformed me to know that it is in moments of peace, of feeling empty, of patience, of "sitting," that we are often learning, absorbing and experiencing the most. I leave Banff with a first draft of my play, new friends and mentors, and a necessity for a lactose-free diet. Most importantly, I now know that it is possible to sit with nothing, till nothing is something.

Ho Ka Kei (Jeff Ho) is a theatre artist, originally from Hong Kong. As an actor, he has toured as Ophelia in Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet* across Canada and the United States over five years, and has performed coast to coast across the country. As a playwright, his works include *cockroach*, the Governor General's Literary Award finalist *Iphigenia and the Furies (On Taurian Land)*, *Antigone: 方*, and *trace*. His plays are published by Playwrights Canada Press.

Broken Tailbone at Banff **by Carmen Aguirre**

“My plan is to dance until everything is solved.” – Facebook

I am at the Banff Playwrights Lab working on a new play, *Broken Tailbone*. Brian Quirt, Artistic Director of Nightswimming and Director of the Lab, came up with the concept that we do a one-woman show in which I teach the audience how to dance salsa. We were at the end of a two-year tour of my play *Blue Box* (also developed in part at a past lab, and later presented at the Banff Centre on tour). In that piece, at the halfway mark, we play a salsa song in its entirety and the audience joins me onstage for a dance party before moving on to the second act. We wanted to take that idea further.

Salsa is my passion. I go to Latinx dance halls and night clubs regularly. I dance until I am possessed by the music. So I started the writing process by compiling a hit list of my favourite cumbias, merengues, salsas, boogaloes, sons, candombes, sambas and reggaetons. Each one of those songs has a story attached to it. Some of the tunes evoke memories from my childhood, others from my youth, and others are so current that the stories are unfolding in the present tense. As I teach the audience how to dance, I explain the roots of the forms, the history of Latinx dance halls in Canada, which began in the mid '70s with the arrival of Chilean refugees, and some geopolitical history of Latin America, starting from the landing of European conquistadors over five hundred years ago, the theft and enslavement of African peoples, and twentieth century national liberation movements aimed at deconstructing neocolonialism. I also mix in some racy personal stories born in the dance halls.

The development process for *Broken Tailbone* has been about testing the material with an audience. We have done this twice. The first time was in Vancouver in September 2015, organized by the Playwrights Theatre Centre, and it was a huge success. There was a dj onstage, and our relationship added another layer to the piece. We tried the material out again in November 2015 in Toronto, as part of Aluna Theatre's Caminos Festival. That too was a hit. A week was spent working on the piece, refining, shaping, and structuring, and we filmed the evening. That video has served as a template – a draft, if you will – that we worked from during my stay at the lab. We have continued to clarify the narrative, fleshing out characters that make their way through the different stories, adding a key character, and translating every song very precisely in order to choose the exact verse I want to deliver. In this way, we have also found a through-line to the lyrics I share with the audience.

Broken Tailbone fits into the Canadian theatre ecosystem as a piece that features a woman of the Global Majority taking up a lot of space. As verified by Canadian Actors' Equity Association just this year (after their 2015 census), only 3.7% of the people we see on professional Canadian stages are women of colour. Of that small percentage, almost none are playing lead roles. Mind boggling in a country where the demographics of its major urban centres are almost half of non-European descent. It is therefore safe to say that it is still a revolutionary act to have a woman of colour centre stage, telling her story, celebrating her politics, the history of her marginalized community, and her sexuality, while inviting the audience to make their bodies the temple with which they celebrate the music, surrendering to the songs until the dance becomes a religious experience, creating a Canadian Latinx dance hall together.

Carmen Aguirre is an award-winning theatre artist and author, an Electric Company Theatre Core Artist, and Artistic Associate of New Play Development at The Stratford Festival. She has written and co-written over twenty-five plays and two best-selling books. As the Senior Playwright in Residence at the 2023 Lab she will be working on *Fire Never Dies: The Tina Modotti Project*.

The mountain is my dramaturg
by Gary Mok

How do you build skyscrapers on quicksand?

I asked this out loud to a mountain one day. I'm sure it's an uncommon question for a mountain to receive, but the mountains around the Banff Centre should be used to being asked uncommon questions. And common ones too.

Like how to write a play.

Writing a play feels like building a skyscraper on quicksand sometimes. Please indulge me in this stumbling metaphor built – you know it – on quicksand. When I'm writing a play, I find myself mostly just doubting the play. Am I building a beautiful story on a shoddy foundation? Or is the story itself hollow and infested with those ants that penetrate the structural integrity of a building?

It's hard to tell with a play sometimes.

It's hard to know with a play most of the time.

And it's hard not to get lost in your head while you're writing in Banff, asking questions of varying importance. That's what happens when you're surrounded by beautiful scenery and even more beautiful artists. Artists from all walks of life, each armed with exciting projects and existential questions that probe at all the parts of my curiosity. Why do we tell stories? How do we make a living? Should we tell our children which one of them is our favourite?

The Colony's playwright-in-residence Marcus Youssef asked me that last question when I brought up the project I was working on over dinner one night. It remains a theoretical question to me. I can only dream of being a father and, truthfully, sometimes I dream of being a playwright.

There's something incredibly magical being surrounded by a bunch of playwrights. Playwriting is usually the most solitary of occupations in the theatre. Some playwrights devise and collaborate creatively, but I'm used to creating by myself. I used to think I thrived in the solitary, but now? I'm not so sure. When I had a bad writing day in Banff, Josh Languedoc reassured me that it was okay, that the day wasn't wasted. When I hid in my hotel room working for most of my last day, no one judged me. The Banff Playwrights Colony was a space where I could be honest and vulnerable. Everyone's been there, done that, drank coffee, written bad drafts, drank more coffee, had an existential crisis, drank more coffee, cried to someone or no one, and then kept telling important stories. It's truly a special place to be for art and for life. And for coffee.

As I enter my final year at the National Theatre School of Canada, I'm going to appreciate the magical environment I have there even more. We have six playwriting students at the school at any given time, and I've only just realized how much the time we spend together matter to me. We build each other up and challenge each other. We're heavily invested in each other's successes, and we're even more heavily invested in each other's failures. We're there for each other, in art and in life. That's what it's like at the school. That's what it was like at the Banff Playwrights Colony for me. And that's what I hope professional theatre in Canada is like when I cross that bridge or hike that mountain.

When I asked the mountain how to write a play, it didn't respond.

The mountain doesn't know either.

Thanks for nothing, Banff Playwrights Colony.

Gary Mok is a Chinese Canadian storyteller who writes about families in transition within magic-infused worlds. He is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada and worked on his play 'we could be clouds' while at the Banff Playwrights Lab in 2016.

Inclusion & Equity at Banff Centre's Playwrights Lab

by Brian Quirt

I was in court recently as part of a jury panel. If our theatres, onstage, backstage and indeed in the audience, are not as diverse and as representative of our community as the potential jurors who surrounded me in that room, then we have fallen far behind.

Controversies have arisen recently in Toronto and Vancouver (and elsewhere) about inclusion / exclusion in terms of programming plays by women and artists of colour, the casting (or, more often, not casting) of diverse performers, and the barriers to artists of different abilities...among others. (See the controversy surrounding Toronto's Canadian Stage Company 2016-17 season, or Haberdashery Theatre's Vancouver production of *The Motherf**ker with the Hat*.) In short, each controversy highlights the need for theatre in Canada to finally and truly catch up with the ways in which our country has already – and will rapidly continue – to change. These controversies are, sadly, not new; they have been happening for many, many years, but the resistance to change is powerful and increasingly absurd given the way Canada's population has shifted.

I have two responses: 1. Diversity is easy; just do it. 2. The white / maleness of many plays, productions and seasons is only part of the problem (as was often stated during the #oscarssowhite protests). The solution is in large part at the source of the stories that will eventually occupy our stages and screens. Change the people; change the stories – because it is from the stories that change will truly occur.

As the Director of the Banff Centre Playwrights Colony, I am making change happen here, change that we believe will contribute to changing Canada's stages in the years ahead. I am joking, in part, about the "it's easy" comment; it's not easy. It is, however, intentional; it takes time and effort. It is also immensely rewarding, because the ideas, conversations and stories that we are now immersed in are rich, demanding, excellent and increasingly reflective of the intercultural and global communities in which we live.

At the Banff Playwrights Colony we are committed to inclusion and equity – to changing the people and projects that we support with residencies at the Centre's mountain facilities. The changes I'm referring to at the Colony include:

- More women playwrights in the program; more women participants in all capacities. More than 60% of Colony participants in the past 4 years have been women (according to recent Playwrights Guild surveys, fewer than 30% of produced plays in Canada are by women);
- More artists of colour and Indigenous artists; their stories and voices are essential to any and every conversation about theatre making – and, indeed, life – in Canada. More than 40% of Colony participants are artists of colour. Each of the past four Colony sessions have included Indigenous playwrights and theatre artists;
- Artists of colour in key leadership positions such as the Senior Playwright-in-Residence and Associate Dramaturg; Marcus Youssef and Jenna Rodgers are core members of the team that selects participants and makes decisions about structure, programming and activities;
- Interdisciplinary approaches to creating theatre are part of the Colony mandate, inviting artists who create in myriad ways to feel welcome applying to and participating in the Colony;

- International artists are built into the Colony programming to ensure that the diversity of voices present includes visions and creative practices from other nations, continents and traditions;
- Next generation artists – those under 30 – are integral to our program; 20% of the 2016 Colony were in their 20s, ensuring a multi-generation perspective that is essential to the vitality of our art form. It is too easy to offer opportunities only to established “names” in our community. A truly dynamic creative ecology depends on its younger artists to both learn from and challenge those who are established;
- Differently abled; we’re not on the forefront of this. We only began to address this aspect of inclusion this spring, principally by hosting a Newworld Theatre workshop of *King Arthur and His Knights*, co-authored by Niall McNeil, whose life includes Down Syndrome, and our Playwright in Residence, Marcus Youssef; it is a start and we will do more in the future;
- Theatre for young audiences is often dismissed as second-class theatre, yet it is often the most adventurous and certainly its audiences are already the most diverse in the country. At the Colony we’ve included these works whenever possible; three TYA plays from the past three years have already premiered on Canadian stages; work for young audiences will be central to the 2017 Colony.

While the full results from this inclusive approach will only be fully realized over the long term, I am proud that this change is being driven here at the Colony. Its impact is already tangible – and being noticed. Over the past year, 12 Colony plays have premiered across Canada; 11 of them are written by women, six by women of colour, and two were for young audiences. This is real change. This is real impact. As Marcus noted at the end of this year’s Colony when he looked at us gathered for the final meal together: “At the Banff Playwrights Colony, it is clearly 2016.” Marcus observed that his residency at the Colony represented the very first time he’d worked at a major national cultural institution where the group of artists actually represented the Canada he lives and works in, as an artist and as a citizen. I was aware that I was often the only white person in the room during Colony sessions; at times, the only man. This is good.

Controversies will continue. Collisions between the power of inclusion and those that adhere to the status quo will continue, and be painful; change as it happens will be uncomfortable, as it must. In creating a space that is inclusive and equitable to all artists, we’re paving the path for a future that is more reflective of my experience of being in that jury room. More than that, the voices of these artists have already changed the ideas and issues we talk about at the Playwrights Colony and how we talk about them. These voices will increasingly do so far beyond Banff.

A national institution such as the Banff Centre can and must take a stand, make it happen, and demonstrate not only that works by these artists can and must be seen on stages across Canada, but that the voices that are being unleashed will enhance and enliven our theatre.

Brian Quirt is the Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto. He has been Director of the Banff Playwrights Lab since 2013. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, directed the premieres of many Nightswimming commissions, and created and toured 8 of his own productions: nightswimming.ca.

Critical “Innovations”

by Marcus Youssef

Over the course of my three-week residency as Senior Playwright in Residence at the Banff Centre Playwrights Lab, in the Hemingway Cabin in the Leighton Artists’ Residence, in the basement of Max Bell, on the 6th floor lounge of Lloyd Hall, in the Margaret Greenham Theatre and various locations in between, I wrote exploratory material about a group of refugee sponsors, maybe to be called *Lion’s Den*. I also rewrote and secured a presentation of my theatrical memoir of my Egyptian family’s complicated history and equally complicated relationship to the failed attempt of young Egyptians to fundamentally challenge the ossified, corrupt nature of their country’s leadership both during and after the Arab Spring. It’s called *Whose Revolution?*

My main focus, however, was leading a one-week workshop of what I believe is one of the riskiest, most forward-thinking and (forgive me, I hate using this word) *innovative* social or artistic experiments currently taking place, in any sector, in this country at this time.

Brian Quirt’s tenure at the Lab has been marked by a couple of critical innovations. The first is a fierce commitment to an accurate representation of the country’s theatrical community in all aspects of the program. Neither he nor Associate Dramaturg Jenna Rodgers like to talk about it, but the Lab is now a leader among major national theatre institutions in its insistence that participants in the Lab represent the ethnic, cultural, age, indigenous, and gender composition of Canada’s actual population. He and Jenna have done so not as some kind of weird or condescending act of charity. They’ve done so because they understand that the future of Canada’s artistic vitality depends – I will always argue – almost entirely on our institutions’ ability to represent the lives, experiences and aspirations of all Canadians. It’s not really all that radical a concept — that a country’s cultural production should reflect the lives of the people who inhabit that country. Hmm. Seems kind of obvious, right? Wouldn’t a culture that fails to do so invite irrelevance, by definition?

The second major innovation Brian has implemented is the commitment of substantial resources to a partnership-driven opportunity for a company to bring a number of collaborators to the Centre to workshop a project slated for future production. This year, the project was *King Arthur’s Night*, produced by my company, Newworld Theatre, and commissioned by Toronto’s Luminato Festival, with partners the National Arts Centre English Theatre and Burnaby, BC’s Down Syndrome Research Foundation. This project allowed the Lab to support to a new Canadian play that will appear at major festivals and theatres across the country. It also marked the Lab’s first legitimate attempt to address the last major barrier facing all Canadians as we attempt to manifest a society that offers real opportunities to all the citizens of our country, no matter who they are or where they come from.

King Arthur’s Night is written by myself and my longtime friend and colleague, Niall McNeil. Niall is an actor and theatre-maker whose life includes Down Syndrome. Our first show together, *Peter Panties*, coproduced by Newworld and Leaky Heaven, was - we think - the first fully professional show written by an artist with Down Syndrome in Canada’s history, and was presented to sold out houses and rapturous - if sometimes somewhat confused (!) - critical reception in 2011, as part of Vancouver’s PuSh International Performing Arts Festival.

With unprecedented monetary support from large but shortsightedly temporary BC-based Olympics-era commissioning programs, we were able to make *Peter Panties* happen. Barely. The resources required for this work are massive. Our collaboration demands that we write a show when one of the writers’ intellectual ability precludes the physical act of writing. They are large-cast productions with numerous songs and full musical scores. Niall’s staccato idiom lends itself naturally to powerful, idiosyncratic lyric

structures. By nature, he's a helluva lyricist, one of musical director Veda Hille's favourite song-writing partners. We also have to figure out structures that allow Niall's sometimes utterly brilliant, sometimes also mystifying kinetic, associate riffs on a beloved, iconic story to be meaningful and accessible to audiences at festivals and theatres across Canada.

Even more importantly we have to figure out how to balance our deep and real desire for artistic success against the sometimes very different personal needs of one of our creative partners. From the beginning we have always said our goal is to treat our long-time collaborator's artistic desires with the same respect, disdain, laughter, and rigor that we would those of any valued colleague. And, in a week-long workshop at Banff with director James Long, composer/musical director Veda Hille and collaborator/Niall's companion Lucy Cairns, we learned that maybe that's the easy part.

We are slated to present *King Arthur's Night* in four Canadian cities, so far. The cast includes seven professional actors, three musicians, and three additional actors whose lives include Down Syndrome, who we have been working with for two years through Burnaby, BC's Down Syndrome Research Foundation. We did essential creative work at Banff. But honestly we could have accomplished that somewhere else. What we wouldn't have been able to figure out: how to live together, as full human beings, across and with our differences, in an actual community.

That's maybe more true on this project than others I work on. But, if you think about it, it's also true about everything we do. And, if we're honest, I think we have to admit that we – the neurotypicals, those who once would have been referred to as "normal" – often don't do it all that well. Once again, doing this work, I feel privileged with the opportunity to experience and learn this more deeply than I would anywhere else.

Marcus Youssef's plays include *King Arthur's Night*, *Winners and Losers*, *Jabber*, *Ali and Ali and the axes of Evil*, *A Line in the Sand*, *The In-Between*, *How Has My Love Affected You?*, and *Adrift*, among others. They have been produced in half a dozen languages in 20 or so countries across North America, Asia and Europe. Marcus is the recipient of the Siminovitch Prize for Theatre, Berlin's Ikarus Prize, the Vancouver Mayor's Arts Award, the Chalmer's Canadian Play Award and the Canada Council Staunch-Lynton Award.

Notes from the Lab: The Evolution of *Mariam*
by Mieko Ouchi

I am still buzzing from my 10 day stint at the 2016 Playwrights Colony. I've been lucky to attend several times, and each time I am surprised again at what an intense, creative and engaged period of time it is. The hard solo work of writing is the main event of course, but it is beautifully broken up by meals and evenings shared with playwrights and collaborators from coast to coast of Canada, the U.S., China and the U.K. as well as visiting artists from other disciplines. Most of all, it is an incredible chance to connect around and think about... the work.

I was lucky this year to share this experience with my collaborator and friend Amena Shehab, who joined me for part of my time at Banff to work on a new piece we are developing. Amena came to Canada as a refugee from Syria via Qatar three years ago. Amena and her three children came to Canada while her husband was given refuge in the U.S. Three years, three months and 27 days later, they were reunited in Edmonton and finally the family is together again.

Amena and I met through a series of careful connections. Because of an amazingly kind teacher at an Edmonton Junior High, her daughter was encouraged to attend a drama camp in Red Deer. On the final sharing day, Amena met some incredible folks from Theatre Alberta, broke down and told them her story. She had been a theatre professional in Syria, before working for Al Jazeera Children's Channel in Qatar. And despite everything she had been through, she had a piece she desperately wanted to work on. She had written a short treatment in Arabic and had received some assistance from another amazing teacher, her ESL instructor, to translate it. They read it and called me. We met in July of 2015, and Amena showed me what she had written.

It was extraordinary to read. *Mariam* is the story of a young Syrian woman who is given to ISIS Mujahideen as a sexual slave. After a year in captivity along with her mother, against the odds, she is able to escape and eventually makes her way to Canada as a refugee. After three years in Canada, she makes the painful decision to make a video which she plans to upload to YouTube confronting the person, the religious Mufti, who unbelievably gave her and her mother as a gift to ISIS. Her own Father.

The story Amena imagined is powerful. Moving. And sadly, a glimpse into a situation that is happening right now in Syria. According to best estimates in 2014, more than 3500 women and girls are being held by ISIS as sexual slaves, some as young as 8 years old. Miraculously, a few have escaped with the help of brave men and women who are risking their lives to smuggle them out. While not her own personal story, Amena has drawn on stories from her community and captured something alternately horrifying, harrowing and hopeful. After spending time getting to know each other... and we like to say eating, crying and talking about the story... we decided to work collaboratively on the project. We are co-writing the piece as a one woman show, which Amena will perform and I will direct.

Our process of development as we began it in Edmonton and continued to refine at Banff begins with moments, memories and scenes sparked from the treatment which Amena either writes in Arabic or improvises on her feet in both Arabic and English. While we were at Banff some powerful new silent scenes developed through visual staging ideas we wanted to investigate and physical exploration of the playing space. Other scenes came through image work and even writing prompts that we gave ourselves as starting points. After this initial generation of raw material, we painstakingly translate each new section into English together if it began, as most of them do, in Arabic. Finally, I am shaping the pieces and sequences into a larger dramatic arc, with lots of discussion and input from Amena.

This is an incredibly slow process. And one full of learning on both sides! Amena's English is vastly improving as is my Arabic. And fascinatingly, we are discovering many words, concepts and even iconic characters and references that do not easily translate from one culture to another, if in some cases... at all. While I think we both expected this, the reality of it has made us deeply consider again the process of translation as so much more than the conversion of words and ideas of one language into another. It forces us to examine what we know as our theatrical traditions. To think about how stories are told in each of our cultures. To envision how archetypal characters have historically emerged. And required us to consider how this has led us to think of ourselves. Today. And of course in relation to others. To the future. And to the past. And through this intense discussion, I feel like we are gaining deeper insight into our own starting points. And new ideas about the places we can go.

And this feels like the right place for the work to begin.

More than anything else, working on the project has made it crystal clear to both of us, the critical role that theatre can play in telling current, relevant, ongoing stories. Theatre can still be a part of the ongoing conversation, and not merely a recorder of events gone by.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

Red Phone.

by Jay Dodge

I can't remember what my expectations were as we packed up our two massive crates and prepared to ship our set up into the mountains. But a few days later, when we met up with our cargo in the backdrop of Alberta's rugged Rockies, the journey of exceeding our highest hopes for what we would accomplish in our week at the Banff Playwrights Colony began and only went up from there.

The *Red Phone* project is not your usual suspect when it comes to the Colony and I must admit that I had my suspicions about the time and effort of bringing our team (which included Sherry Yoon and Carey Dodge from Vancouver's Boca Del Lupo) all that way. Perhaps that's where I should start, with the project.

So, the *Red Phone* project is a very simply idea in many ways. Imagine two phone booths. They are set a good distance from each other. You can probably see one from the other but you can't really tell who the other person is or read their face. Each booth has a red phone in it, as you might imagine, and a teleprompter.

Simple enough right? But how is this a theatre piece you ask?

Well, after building these two phone booths, we've gone out and started asking playwrights to write for them. We asked them, "what is an urgent conversation that you feel Canadians should be having?" And then we asked them to write that conversation. And now we are asking the public – in this case, members of the Colony and staff up at Banff – to step into these booths and have those conversations over the telephone while being prompted by the script appearing on the screen in front of them.

Okay, so now it's starting to sound a little more like theatre. There are playwrights, a script, a set of sorts and while there are not actors and audience in the conventional sense, there are two people playing parts and kind of acting as both performer and audience at the same time....

I guess it's that last bit that we didn't really expect when we started this project and where our discoveries at the Colony really started to unfold. What do I mean by that? Well, we were all pretty excited about the idea of engaging with playwrights to create short-format, powerful dialogues. We imagined it to be a novel format for writers and an interesting way for the public to take a peek inside the minds of prominent playwrights. What we didn't expect was that the experience would be as much about the experience of performing as it is about the content of the scripts.

As someone who works in theatre for living, I think nothing of taking on a character, pretending to be someone other than myself, professing views contrary to my own, portraying someone despicable even. But what we discovered, and this seems obvious now that I say it, was that being someone other than one's self is not a regular part of most people's day.

So, what we began to observe as different people participated in the *Red Phone* project, stepping into those booths, reading those scripts, taking on the implied characters and circumstance, was that there was a duality to the experience. As we debriefed with people afterward what became surprisingly clear was that the journey of engaging with the 'inner performer' was equal to and perhaps even greater than their reflection on the content or narrative of the piece.

For some it was the struggle of stating views radically different from their own, for others it was the joy of having poetic language role off the tongue as if they were making it up on the spot and for others still

it was the exhilaration of expressing big emotions or ideas. We started to realize that we weren't just creating a unique format for playwrights as we had planned; we had inadvertently created a dynamic form of audience participation. Because there is no other audience and the caller on the other end is in also a participant, the experience doesn't come with any of the embarrassment or performance anxiety that can accompany other forms of audience participation when someone is pulled up from their seat and onto the stage.

The result, as near as we can figure, is that *Red Phone* is the theatrical equivalent of singing in the shower – with all its unfettered joy and abandon.

There are many other things we learned about our *Red Phone* project while at Banff; about the creative constraints of the form, about punctuation, about how to articulate the narrative challenge to playwrights, about the phone booths as objects, about the technology that drives them but it was this discovery about the inner performer in all of us that we will cherish most and that dramatically shifted our approach to the project going forward.

So, as we packed up those two massive crates, each carrying one of our precious phone booths, we reflected on our week at the Colony and like I said, while I can't quite remember what my expectations were going in, I'm certain they were all blown emphatically out of the water.

On a final note, I have to give a big shout out the Banff Centre and Colony staff. For a project like ours, where we weren't entirely certain how to activate the Colony actors or how we'd engage with the other playwrights on site, we were taken aback by the real human support we received at every step of the way – from lugging our crates into place, to playwrights contributing scripts and ideas, to the Julian Sleath (Executive Director of Performing Arts at Banff Centre) spending hours with us making sure we had what we needed, to the technical department getting us the tools we needed, to the actors trying their hardest not to 'act', and of course to Brian and Jenna for supporting us at every step of the way and finding us exactly what we needed – often before we knew we needed it.

Jay Dodge is the Co-Artistic Director of Boca del Lupo and has won several Jesse Richardson Theatre Awards including seven nominations for the Critic's Choice Award for Innovation. Jay's playwrighting includes *Vasily the Luckless* co-written with James Fagan Tait and *My Dad, My Dog* which leveraged the world of Jay White's animation and Sherry J Yoon's lived experience in taking the audience on a journey to the most sequestered kingdom on earth, North Korea.

Why Theatre for Young People Matters

by Mieko Ouchi

Rounding the corner into the final week of my three-week residency at the 2017 Banff Centre Playwrights Colony, from my captain's seat in the *Elsie K.*, a 1948 gillnetter fishing boat, built in Steveston, B.C., and now moored at Banff in the Leighton Artists Studios, I find myself navigating myself through a lot of hard questions brought up by the theme of this year's Colony: Theatre for Young Audiences.

How do we as theatre makers and playwrights really look at and interact with children and young people? How do we choose to represent their lives and experiences on stage? How do we decide as creators what it is that they need to think about and explore? And, of course, why do we as artists continue to do this important work and find it so compelling, even when it can be overlooked or undervalued by our theatre colleagues?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions, but so many Colony participants have got me thinking and re-thinking.

The work of **Adrienne Wong** (Ottawa) and **Jan Derbyshire** (Calgary) on their project *Me On The Map* reminded me about what it to ask for and invite civic and intellectual engagement from children as fellow citizens, and really mean it.

Danish TYA practitioners **Methe Bendix** and **Anna Panduro** (Copenhagen), this year's Senior Playwright in Residence **Marcus Youssef** (Vancouver), Project Humanity's **Andrew Kushnir** and his collaborator social scientist Dr. **Kathleen Gallagher** (Toronto) and **David Harradine** of the U.K.'s *Fevered Sleep* all brought forward different but equally important perspectives on exploring positive but incredibly complex ideas with young people such as happiness, joy and radical hope.

Tasnim Hussein (Sydney, Australia) shared her experiences as Playwright in Residence at the wonderful Australian Theatre for Young People who not only commission plays from young people, but also feature them as actors and directors rather than simply the receiving audience, making me wonder, is having the work produced by adult professionals as important as I might have thought?

And of course U.K. playwright **Bryony Lavery** and her collaborators, dramaturg **Ruth Little** (U.K./Australia) and director **Kendra Fanconi** (Vancouver), continue to amaze us with the sublime madness of Bryony's play *Slime*, which asks, do we even need human language to connect to children about climate change?

Brian Quirt, the Colony Director and Artistic Director of *Nightswimming* in Toronto, shared with me an inspiring Colony conversation with **Boomer Stacey** (the Toronto-based Executive Director, International Performing Arts for Youth), discussing how the most dangerous ideas and concepts for adults are often the same for children. Grief, death, revenge, reconciliation, justice. Three other playwrights are diving fully into these questions. **Pascal Brullemans** (Montreal) is examining how children face monstrous acts that have been done to them. **Makambe K. Simamba** (Calgary) channels the story of Trayvon Martin through his own deceased body. And **Catherine Hernandez** (Toronto) is diving deeply into the experience of child soldiers.

Through these artists and all the other equally remarkable writers and collaborators who participated in #PlaywrightsColony17, sharing the air and a sense of community, I feel challenged, invigorated and shaken.

The biggest ideas repeated, reiterated, echoed: we do this because we believe in children. Now. Not as an investment in future audience, in adult subscribers, but an audience worth writing and performing for right now. Just as they are. We do this work because we've discovered how much we can learn about our own shared humanity from how children and young people receive and engage with huge ideas. We do it because we've learned that we want a conversation with young people that is never one sided but reciprocal.

Radical hope. I've got me some. Thank you Banff.

–Mieko.

Mieko Ouchi works as a freelance actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is the Associate Artistic Director at the Citadel Theatre. She is also a co-founder and Artistic Associate at Concrete Theatre, where she held artistic leadership roles for 31 years. Work at the Playwrights Lab includes: *Burning Mom*, *The Silver Arrow*, *Mariam*, *Makepeace*, *I Am For You*, *Nisei Blue*, *The Blue Light* and *The Red Priest*.

**Banff Playwrights Lab:
Why We're Changing Our Name
by Brian Quirt**

Over the past year, Banff Centre has undertaken an examination of its programs in light of the Truth and Reconciliation Report. An important component of this process has been to ensure that the language used at the Centre to name and describe its programs is scrutinized and changed to acknowledge and reflect the Centre's commitment to Indigenous reconciliation.

For 44 years, Banff's playwriting residency program has been called The Colony. It is now time (and long overdue) to retire the word 'colony', recognizing the pain and deep discomfort the term generates for many individuals and communities. Over the past five years, I have had the privilege of directing this program, and been honoured by the participation and contributions of remarkable artists – including Indigenous playwrights, actors, scholars and elders – all of whom have shown remarkable patience in the face of this word.

To mark the 45th edition of this program, we are renaming it **The Banff Playwrights Lab**. I thank all those who have chafed at the previous name for their tolerance – and welcome them to the Lab in the future under a title that I believe more effectively articulates what the program has evolved into during my tenure. It remains and will always be a vital and dynamic gathering of playwrights and the artists who collaborate on their creations. It is a temporary community devoted to exploring writing for the stage on lands where stories have been told for thousands of years. It is a precious site to be permitted to work and remains a gathering place that we must never take for granted.

The program has developed in new, more exploratory directions during the past five years to better support the work of those creators; a huge thank you is due to Associate Dramaturg Jenna Rodgers for collaborating with me on this evolution. The Playwrights Lab encourages participants to further their work not only through play readings (we hold more than 30 during the Lab each year) but also in-studio sessions that examine staging, choreography, sound, design, space and community.

Playwrights create using much more than words; the Lab invites writers to use the full spectrum of their tools and seeks to provide access to those requirements during their residencies at the Lab. We have also made access to the 200-seat Margaret Greenham Theatre a core feature of the program: playwrights must be able to work in theatres when they wish, and we believe it is essential to offer writers not only the opportunity to hear but also to see their works-in-progress in a performance space, if that is useful and inspiring to them.

We are committed to ensuring that this in-studio research and creation work is led by playwrights, empowering them to guide the teams devoted to developing their work at the Lab and beyond. We actively seek out interdisciplinary projects to broaden the range of artists and collaborators invited to the Lab in order to more fully and accurately reflect how playwrights are creating new works in Canada. And we ensure that international guest artists contribute to the Lab's conversations about creation, and take Canadian ideas and approaches back with them when they leave.

Check out the Lab's commitment to inclusion and equity in my 2016 essay – *Inclusion & Equity at Banff Centre's Playwrights Lab* – that outlines many of the Lab's priorities and approaches to new creation.

Each year the Lab articulates a focus area to encourage artists to examine in depth specific elements of the performance ecology. Over the past five years, the Lab has explored political writing, interdisciplinary creation, outrage/outrageousness, and theatrical form; earlier this year 45 artists came together to

investigate theatre for young audiences. In 2018, our focus will be on the audience: specifically, in an age when devised works in all disciplines continue to engage audiences in myriad ways, we want to explore how playwrights are thinking about the audience(s) for their works; how playwrights are imagining ways to incorporate spectators into their works; how writers are conceiving and designing new works with the role of audience members as active participants rather than passive viewers. We are interested in projects imagined for very small audiences, and very large ones. We are eager to explore how audiences in Canada are changing, and how playwrights are considering different communities of audiences as they create their work.

As we look ahead to the 45th edition of this program, we also celebrate the impact it has had on hundreds of playwrights since its founding in the early 1970s. Although the emphasis at the Playwrights Lab will always be on discovery and process, rather than product and production, the impact of the program is visible in the number of Lab shows premiering each year on Canadian stages. In the 2016-17 season, 24 recent Lab projects received productions, with 15 in 2017 alone, at prestigious venues such as PuSh Festival (Vancouver), High Performance Rodeo (Calgary), Luminato Festival (Toronto), Canada Scene (National Arts Centre/Ottawa) and the Stratford Festival.

With a new name, and a renewed commitment to supporting Canadian playwrights, The Banff Playwrights Lab aims to welcome and serve all communities more respectfully, more intentionally, and with the goal of fostering the work of individual artists as deeply as possible.

Brian Quirt is the Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto. He has been Director of the Banff Playwrights Lab since 2013. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, directed the premieres of many Nightswimming commissions, and created and toured 8 of his own productions: nightswimming.ca.

Performing to a Changing Audience

by Brian Quirt

The Banff Playwrights Lab celebrated its 45th edition in 2018. The Lab supported 50 artists from Canada, Australia, Denmark, the U.K. and the United States, working on more than 25 different projects. The focus area this year was on audience, in the following ways:

1. Performing to audiences that are changing – over time, from performance to performance during a run, and from city to city for those who tour Canada. Audiences are shifting, particularly in larger cities, where they are becoming more culturally diverse, and where the age range is broader, at least in some venues. We talked about what it means to playwrights to hear their stories when the audience changes from night to night or city to city, asking storytellers to think about who this play is for. Which audience? Can it play equally well in every city, or every night?
2. We also examined ways that playwrights are incorporating audiences as participants into their new creations, something increasingly common. How are audiences defining the experiences they attend? They are demanding active experience rather than passive spectatorship, especially, but not only, among younger audiences.

The Lab put out a call for theatre works in which audience involvement/participation is central to the event. We received lots of applications, of all kinds. It is illuminating to me that playwrights are absorbing the expanding interest in audience engagement and imagining how they and their works can have more impact on their audiences. The question then becomes: where do these shows live?

One of my favourite moments was when playwright Bea Pizano, Artistic Director of Aluna Theatre in Toronto, said, referring to the challenges she faces in considering all the complicated aspects of these audience-related issues: “The audience is the mother-fucker.”

And as I thought of whether to use this quote or not, I too had to consider audience and how they – you – would receive that statement, one that we all knowingly laughed along with when it was shared by Bea.

Here are a few snapshots based on our conversations at the Lab...

- Welcoming is crucial – what are the strategies to welcome an audience, to make the experience personal and individual and therefore unique? To feel like an individual rather than part of an anonymous group.
- Food and drink – hosting – is an essential component. To what extent is food and drink available or incorporated into the event, and how is it related to the content of the show?
- Theatres tend to be static in relationship to audience – the relationship is largely the same every time, due to the nature of the venue. Theatres need to explore further how to make this static relationship more active and engaged, not with more E-blasts or ancillary activities, but actually in the room.
- New relationships between artists and audiences offer the possibility of deeper connection, and therefore deeper exploration – together – of the content. Maiko Yamamoto of Vancouver’s Theatre

Replacement, who developed a new piece at the Lab called *Mine*, terms it “shared engagement” in which performance, community, site and engagement are built into the experience; that sounds ideal.

- Maiko reminded us that presenters, especially at festivals, are very interested in engagement with audiences. And tend to be more capable of providing it due to the flexibility they wield in terms of schedule, venues and audience.
- Based on my own recent experiences, museums appear better able to incorporate deeply audience-engaged performance. These venues deal with audiences in much different ways than sit down theatres, and therefore have ways of intersecting effectively and powerfully with audiences. Can museums and theatres learn from the very different experiences they each provide, and both present a more richly varied offering that draws from their mutual strengths?
- For a lot of performing arts organizations, engagement is put into ancillary events and activities rather than at the core of their artistic work. Much of that artistic work retains a passive audience-performance relationship, so the issue becomes how to engage with individuals more creatively during the arrival, the hosting, the departure rather than through things such as talk-backs that often seem like an offering of false intimacy and controlled engagement rather than free play and interaction.
- Many of the Lab projects this year were designed with the audience playing a more central role in the experience. This creates a challenge: where do these works fit in terms of the theatres that have the highest capacity to bring them into contact with audiences but are generally least able to accommodate – because of their organizational structure and venues – performance events which require very different presentation strategies. Thus, these works tend to find homes in festivals by independent creators where the audience experience can in fact be co-designed by the artists creating the work in collaboration with the organization presenting it to the audience.

A few examples developed at the Lab this year: Marjorie Chan’s *Dim Sum Lose Some* happens during a dim sum meal; *Grieving Things*, by UK company Fevered Sleep, created by Sam Butler and David Harradine, takes the form of a shop that people wander into to talk about grief and buy products designed for the show. Love it.

UK playwright Sharon Clark’s company, Raucous, uses, among many multidisciplinary elements, aroma as a central creative tool. Maiko’s show *Mine* is set within the video game Minecraft, with spectators watching it being played live in front of them by the creators along with children from the community. And *Dr Silver: A Celebration of Life* is a new immersive musical by Anika and Britta Johnson in which the audience become members of a cult, locked into the venue for a final funeral.

The audience may be a mother-fucker, as Bea said. And if so, it is because the complexities of the invitation we make to audiences are so rich, often elusive, and ever-changing. That’s what Bea was grappling with, and what all Lab participants grappled with throughout the 2018 edition.

Brian Quirt is the Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto. He has been Director of the Banff Playwrights Lab since 2013. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, directed the premieres of many Nightswimming commissions, and created and toured 8 of his own productions: nightswimming.ca.

This article is based on Brian’s presentation to the Canadian Arts Summit at Banff Centre, April 21, 2018.

Covid Reflections – Summer 2020.**Greetings from Lockdown, Level 4!****by Mike Van Graan – South Africa**

South Africa has five levels of lockdown to ease ourselves to whatever ‘normal’ will look like eventually, while continuing to attempt to ‘flatten the coronavirus infection curve’. We have just emerged from five weeks of Level 5 which was among the hardest lockdowns in the world but now, in Level 4, the economy has been opened a bit more, except that the sale of cigarettes and alcohol remains forbidden. We are now allowed outside for exercise but within 5km of our homes and only between 06:00 and 09:00, and a curfew is in force from 20:00 to 05:00.

In a society as unequal as ours, we experience these limitations on our freedoms so differently.

Experts tell us that we will only reach the peak of our infections in August/September 2020 after our winter, so we have a way to go before we reach Level One ‘normal’, but even then, with physical distancing.

As in other countries, the arts and culture sector is among the hardest hit and with gatherings being outlawed – and likely to remain so until a vaccine or effective treatment are in place – it is unlikely that we will have much in the way of traditional theatre before the end of the year.

This week, the Fugard Theatre was scheduled to preview my new play they commissioned as part of a season to celebrate their tenth anniversary. *What we wish for* – which explores ‘sanctity of life’ versus ‘quality of life’ themes – was first postponed indefinitely and has now been formally cancelled. We were also supposed to move into the Baxter Theatre this week with *He had it coming*, my one-person show on the themes of gender-based violence and patriarchy, but this too, has been cancelled. Another play, *Return of the Ancestors*, had 5 performances before its 3-week run at the Market Theatre was cut short by the initial lockdown. A play commissioned by a Rwandan actress friend (on the maltreatment of refugees from neighbouring Burundi) that was scheduled to run from 1 May has also been put on hold.

While these are all my plays, they are not all my productions. But with young actors and crew having lost income as the result of the cancellation of these, I’ve spent much of the lockdown trying to raise funds to support them. The crisis has sparked many short-term relief initiatives, but it has also provided a challenge – and an opportunity – to think about ways in which theatre can be more self-reliant (theatre is a policy stepchild in the ‘creative and cultural industries’ approach that preferences creative disciplines that can sustain themselves in ‘the market’). To this end, I am engaged with a few colleagues in the dance and theatre sectors in thinking through the possibilities for greater independence and sustainability in a post-lockdown future.

There has been much use of online tools to showcase theatre and to try to generate some form of income, but ultimately, it is the direct encounter between an audience and performers that make theatre unique.

Currently, I am a fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS), an institution funded by the University of Stellenbosch (wine country) and Sweden’s Wallenberg Foundation. I was hoping to spend my fellowship working on my first novel, but ironically (considering the ‘time’ we now have), this

has not been a particularly creative period. The fellowship ends mid-June, and with the lockdown, most fellows from abroad have returned home. Technology still allows us to meet at weekly Thursday seminars, but the excellent daily lunches which were prepared for us are sorely missed (and so we fatten our curves by ourselves in lockdown!)

Many – particularly more resourced - schools are using technology to continue to teach, and I am engaging through online platforms with different schools that are studying my play, *Green Man Flashing*. A play which I was commissioned to write on the Sustainable Development Goals (!!) as an artist-in-residence at the University of Pretoria last year, has now been prescribed for study from 2021 by schools that fall under the Independent Examinations Board (mostly private schools). It is currently being designed for printing and distribution. When we write plays, I doubt that many of us consider that they will be studied as we write for the stage, but having one's plays studied by school learners is another way of reinforcing the ideas embedded within plays and raising critical thinking among a younger generation!

Limitations on international travel and national lockdowns have also halted the Ateliers for Young Festival Managers which I've had the privilege of facilitating over the last two years. We are now experimenting with an "online Atelier", scheduled for mid-June, with alumni of the Ateliers also currently engaged in regular and animated seminars about online festivals and the medium-to-long terms impacts (positive and negative) of COVID-19 on the arts generally, and on festivals in particular.

This has been, and continues to be, the weirdest of times for all of us, a time for rethinking what we do, how we do it, and why we do it.

Should you wish to know more and keep in touch about my theatre work, you may do so by following the news on my (sometimes) updated website: mikevangraan.co.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I look forward to hearing your news!

–Mike Van Graan

Mike Van Graan is a South African playwright and the Coordinator of the Sustaining Theatre and Dance (STAND) Foundation.

Covid Reflections

by Chloé Hung – United States

As conflicted as I felt deciding whether or not to write this piece, perhaps I can offer a different perspective on living in the United States as a Chinese-Canadian person. I am in one of those awkward and privileged positions where I am a person of colour but not a race that is overtly targeted. The kind of racism I face is predominantly of the microaggression flavour with a splash of institutionalized racism – not one I enjoy but it is indeed a privilege I have that I do not fear for my life on a daily basis.

The pandemic has changed this – especially since I live in Los Angeles, alone and far away from my family in Toronto. I now am more aware of my surroundings when I go outside as I have heard indirect and direct accounts of Asians being attacked in so-called “safe” neighbourhoods. The irony is not lost on me that a community of people who so often remain silent when it comes to issues of race became the target. And now that the racist and murderous actions of the police are back in the news and the Black community needs more support, it is a litmus test for Asians and Asian Americans to show the support that we craved for the last couple months.

Onto the update. At the Banff Playwrights Lab two years ago, I workshopped a play called *Model Minority*. The play deals with the racism within the Chinese community towards the Black community and the appropriation of hip hop culture by young Asian Americans. After Banff, I sent the play to theatre companies all over Canada and the United States. No takers. In Canada, I was told by one literary manager that it is an American-specific story (I whole heartedly disagree. This person has posted on Facebook non-stop this week about racism in both Canada and the United States.) In the United States, I was told by many companies they already programmed a Lauren Yee play so they couldn’t program mine – alas, there can only be one.

That was before the pandemic and before the murder of George Floyd by the police. Now, in the last three days, I’ve had several requests to read and do virtual readings of *Model Minority*.

My play, *Three Women of Swatow*, was among all those this season that were canceled at Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre due to the pandemic. I don’t need to tell you how badly our theatre community is being hit and so I’m grateful now for every opportunity and for the support. PlayMe Podcast recorded *Three Women of Swatow* for broadcast this summer with our Tarragon cast (Diana Luong, Carolyn Fe, and Chantria Tram) and director (Courtney Ch’ng Lancaster & assistant director Karthy Chin).

I also write for TV and I have the great privilege of continuing that work from home. It has given me the financial support to continue to write. As well it has provided me with structure and routine. But the process of writing during this time has admittedly been difficult. I find myself running out of steam a lot faster than I normally do. Usually, I pride myself on being a fast writer (a skill I exploit endlessly when I want to procrastinate until the last minute – in fact, I’m using writing this piece now to procrastinate from another project I need to write). But now I’m quite slow. Here in Los Angeles, I am in a playwrights’ group at the Geffen Theatre. Last week I had to turn in pages and, I am not exaggerating when I say, they were awful. Some writers have found great inspiration and productivity during quarantine. I am not one of them.

I just read back what I wrote above. Jeez. I apologize for the dreary tone. I had intended to write something that sounds hopeful – perhaps about how we will persevere and see each other on the other side – but as I write this, sirens are blaring and helicopters are hovering low. And so this is my honest update.

I think about what I can do. I am not comfortable with the spotlight, which is why I write fiction. So I will continue to listen, to read, and learn from those smarter than me. I will write responsibly and hold myself accountable for the things I say, the things I do, the art I put out in the world, the art I engage in in the world. I will listen when others hold me accountable.

Thank you for reading this whole rambling mess of an update. I hope that wherever you are that you are safe and writing.

Sincerely,
Chloé Hung

Chloé Hung is a playwright and TV writer. Her plays include *Three Women of Swatow* (Tarragon Theatre), *All Our Yesterdays* (Toronto Fringe, Next Stage), *Issei He Say* (New Jersey Repertory Company). In TV, she's written on *Queen Sugar* (OWN), *Cherish the Day* (OWN), *The Watchful Eye* (Freeform/Hulu), and developed for Netflix.

Covid Reflections

by Miriam Boolsen – Denmark

The world is a madhouse, but in that house, I live in one of the smaller and less noisy rooms. Probably one of the rooms at the back of the house, not spectacular but with occasional sea view. When the world is on fire I hear about it, I read about it, I try to incorporate the world in my texts but I have to do so in a truthful way, one that reflects my everyday reality which is here in Copenhagen, Denmark.

We are seldom in the big news, unless someone tries to buy Greenland from us (not ours to sell, or indeed to 'have'). That doesn't mean we don't have corona, racism or police brutality, of course we do, but in a country with 5.8 million people everything is just on a smaller scale.

My personal corona-story is a bit upside down, good is bad and bad is good. I started my theatre-life with absolutely shooting myself in the foot, moving from one small country and language to another small country and language (from Copenhagen to Amsterdam). I spent 15 years writing in a new and foreign language and when I had mastered that and had gotten published as a playwright I moved back home.

It has taken me years to begin again from scratch in my own country and then finally on the 5th of March this year I had a reading at a theatre. The text is in verse and is about love, lust and (the absence of) sex, a sort of full-frontal poetry. It is also a discussion of the Nordic model, where everything is so well thought out that there's almost no excuse for not being happy. However, these characters scream and shout and rhyme, masquerading as rational beings but clearly full of contradictions and impulses.

And then on the 11th of March the whole country shut down in one of the first and swiftest of lockdowns in Europe. It felt very much like my fifteen minutes of fame, the door opened after years of work and then it was slammed shut after a couple of days. No signing on the dotted line, no new agreements being made. There had been inquiries from different theatres in the days after my reading but now everything fell completely silent.

The unions in Denmark are very strong and have played a big part in shaping society as it is now, guaranteeing workers a fair pay whether employed or unemployed. But for people with a patchwork-economy it isn't that simple, we are constantly in and out of work and therefore very hard to fit into the regular system. To get compensation in the arts you had to earn a certain minimum and you had to prove a loss of 30 percent of your income. Like many others in my position I earned too little to apply and I had lost 30 percent of a bright future, not exactly something you can get compensation for.

Because this was an obvious problem, the union for writers of TV, film and theatre set up a new emergency fund and I was lucky enough to receive a little pot of gold. There is no way on earth this would have happened if I hadn't had my reading; a week later and I would have had a CV that was still too flimsy, in a Danish context. This fund has allowed me and others to catch our breath and continue to work on our ideas.

Regarding new formats I suppose Denmark is the same as everywhere else, with theatres shut down people are looking at what can be achieved online. Actors working together but staying at home, presentations online, lots of monologues, newly written material focusing on isolation and illnesses or dealing with the new normal as something normal.

For me personally it has been a great opportunity to reconnect with the theatre culture that shaped me during the first fifteen years of my career. I had to cut myself lose when I moved home and my whole

focus was trying to fit in again in my home country, but of course the Dutch and Flemish theatre was still very much a big part of my theatre language (and actual language), just not something I was always up to date with. It's a very expensive theatre ticket if you have to travel through a couple of countries to get there, but now was my time to catch up, because so many shows have been made available online. I have bathed in theatre and it's been a real jolt and very good timing now that it looks like I get to work here at home as well. My world, work and life have consisted of me skipping on two legs for a looong time, but now I'm taking the first steps towards reconciling my languages and traditions and making it make sense. It has been a very long detour, but during the lockdown it has started to come together.

I live in a silent room in the madhouse and it would be untruthful to pretend otherwise, but I hope I can contribute by letting hitherto unheard voices speak very loudly in my texts.

Miriam Boolsen is a Copenhagen-based playwright. Her texts have been staged in Denmark, Sweden, The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Australia and Canada. She has worked with amongst others Theatre of Speed/Back to Back Theatre, Sydhavn Teater, Glad Teater, Teater Katapult and The Royal Theatre.

Covid Reflections

by Tom Holloway – Australia

A little over a year ago I was fortunate enough to attend the Banff Playwrights Lab. 'Fortunate' doesn't quite cover it. It was an amazing experience of traveling from the bottom to the top of the world to take part in something unlike anything we have in Australia, because we have been draining the arts of resources for two decades.

Although thought of as a publicly funded industry, that doesn't capture how theatre survives here, and I mean 'survives'. Of the small companies that receive federal public funding, it makes up roughly just 7% of their revenue.

And of course, the talent that drives these larger companies first make their names in the small-to-medium sector that has been completely stripped of support by governments simultaneously trumpeting the importance of small businesses.

The total federal budget for the Australia Council is less than half of the Canada Council for the Arts and has been cut by more than 20% over recent years.

I write all this to put the impact of COVID 19 into context. Australia has been very fortunate to have not been severely hit by the virus, helped by our island nation, but also by a conservative government that did eventually, thankfully listen to scientists and doctors. That same government even worked to lay out a series of immense financial welfare structures that easily dwarf anything in Australian history. Although first touted at \$130 billion until an accounting error showed it was more like \$60 billion, the government is helping the unemployed, the barely employed and the companies struggling to keep people employed, and it is a huge benefit to almost all the nation.

Apart from the arts.

When this huge legislation went through, it was pointed out in parliament that the peculiarities of how the arts is run means that the majority of artists will fall between the cracks of the two major support streams. I mean this was literally said on the floor as the support bill was being debated, and yet no changes were made, because conservative Australian politicians refuse to see us as a legitimate industry even though we offer the best return on public dollar of almost any industry, we employ twice as many people as Australia's 'all important' coal industry and bring in more than twice the revenue.

In a recent regional cultural funding round in New South Wales, where the conservative government ignored the advisory panel's recommendations almost completely to instead fund aquatic centres and zoos in marginal seats, the Deputy Premier, John Barilaro said the money was to "deliver real benefits to real people, not satisfy only arty types who sometimes populate these departmental panels".

This is what he said *in public*. What do they say about us from behind closed doors?

Over the last few days, there has been talk of a 'rescue package' for the arts, which has seen 50% of its workforce lose their jobs and every single venue close (and remember how reliant these venues are on box office), but it has already become public that the federal government has denied the appeals of state arts ministers, and that the majority of any package will go to the major companies and not to small companies or independent artists. And, of course, not a single cent has yet been announced.

There has been a culture war in Australia for nearly all of this century. Whenever a conservative government is in power they slash the arts, which saves nothing, so is clearly just ideological.

It really feels like they are now happy to stand back and watch as the house burns.

To be naively honest, I don't get it. Equal numbers of people attend the arts here than attend sport.... We're one of the biggest employers and, as stated above, offer one of the best financial returns, and all this ignores the *real* purpose of the arts anyway. Still, economic rationalist governments should LOVE us, but then the days of economic rationalism have long since been replaced by things far more sinister, I guess.

The other issue is that when people think of 'the arts' they see champagne flutes in lush foyers, not comedians, or box-sets, or bands, or books or even people dressed as dancing cats. They think we're elitist and our dire mistake is that we let them.

Still, our Prime Minister (Scott Morrison) has been a phoenix, rising from the ashes of a disastrous summer where his inaction helped fuel the biggest bushfires in our nation's recorded history. He's now really *leading* by working with opponents to find effective compromises.... He's helping those in need.... And he is potentially about to announce a real and impactful package for the arts in these nightmarish times.

I hope so. It would be amazing.

–Tom

Tom Holloway is a multi-award-winning Australian playwright. His work has been staged extensively in Australia and internationally, being translated into over ten languages. He's librettist for Miroslav Srnka, including the opera *South Pole* (Bavarian State Opera, starring Rolando Villazon and Thomas Hampson) and shortlisted for Best New Opera, 2016 International Opera Awards.

Online Theater Manifesto by Wang Chong – China

The ancient Greeks probably could not have imagined that the public forum they called theater would still exist more than two thousand years in the future. They absolutely could not have imagined that, more than two thousand years later, a plague like the one in their play *Oedipus Rex* would suffocate theater.

Performances have stopped; venues have closed; theater has disappeared.

Theater disappeared. Only video-recordings of theater are left on the internet. But of course, video recordings of theater are not theater. They are merely bad copies, passing shadows, and vague memories of theater.

Theater artists became jobless and started suffering and complaining. In fact, the worst part is not that they lost their jobs; it's that they have been forced to realize the cruel reality of the twenty-first century: theater is non-essential.

Among all businesses, theater was the first to be shut by the pandemic and will be the last to reopen. Theater is non-essential.

Restaurants must go on; factories must go on; music must go on; Netflix too must go on. Only theater is non-essential.

Theater artists only realized that theater is non-essential once the plague was everywhere. In fact, theater became non-essential long ago. Theater stopped connecting humans and gods long ago; theater stopped being the only light during the long night long ago; theater stopped enlightening people long ago. Theater is not public forum anymore. Most theater has nothing to do with our times.

While cellphones and internet have become new organs of the mankind, and the age of cyberpunk is at our doorstep, theater is one of the last few places that doesn't allow the internet. While global news reaches people in seconds, theater still takes a year or two to go from page to stage. While most people in the world have access to the internet, theater remains the pretty plaything of the privileged few.

Theater is tourism; theater is consumerism; theater is capitalism. Theater is non-essential, because theater stopped being public forum long ago. It is neither public nor a forum.

Yet the online world is public and a forum. This world has sharing, participation, and billions of people. This world has stages, auditoriums, and open-air squares. This world has bodies, spaces, and beating hearts. This world has energy, light, and zeitgeist. The online world is not a mirror of the world. It is the world.

In this world, theater artists can start from scratch with just their bare hands. We can define all time and space; we can control all language and symbols; we can create all the currents and futures. In this world, it is easier for us to find the Dionysian spirit or the "immediate theater" imagined by Peter Brook.

Online theater is absolutely not a stop-gap measure during this plague. As in *Oedipus Rex*, the plague will pass at last, and the hero, through life-and-death experiences, awakens to the truth. Human society will soon be full of virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and artificial organisms.

So will the arts. Humans will at last redefine “human,” and also “theater.” Theater artists, having experienced “the death of theater,” shouldn’t and can’t stand by awaiting our doom. Online theater is no death knell for theater, but a prelude to our future.

We, I and my friends, stayed up all night, only because the prelude has started.

Stand still, or join us.

Wang Chong is the founder of Beijing-based performance group Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental. He is the most internationally commissioned Chinese theater director. His works have been performed in more than 20 countries. Wang’s productions include: *The Warfare of Landmine 2.0* (2013 Festival/Tokyo Award), *Lu Xun* (2016 Beijing News Best Chinese Performance), *Teahouse 2.0*, (2018 One Drama Awards Best Little Theater Work), *Waiting for Godot* (live online performance with 290,000 audience), and *The Plague* (live online performance with artists working from 6 continents).

This article was originally published online; English version proofread by Tarryn Chun. Watch the online version on YouTube.

The unexpected...

by Silvia Peláez – México

My name is Silvia Peláez. I am a Mexican playwright based in Mexico City, truly fortunate to have been part of the Banff Playwrights Lab 2019. Since my childhood, I have always liked surprises. Surprise as the possibility of the new, the different, the broken routine, the going on. Surprises hide around the corner or under a rock, or far away in a distant city of an alien country. Sometimes surprise has the flavor of the unexpected or something that happens abruptly, and that prior to its presence, you do not think about it. And here we are, immersed in the unexpected events and the unknown future possibilities.

Since the quarantine began, I found it extremely difficult to think in terms of future, although I keep writing to save myself, writing as an antidote against fear, depression, frustration, lack of socialization and cancelled projects. Writing is a lonely process, so it gives me the sense of normality knowing, at the same, that nothing is or will be the same.

To reflect on this experience, I go back to the play I worked on last year at the Banff Playwrights Lab, *Anteroom to Happiness*, a play about migration as a possibility of satisfaction for life. During these fateful times, I have been able to revise and translate it, remembering the fantastic experience I had at Banff with the Lab and participants. The play was supposed to get a staged reading by November this year, but got a cancellation as well as some other stage projects, collaborations and workshops.

Belonging to theatre, one feels part of a community. The Mexican theatre community, where I belong, is devastated with the closing of theatres, cancelled projects, ill and dead colleagues, ineffective cultural institutions, as well as a government full of contradictions and lies. The pandemic has been a pretext for reducing culture and science budgets. Here the unexpected adds up to uncertainty. We say #EsTristeVivirSinTeatro (#ItsSadLivingWithoutTheatre).

On the other hand, theatre communities, not only from Mexico but from Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela, have developed Zoom meetings, conferences and dialogs to talk about what is to come, how theatre is going to live in the next years considering this is an art with and for people. Some theatres in Mexico City have launched campaigns selling combos of plays in advance; some institutions like UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) have commissioned some creative dramatic works to be presented via Zoom or video. This strategy produced reflections on the possible impact of these formats with the audience, questioning what theatre is and what theatre is not. This has been a turmoil among Mexican theatre community.

The unexpected is still to continue changing. Allegedly, the pandemic is in its worst moment, and the federal government in my country is inviting a “renewed normality”, exposing people to infection. I do not listen to these foolish calls and continue to be socially distanced, writing in my studio, and reflecting on what kind of stories I would like to tell in my playwriting, hoping to connect with the world, my country, my city, my community, defining my responsibility as a writer, and preserving the possibility of surprising myself in a good way in the days to come.

From now on, I expect the unexpected with my eyes open. Thank you all for taking time to read my thoughts, hoping that you are healthy and safe.

Silvia Peláez is a playwright, librettist, and translator. Author of 60 plays, author of the opera librettos *Firefly*, *A swirl I am* and *Homecoming*. She writes about subjects such as migration, transgender, identity, among others. In 2019 she wrote *Anteroom to Happiness* during the Playwrights Lab at Banff Centre. silvia-pelaez.com

Wrestling with the truth **by Andrea James – Australia**

I had the great fortune to visit the Banff Centre in 2011 with a group of First Nations Artists from Australia on a creative cultural exchange. It was an immense pleasure and a privilege to be hosted by the Blackfoot; sleeping under the shadow of Sleeping Buffalo mountain in a tipi, with the smell of woodfire smoke in my nostrils and the closeness of my colleagues nearby. So when the opportunity came to visit again and take part in an international playwright's circle, I was elated!

I had been smashing away at a dark and foreboding play about a series of tragic events that took place on my Grandmother's Gunaikurnai country in 1841. I was stuck, frightened of the play's latent power and wondering if I had the guts to really sing this story up and make it shine. Three weeks at the bottom of Sleeping Buffalo Mountain was just the tonic I needed. There's a kind of magic that happens when you travel outside of your country and look back at it from afar, particularly when I exchange with other First Nations people from around the world. We celebrate our differences and mourn the disastrous and familiar consequences of colonisation, and then...COVID hit.

I took it on the chin, resisted panic buying toilet paper, avoided hysterical articles on social media and bunkered down. For us playwrights social isolation is a prerequisite. I was in my usual zone. Thankfully our health system and a limited number of state jurisdictions have served us well. However, the arrival of body bags instead of health workers in remote Aboriginal communities was unsettling, to say the least; and thankfully our own Aboriginal Health Centers took charge to protect the lives of our Elders – the keepers of deep knowledge.

The play I am wrestling with – *The Black Woman of Gippsland* – uncovers, amongst other things, the first Black Death in Custody in 1848 of a Gunaikurnai man, Bungelene, accused of kidnapping a white woman who was said to have been shipwrecked on our shores (but never found). As the Black Lives Matter movement rages and our Prime Minister wipes his hands of our own dire colonial history by muttering – “there was no slavery here” – my writing hand burns. I grip the pen even tighter now and know that this story from my Grandmother's country not only wants to be told, but it MUST be told.

Slavery happened here, massacres happened here, and Black Deaths in Custody tragically prevail. When we awaken from our COVID nightmare and our battered theatres re-open – we must resist the temptation to program money spinners and happy clapping plays.

Playwriting brings truth, brings justice, and will bring healing to the people.

Andrea James is a Yorta Yorta/Gunaikurnai theatremaker. She was Artistic Director of Melbourne Workers Theatre 2001-2008, is a recipient of the Mona Brand Award for Women Writers. Her latest play, *Sunshine Super Girl*, has completed a 2022 National tour. She is currently Associate Artistic Director at Sydney's Griffin Theatre.

Covid Reflections

by David Harradine – United Kingdom

I'm sitting in my studio – the top room of a red brick terraced house in a small village in the county of North Yorkshire, in the north of England, UK. If I look through the window I see flat green fields – the Vale of York – a river-riddled agricultural landscape, and on the horizon, the rising hills of the moors that stretch out to the sea. I'm sitting in my studio in the woods at the Banff Centre during the Playwrights Lab in 2017, watching a small family of deer drift through the trees outside. I'm sitting at a table in a bar in Banff, watching people fall from the rodeo bull that's in the centre of the room, weighing up the possibility of some triumph of strong thighs and good balance, or the greater likelihood of being flung to the ground, the victory of a non-human, for once (albeit not a real one).

When Brian asked me to write something for this series of reflections from participants in the Playwrights Lab, he suggested I say something about “what is happening in your corners of the globe”. One of the consequences of this pandemic is that it has unravelled many of the visible and invisible boundaries and systems that seem to separate us, or that have led us to believe that our bodies, our countries and our communities – our corners of the globe – are somehow able to be discrete.

Instead, we see with fresh eyes the impossibly complex mesh of spatial, physical, geographical, national, political, economic and epidemiological connections that bind us all together. Species boundaries have been breached too – see how quickly a virus jumped from the body of a pangolin in China into the body of the global human population, then into the bodies of domestic cats and dogs, even into the body of a tiger in Bronx zoo.

As the brilliant curator and writer Filipa Ramos has said, “the virus has become trapped in a system that is more complex than itself”, and we've become hyper aware, as if for the first time, of the complexity of the systems we live in every day: the fading heat of someone else's hand on a door handle; the unseen cloud of vapour that blossoms from someone's mouth each time they breathe and speak; the vast invisible communities of non-human organisms that live in our bodies and on our skin.

In the arts here in the UK, the pandemic has opened our eyes and we're seeing afresh the stress lines, weaknesses, interconnections and vulnerabilities that run through this system too. The enforced pause on cultural production means that everyone's had time to reflect on exactly what's been paused, with a strong collective desire to build back better, in a more just, equitable, and future-facing way. The deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests and global movement that followed have been hugely impactful, shining a damning light on the lack of ethnic diversity in many arts organisations, particularly in leadership and governance roles, and in the programmes they produce. And as the disability arts community has become more and more isolated, and disabled artists' positions more fragile – because of heightened risk factors during the pandemic – new campaigns such as *We Shall Not Be Removed* that the coming 'return, rebuild and reset' leads to an arts ecology that's more inclusive than it was before.

The infrastructure of the arts here is changing because of the pandemic. Our government's dithering response to the emergency facing the sector has already led to the permanent closure of some theatres and producing organisations, along with mass redundancies. And we're seeing swathes of people leave careers in the arts for more secure employment elsewhere. Many of the working groups and advocacy campaigns that sprang up when lockdown was first announced were focused on saving theatre buildings and other cultural institutions, whose reliance on earned income through ticket sales and admission fees led to catastrophic damage to their business models and chances of survival.

But the fundamental importance of freelance arts workers has also begun to be acknowledged. Stage managers, designers, sound engineers, composers, choreographers, musicians, actors, dancers, and other artists, creatives, technicians and makers of all kinds are the people without whom cultural organisations and theatre buildings have no programmes, and yet they are the most vulnerable members of the ecosystem, clinging to employment like those people in the bar in Banff clung to that rodeo bull. Campaigns such as the Freelance Task Force and the public facing *Freelancers Make Theatre Work* have led the charge to ensure that as the sector starts to rebuild, it works harder to flatten out these employment inequalities between the freelance workforce and the salaried staff in the theatres and companies whose programmes it makes possible.

One of the best pieces I've read during lockdown is "What Would Health Security Look Like?" by Sunaura Taylor, a disabled artist, activist and academic, in which she describes "a future that recognizes and supports our mutual vulnerability as creatures on this planet, a future that is structured around our interdependence with each other and the environments and species we live with, and a future that pursues access for people at all stages of life and abilities".

Can we muster in ourselves the ability to recognise and celebrate these profound interdependences and interconnections, between countries and communities, between people and populations, between ecologies and environments and villages and cities and forests and theatres, between human bodies and animal bodies, between institutions and individuals, between art and culture and community and family and love and hope and grief, between work and creativity and security and health and happiness and home?

There's a swan drifting down a river in North Yorkshire, a deer amongst the trees in Banff, a pangolin in China, a tiger pacing her cage in New York, and each of us, reading this, together. An invisible virus has opened our eyes.

When we come back to rebuild, restart, reset, what will we have seen, and what will we have changed?

David Harradine is co-Artistic Director of Fevered Sleep, a UK-based cross artform company that makes performance, installations, films, books and digital art through collaborative co-created processes involving people from all sorts of places and all walks of life.

By the banks of the Bow
by Jovanni Sy – Canada

I finally made it to Alberta. I was supposed to be here in March to work on a prequel to my play *Nine Dragons* with Calgary's Vertigo Theatre. And, of course, I was supposed to be here in April as the senior playwright in residence for this year's Banff Playwrights Lab. I had been looking forward to the Lab, and the ideas we were going to explore, for almost two years.

COVID-19 prevented all of that but it couldn't keep me from moving to Calgary to pursue my MFA.

So here I am in my new home overlooking the Bow River, averting my gaze from the mountain of boxes that remain unpacked. Instead I sit on my balcony and watch the joggers as the rising sun shimmers on the water.

Being up at the break of day has become my new normal—I can't recall the last time I slept uninterrupted through the night. Sometimes I awake with a start, reminded of something I've forgotten or overlooked. But most of the time, my body decides that it's time to be filled once again by a pervasive sense of dread.

I know I'm not alone among artists in feeling a little lost, a little paralyzed. Many of us are asking ourselves weighty, existential questions. There's just so much time now. The hours we used to dedicate to making theatre, laughing and playing with one another, are now spent ruminating.

Of course, much of that is due to the newly precarious state of Canadian theatre as a whole. With so much uncertainty, devoting hours to a creative project feels a little like building a house upon a sandy shore as the tide rolls in.

I wonder whether what I have to say holds any meaning in a post-COVID world; I wonder whether theatre will matter to people the way it did before.

There are so many plays I could be writing now; instead I'm doomscrolling until my eyes are bleary. I go to sleep hating myself for having wasted another day.

It wasn't always like this. Back in March, I decided that I would be a pandemic hero, one of the elite who leverage tragedy into opportunity. I would write two *King Lear*s, damn it, and learn Dutch in my spare time.

Obviously, things didn't pan out that way. My initial burst of creative energy dissipated into malaise. This soon gave way to horror and outrage. After George Floyd was executed, I was enraged by the boilerplate statements that some of our theatre companies were making in purported support of Black Lives Matter. Organizations with decades of demonstrable racism were now telling us that they 'were listening' and would 'do better'. The rank hypocrisy of it all was too much to stomach.

So I was grateful for the inspiring artists behind the #InTheDressingRoom and #DecolonizingTheatre initiatives at the Stratford Festival. When I heard them share their stories, so many of the slights, sneers, and aggressions were all-too-familiar. Since I began my career in 1992, I have not enjoyed a single significant achievement without a white person telling me to my face that I owed my accomplishment to the colour of my skin.

The first time I landed a TV series; both times I was appointed as artistic director; and, most recently, being named Senior Playwright in Residence at Banff—every single milestone has been undermined by someone implying that I hadn't *quite* earned it.

So I sat in the pain of those memories for a while. And consumed ungodly amounts of carbs.

And now I am a new Albertan. In two weeks, I'll be back in a classroom for the first time in thirty-two years. I'm feeling quite blessed to be going back to school right now. Pursuing my Masters degree seems like a perfect opportunity to reflect on my artistic practice. I used to joke that my personal artistic mission has consisted of saying yes to every offer.

But lately I have come to recognize that I *do* have a specific and unique practice: creating theatre that connects communities. Having spent so much of my early career on the margins, I naturally strove to redefine the 'mainstream' when I became an artistic leader.

In hindsight, though, I wonder if my ideas about inclusivity leaned too far in the direction of choosing IBPOC plays that were 'accessible' to white theatre patrons. For decades, artistic directors have selected white-centred plays with absolutely no regard to whether IBPOC patrons could identify with the material. So why did I agonize over whether my white subscribers would connect with an IBPOC play that I passionately wanted to program?

Though I don't have all the answers yet, I do know that, for a IBPOC artist, carving a place in the theatre means more than fighting for scraps or taking whatever is handed to you. It means constantly asserting and re-asserting your dignity. And it requires a clear sense of the audience you seek.

I am going to use my time at the University of Calgary to reflect on these questions. I'm going to challenge myself to find new ways to express myself. I'm going to think about how I can support the next generation of artists.

Out by the Bow River, the joggers are now obscured by a steady stream of whizzing cars. The rush hour traffic is starting and there are U-Haul boxes demanding my attention.

—Jovanni Sy

Jovanni Sy is a playwright, director, performer, and the former artistic director of Gateway Theatre (Vancouver) and Cahoots Theatre (Toronto). He was Senior Playwright in Residence for the Playwrights Lab in 2020 and 2021. His most recent residency at Banff was in 2022 where he worked on: *Salesman in China* (a co-commission of the Banff Playwrights Lab and the Stratford Festival); *Kowloon Bay* (Vertigo Theatre); and *The Tao of the World* (Citadel Theatre).

Stories in the Forest

by Jenna Rodgers

I'm sitting in the Painter House. It's an overcast morning, brisk and chilly. Two resting deer greeted me on my walk to get here. It's April 2023, and we're halfway through this year's 50th iteration of the Playwrights Lab. It's hard to believe that I've been with this program for nearly a decade when I can still clearly remember driving up to this magical place for the first time – full of anticipation for what was to come.

Since 2014, The Playwrights Lab has honed my administrative skills, sharpened my curatorial thinking, and most importantly – helped me develop a deep appreciation for the craft of new play making. Seeing so many works in various stages of process evidences just how much work, care, love, and thought go into telling each and every story that makes its way to a stage. As we return to live performance following the pandemic, it is so easy to get wrapped up in the flurry of production and forget the gentle nuanced work that helps to nurture an idea towards the stage and the audiences that witness it. The craft of dramaturgy is collaborative, and the way in which we convene in the mountains reminds me of how nourishing it is to share intentional space with other creative minds.

Reading through this anthology, I'm struck by the explosion of writing that occurred during the pandemic. The scope of the articles we collected expanded from reflections of specific projects to a series of powerful reflections about the state of various parts of the world. About big human feelings – fear, apprehension, connectivity, inclusion, change, curiosity about the future and more.... It was like everything bubbling away beneath the surface of our psyches suddenly had the time and space to rupture the meniscus and burst forth onto the page (or screen, as it were). As a society, we are changed.

The Playwrights Lab, and the Banff Centre as a whole, have faced the same reopening obstacles as other organizations and programs across the country. As Brian and I considered how to proceed with our programming, it was imperative that we find ways to uplift and honour the deep thinking and writing that occurred during the pandemic (some of which has been captured in this anthology), that we stay true to our values, and that we continue to encourage each other to grow the program in ways that honour our commitment to collaboration.

As we gather again in the mountains in this 50th year, we find joy in community. We celebrate the ways that playwrights have come together over so many years to engage fully and deeply in each other's work. We read, we listen, we embody character, we dance, we sing (sometimes even atop of the coveted forest boat). We meet around campfires in the gentle spring rain. We stargaze. We engage with the skies, the earth, the water.

We are still here. Telling stories in the forest. And looking out the window at the Painter House.

Jenna Rodgers (she/her) is a mixed-race Director and Dramaturg who gratefully resides on land called *Moh'kins'tsis* (Calgary), on Treaty 7 Territory. She is the founding Artistic Director of Chromatic Theatre, the Dramaturg for the Playwrights Lab at Banff Centre, the Board Co-Chair of LMDA, and the Director of Theatre Alberta's Artstrek Program.