

Annual Report 2022

Artistic Director's Report

After a year and a half of making theatre on Zoom, and bluffing our way through the process of filmmaking—in-person theatre returned to our beautiful building—and so did many of our patrons. Ivan and I took turns doing the pre-show speech before each performance of *Serving Elizabeth*—and the words “Welcome back to Belfry” elicited an eruption of applause. It was incredibly moving.

In what was nothing short of a miracle—while shows across the country, and around the world, were cancelling performances and/or entire productions—we managed to mount a four-play season that was virtually unaffected by COVID-19. Credit for that goes to the precautions taken by the entire staff—led by our COVID Protocol Committee: Production Manager Mike Ford, Front of House Manager Jane Broomfield, Audience Services Manager Ian Gibson, Executive Director Ivan Habel, and Stage Manager Jen Swan, as well as all of our guest artists.

We opened the season two months later than usual, in the hope that the severity of the pandemic might have lessened by then—which indeed it had. Our first production was a relatively new Canadian play: *Serving Elizabeth*. Launching the season with a play written by Marcia Johnson, directed by Nigel Shawn Williams, with a set co-designed by Camelia Koo, and costumes designed by Vanessa Magic—all members of under-represented communities—as were three of the five actors in the show, was a conscious choice. Between the day we shut down mid-way through the 2020 SPARK Festival, and the opening of this show mid-way through November, the world had changed in profound and important ways. It was time for us to recognize that, despite our commitment to producing one Indigenous-led production each season—a commitment of which we can be proud—we—I—had failed to ensure that we were being inclusive in other significant ways. I had been ignoring—essentially shutting our doors to—the many talented artists from marginalized communities. *Serving Elizabeth*—a wonderful play by any standard—deserved to be on our stage, was embraced by our audiences, out-performed the other three shows at the box office, and was a first step towards making the Belfry a theatre in which the country, and the communities of which we are a part, are represented onstage.

Will we continue to see this level of diversity on this stage—? Yes. Will we continue to see excellent plays and wonderful artists on this stage—? Yes.

Our outreach to the marginalized segments of our population has been greatly enhanced through the efforts of Matilde Cervantes, the Belfry's Manager of Community and Artistic Connections. She has developed an incredible network of connections throughout the city and the region, planting seeds that will grow and flourish, addressing accessibility, diversity, and genuine community engagement.

While the pandemic presented many challenges—it also brought many opportunities. The experience we gained filming *BEING HERE: The Refugee Project, Taking Shakespeare, and Same Old Same Old* paid off in a major way when we started live-streaming performances, which began with *Serving Elizabeth*, and continued throughout the season. During the third week of each run, all eight performances were live-streamed into the homes of subscribers and single ticket buyers who had chosen not to return in person. At least not just yet. Live-streaming is an extremely labour-intensive process, and can never replace live theatre (a term I have always hated—"live theatre," which always struck me as totally redundant, really isn't anymore.). Thanks to the effort and creativity that our Head Technician and Systems Manager Keith Haughton put into our live-streamed performances, they had their own special qualities, well-representing the productions, and even managing to capture some of the feeling of the live event.

Our next production, *Little Red Warrior and His Lawyer*, written and directed by Kevin Loring, surprised audiences with its irreverence. At first, patrons were unsure whether they should laugh or not, but eventually they gave over to the zany comedic sugar with which Kevin coated his bitter pill of social commentary and revenge on the colonizers.

While we managed to dodge the COVID bullet, Sam Bob—the actor playing Little Red—stumbled during a dress rehearsal and aggravated a chronic back injury. Actor Gordon Patrick White was flown in to cover for Sam—and did a wonderful job—but we lost a week of performances. The two actors shared performances throughout the run, both here and when the show transferred to the York Theatre in Vancouver. This current season will see our production of *Little Red Warrior* on stage at Theatre Calgary and the National Arts Centre Indigenous Theatre.

During the season, we continued to support the development of artists and arts administrators, through the Arts Leadership Training Program, the Emerging Artist Enhancement Program, the Creators' Circle for playwrights and theatre makers, play development workshops, our Incubator Project, and one-on-one mentorships.

I can't speak objectively about Hannah Moscovitch's *Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes*. It was my first time back in the rehearsal hall, rehearsing a play, and working with four of my all-time favourite colleagues: Stage Manager Jen Swan, designer Shawn

Kerwin, composer Tobin Stokes, and actor Vincent Gale—who, together with the amazing Sara Canning, proved to be a perfect cast—in every sense. Despite having to test ourselves twice a week, and wear masks outside the hall, it almost felt like being back to normal—we were all so happy to be doing what we do—but hadn't been able to do for so long. The play is Hannah's attempt to climb inside the head of a middle-aged professor and CanLit icon, in an effort to understand how he could so carelessly treat the emotions of 19-year old student. Vince gave what many consider his finest performance yet, and the play certainly seemed to resonate with audiences. This production will be recorded next month for the CBC podcast Play Me.

With *Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes*, we went back to operating at 75% capacity—as we had for *Serving Elizabeth*—to allow room for “social distancing.” Omicron hit shortly before rehearsals for *Little Red Warrior*, and so that production opened at 50% capacity, moving to 65% as restrictions were removed.

We closed the season with a play called *Kindred*—a new play that we had had in development for a number of years. In retrospect, I think we could have run that show for another month—the response to it was so ecstatic. I called it “a fairy tale for adults”—and I truly believe that seeing two of the characters arrive at a happy ending was profoundly satisfying for audiences. Maybe the media has conditioned us to believe that happy endings are impossible.

Or maybe it's because it's difficult to know when an ending is really an ending... One very clear ending was the departure of Ivan Habel—my partner at the Belfry for the past 11 years, and a colleague for 35. At the event we held for him, I told him that despite disagreements and debates during our time together at the Belfry, I felt that we were saying goodbye better friends than when he arrived—which I think is an amazing tribute to our partnership. I appreciated and respected his work, and while he rarely said it (much to my very vocal chagrin) I knew deep down that the feeling was mutual.

And now the Belfry is embarking on a very exciting new chapter, under Executive Director Isaac Thomas—who is so filled with energy and drive and ideals and a profound love of art.

I am feeling energized—and determined to live up to Isaac's belief in me—and to do my very best for this incredible and unique audience, our amazing staff and volunteers, and this beautiful gem of a theatre!