

## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S REPORT

2024 was something of a milestone for me personally. Having started my career on the stage crew at the Shaw Festival in 1974—2024 was my 50<sup>th</sup> year in professional theatre.

And it turned out to be one of the most rewarding artistically-- and also one of the most challenging.

The Belfry Theatre's 2023-2024 Season was a season to be proud of.

From an artistic point of view, it was one of the strongest seasons of my tenure.

Our remount of *I Think I'm Fallin': The Songs of Joni Mitchell*; our presentation of *A Wonderheads Christmas Carol*; our premiere of *As Above*—a play that we commissioned and workshopped; and our production of *The Lehman Trilogy* were artistic successes of which everyone on staff can be very proud.

Our remount of the Joni Mitchell show was a joy to work on. Whereas we were building the show during the rehearsal process for the first production—and that was incredibly fun—this second production gave me the opportunity to refine the original and to direct an existing piece of work. The result was even better than the first time around. And once again, our cast—comprised of three of the original performers and two new cast members—were exemplary colleagues and sublime musicians and actors.

The Wonderheads is a company that recently relocated to Victoria from their original home in Portland, Oregon. Their unique and extraordinary masks are stunning and amazingly expressive. And their version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* contains a number of very clever changes to the original—making it even more powerful and emotional. I have directed my own adaptation of the story about 20 times—and I still can't believe that they are able to convey its nuances without a word of dialogue. Our audiences were enthralled.

Christine Quintana's play *As Above* was commissioned by the Belfry pre-pandemic. Christine—an award-winning and in-demand playwright—had worked in the Box Office at the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver. Noting how many of their ticket-buyers were mature women—and how few plays are written for that segment of the population—when I approached her about writing a play for our audience—she decided to address this artistic gap.

We workshopped the play in 2022—with director Meg Roe and a cast that included Gabrielle Rose and Hrothgar Matthews. All three were part of last season's beautiful and moving production. Gabrielle in particular gave a stunning performance—and the play definitely struck a chord with our audiences. Unfortunately—a family tragedy and a case of COVID-19 forced us to open a week late—thereby losing a week of performances for a show that sold extremely well. I suspect that this play will soon be seen on stages across the country.

Our closing production—Italian playwright Stefano Massini's *The Lehman Trilogy*—adapted by British playwright Ben Power—was a three-hour-plus examination of the American Dream gone wrong. And, much to my amazement—it was whole-heartedly embraced by our audiences. It featured outstanding performances by our three actors: Brian Markinson, Nigel Shawn Williams,

and Celine Stubel, and a stunning design by Shawn Kerwin that redefined this stage—creating the impression that our plaster back wall had been eliminated.

I have to make a special mention of Celine Stubel’s work. As the first female-identifying actor to play one of the three Lehman brothers, she managed to make us all believe that she was a man with no perceptible impersonation of “maleness.” She is—without a doubt—one of a handful of truly exceptional actors. Our rehearsal process was a delight from beginning to end and—despite the rigorous demands of this lengthy play—the actors loved every minute of it.

Reflecting on our ongoing commitment to Indigenous Mainstage programming—we realized that we had fallen into the trap of confining Indigenous artists to plays by Indigenous playwrights. We therefore programmed Kat Sandler’s *YAGA* as the first production of the season—with an Indigenous director and two Indigenous actors in the three-person cast. The production hit its stride in the second week of performances—and by the final week was selling out. I believe in expanding opportunities for artists to work on a variety of scripts—and we will continue to look for future opportunities to explore this approach.

The Belfry drew attention from the national press this season—not for any of the work that we produced—but for a production that we chose not to present. Our decision to cancel Christopher Morris’s play *The Runner*—and the controversy that followed—created the most challenging period of my 50 years in Canadian theatre. *The Runner* had been programmed as part of our 2024 SPARK Festival. The decision that Isaac and I arrived at after much soul searching has been frequently misinterpreted as a response to widespread protests. The truth behind our decision was our belief that proceeding with this particular play at this particular time in this particular political climate would cause harm—inflaming an already divisive situation within our community.

I want to commend the Board of Directors for standing behind our decision. And I thank our colleagues across the country who empathized with our situation. And I can honestly say that I would not have wanted to go through this stressful situation with anyone other than Isaac Thomas. He is a man of great intelligence and integrity, and the Belfry is incredibly lucky to have him as its Executive Director. I am personally fortunate to have him as my partner.

In closing—my thanks to our audiences, our donors, and our volunteers—especially our Board of Directors. And I take my hat off to the incredible staff at the Belfry. We could never accomplish the things we do—at the level at which we do them—if we weren’t for every one of them.

The notion that Pat O’Brien is leaving/has essentially left—is too much to even contemplate—! I shall therefore carry on with the belief that she is still here—!

Thank you—

Michael Shamata