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BOOKS THAT ENTERTAIN, EDUCATE, AND INSPIRE

Essential Reading

The Dark Lady

"Hill's spirited, snappy dialogue cracks like a whip throughout…At its heart, the play is a love story, but one that also asks potent questions about agency, and the price artists pay for autonomy."
—*Winnipeg Free Press*

Pandora

"Playwright Jessica B. Hill creates an otherworldly, life-affirming theatre experience.
—*Winnipeg Free Press*

The Dark Lady and *Pandora*, two plays by Jessica B. Hill, explore the meaning of life, love, and art. *The Dark Lady* centres on Emilia Bassano, Shakespeare's mysterious "Dark Lady of the Sonnets" and one of England's first published female poets. Shakespeare and Bassano collide as they wrestle with artistic collaboration, ambition, deep love, and legacy

—an entanglement that will profoundly shape both their lives and their work. In *Pandora*, we meet the mythological character who's been carrying the burden of all human suffering since the beginning of time. She's really sorry. She's also really curious about the *why* of it all. Her curiosity starts connecting the dots between myth, modern science, and the meaning of theatre itself as she quests for answers to life's unpredictability.

See More

The Interview

John Lazarus is one of Canada's most successful and critically acclaimed playwrights. His plays include *Babel Rap, Dreaming and Duelling, Village of Idiots, The Late Blumer, Homework & Curtains, Genuine Fakes, The Nightingale, Medea's Disgust, Rough Magic, Trouble on Dibble Street, The Grandkid,* as well as several plays for children. John also has extensive experience teaching playwriting, both at Vancouver's Studio 58 and Queen's University in Kingston. John's book *Two Ways About It: The Inside and Outside of Playwriting* is the Swiss Army knife of playwriting books.

John, why did you choose to pursue a career in playwriting?

I just wanted to be an actor. I tell kids now that I went to the National Theatre School, and sometimes they say, "Oh, you took the playwriting program," and I tell them, "No, there wasn't one." Not to knock the National Theatre School—there was nothing anywhere in the country. I once put out a question on Facebook: "Anybody my age, did you ever take a post-secondary playwriting course?" And the only person who answered was Stephen E Miller, the actor and novelist who lives here in Vancouver. He said he took a creative writing course at UBC, and there was a playwriting component as part of that. It turns out that that course was taught by Doug Bankson, who was an American, ironically, and a

playwright—and a pretty good one. He wrote a play called *Lenore Nevermore* about Edgar Allan Poe, which I acted in in my youth. He was a lovely guy, and he introduced the idea of teaching playwriting to Canada, as far as I know. But nobody was doing that.

I was training as an actor when I was sixteen. I was in—as everybody is when they're sixteen—I was in *The Crucible.* And we were in the middle of a horrible rehearsal. It was boring, and it was hot weather, and there were flies buzzing around; there was another guy in the play who couldn't do it, and the director was spending all his time on him. And, you know, I thought, "This is still kind of fun. I'm still enjoying this, so maybe I should do this for a living." I didn't factor in the aspect of making a living doing it, because I was a kid, and I didn't know any better. But I went to the National Theatre School to train as an actor, and I worked as an actor for five or six years.

Just to bookend that story, now that we're back in Vancouver, I suddenly have an acting agent, which I didn't go looking for. I went to a script workshop for a guy I know who asked, "Would you come and listen to my script and give me notes?" And I said, "Can I read something?" "Oh, yeah. There's a part you can read." I went in and the only other guy I knew was an actor friend, and we were playing enemies, so we were yelling at each other across the table. And afterwards he said, "I'm going to tell my agent about you." So now I have an agent. It's very strange.

That's a full circle moment! So you trained at NTS and were working as an actor… What was your first playwriting experience?

I came here to Vancouver, and I got a job with a TYA company touring British Columbia. The plays were a mixed bag, and at least one of them was very frustrating to perform. I had this image of the playwright sitting at home collecting royalty checks while we were trying to sell children on this thing, and I thought it would be fun to try being a playwright. The idea of a Canadian playwright was almost unheard of at the time. My timing was excellent. This was the early 70s, when Pierre Trudeau began a series of grant programs: LIP (Local Initiative Programs) grants, and OFY (Opportunities for Youth) grants, which started a whole bunch of different kinds of groups, including arts groups, and including theatres. So after the tour was over, I was back in Vancouver and a bunch of us young hippies were sitting around looking at each other and saying, "Okay, let's start a company." We wanted to do things differently from the older people—whom we respected, but we were kids; we wanted to do something different. One thing they weren't doing was Canadian plays, so we said, "Let's do Canadian plays!" Oh, where are they? There weren't any. But the guy who brought us together for that theatre company, which was called Troupe, was a guy named Jonathan Bankston, and he said, "Well, my dad's written a play." And I laughed out loud, which is something I tell students now: that that the idea of somebody's middle-aged dad writing a play in Canada seemed ridiculous. In fact, by a weird twist of fate, the guy who wrote that play was Doug Bankson, the guy who was teaching playwriting at UBC!

But anyway, we were sort of programming the season as we went, and about two shows down, we had scheduled a couple of one-acts: one by my friend David Peterson, who has

left us, and one by Jackie Crossland, who has also left us. Jackie wrote a sort of feminist take on *Beauty and the Beast,* and David had written a short play about Humpty Dumpty sitting on a wall. And I thought, “This is my chance,” because it was a short evening, you know; we didn't have enough content. I thought, “I'm going to write a one-act and fill out the evening.” And I thought that because the other two were based on folklore or fairy tales, that mine should be similar. And then I thought, “I should be able to write a play about the next thing I see,” which was *nonsense.* But I had that thought and when I looked up, the next thing I saw was the lighting man's stepladder, because it was tech week. So I thought, “Okay, I'll write a play that takes place on a stepladder.” And I decided that Alexander Deakin—a friend who came over to visit a couple of weeks ago, 52 years after we did that play—Alex and I would be these two guys on a stepladder, and the stepladder should represent the biggest structure in the world; it would be the Tower of Babel. I wrote the play in one evening, and I brought it in the next day. Alex and I read it, and everybody said, “Okay, let's do it.” I thought, “This is great, this will be my career. I'll write one of these every evening and I'll get *rich!”* And of course, I couldn't do it again.

I’d like to add, as a kind of coda to that story, that *Babel Rap,* which was the name of the play, became the most produced play in Canada for several years. That's correct, isn't it?

It was a low bar. There wasn't much happening.

Click on the link below to read more of our conversation with John.

Read the Full Interview

Behind the Scenes

This month we spoke with Jacqueline Loewen, an award-winning theatre maker who has worked extensively as a fight choreographer. Jacquie has worked on many productions in her hometown of Winnipeg, as well as on shows at Bard on the Beach (Vancouver), Canadian Stage (Toronto), and Kansas State University (KSU), among others. Jacquie has won two Winnipeg Theatre Awards for outstanding choreography. Jacquie is a founding member of the physical sketch group Hot Thespian Action, has adapted and directed several operas, works as a dramaturge, and has created acclaimed experimental physical theatre pieces.

Jacquie, could you give us an overview of what the job of fight choreographer is all about?

I'm at a point in my journey with this job where it feels like there's a big difference between choreographing a fight and creating the violence of a scene, because those aren't the same thing. I'm actually far more interested in making physical stories on stage.

Becoming a fight director wasn't my intention. It came about because of a series of circumstances, and when I look back, I can see "Oh, that's how I got this career!" I think that because of both my skills and my interests, fight choreography really appealed to me —because any time there's a fight in a play (or in life,) it's the point of highest intimacy between two people, when the stakes are the most important.

Sometimes there is a fight in a play, and you choreograph the moves. But I'm much more interested is using those tools, those building blocks, those tricks, those skills, to create *violence,* which is the not necessarily the physical thing — it's the visceral thing that comes out of the physicality.

You touched briefly on this in your last answer, but can you tell us more about the circumstances that led you into this career?

From my perspective, I didn't really think that I was doing *anything* until I was about 35. And then, as it turns out, I was doing things all along! I just hadn't quite realized it. I took theatre at the University of Winnipeg, and I had to take a bunch of different courses. When it came to physical theatre, it seemed like: "I like it. It likes me. My body works pretty well." I was in a mime sketch comedy group for a long time. But these weren't things that felt like

conscious choices; they were just the things that I was the best at, and I liked the most, so I kept doing them.

Stage combat was one of those things. The stage combat teacher at U of W was Rick Skene. (Rick comes from a theatrical dynasty; his dad, Reg Skene, started the theatre department at the University of Winnipeg.) Rick was teaching both stage combat and mime and improv and I was taking both of those. I had an interest and adeptness at both, but I just thought it was fun. And it was! I went to Banff, and I did a course there, but “only for fun.” Not because I'm doing this job for real… And then I went to Toronto, and I did Fight Directors Canada certification, but “only because it's fun,” not because I'm doing it for real… All of that “fun” coincided with a time when a lot more films were coming to shoot in Winnipeg. Rick had been working extensively in theatre as a fight coordinator at the time, but he was called by the siren song of film, and he began moving significantly more toward doing stunt coordination. People kept calling him to do fight choreography in theatre, but he was otherwise occupied, and so he started recommending me. I just said yes to anything because it was always fun… And then, when I was about 35, I realized, “Oh, hold on a second. I think I *do* this!” Turns out that’s how you get a career!

Would you tell us about one or two of your favourite gigs?

Sure! In the summer, Shakespeare is often done, which is great for fight choreographers. I've done quite a number of *Romeo and Juliets,* quite a number of *Macbeths,* quite a number of *Hamlets.* One fight that stands out was for a *Hamlet* for Shakespeare in the Ruins. I had gotten really bored of *Hamlet* always ending in a sword fight. Of course, it can, for sure—it does in the script—but in this particular production, I was creating fight choreography for a contemporary setting. I had this idea that, instead of a sword fight, they'd be having a chess match. So they're playing speed chess, and during the game, they’re saying the lines like: “A hit, a hit, a very palpable hit.” The actors had memorized their speed chess moves, and the game kept ramping up in intensity. And then right at the end, either Hamlet or Laertes—can’t remember my own choreography—gets frustrated, and he slams the board down, and then they start having a physical fight. Because it was at the ruins, we had the whole depth of the space, which was cool because there was nobody behind them, and there were no stage pieces to worry about. And again, because it was contemporary, we got to use any stuff that was around, which included a bunch of two-by-fours. So I had one of the actors grab two-by-fours and chuck them at the other guy, and the other actor could easily move before they would hit him. It was happening right in front of the audience, there was nothing fake about it, and it was completely safe because the actor would move long before a board could get to them. But the fact that there was actually a two-by-four sailing through the air and hitting the ground created that sense of violence.

Dramaturgy is a big part of what I do when I'm choreographing something, because often it'll simply say in the script “They fight.” (As in Shakespeare.) If it's contemporary play, sometimes the playwright will behave like a filmmaker and they'll get very detailed: “He hits her with an open hand and blah, blah, blah.” But what’s written may not work for the production that we're doing. So for me, it's about thinking about the characters that have been created. I come into the process after the actors and director have already been

working; they've already got something happening. I need to figure out: “How does the way that they move, what they do physically, make sense within the play that that is being created?”

Once I was working on a production of *Crackwalker* by Judith Thompson. There's a part in the script where a character is abusing his girlfriend. As it is written, he hits her and he's speaking to her while he's doing it. So the violence is interspersed with lines, which I think is always better because it rounds things out more. The script called for the male character to slap and punch the female character. But this production took place in a really small space, and the actions as written felt so big. With the audience so close, it would be difficult to hide the tricks necessary to fake a punch or a slap; the audience would just come away thinking, “Oh, that was well-performed fight choreography.” I understood the idea of that scripted “fight,” but it didn’t work for this situation. You want it to feel gross, because that's what that was. What I actually had him do didn’t involve a lot of choreography: the actor said all the lines as he grabbed her wrist and began twisting it slowly. And then he took his cigarette out of his mouth and burnt the back of her hand. And everybody had to hug after that because it felt really gross.

Space obviously makes a big difference. At Shakespeare in the Ruins, you had the space to throw the two-by-fours and go big. And when the *Crackwalker* audience was so close, it was better to do the opposite.

Somebody in a workshop I took years ago said, that as a fight choreographer or as an actor performing fight choreography, you should be reminding the audience of what it feels like to be hurt. Not many people have been punched. But everybody knows that feeling when you’ve accidentally hit your head on a cabinet door or a wall. I don't think about it so much as like, “Oh, we’ve got to replicate that punch perfectly.” What you have to replicate is the *reaction* because the punch actually isn't happening. What we're reading is the reaction for how we should feel about that.

I would like to say only 75% of the time—but probably closer to 50% of the time—when the stuff that I've choreographed is performed by the actors, it actually *feels* violent. Often it doesn’t work as well as I would like (though my standards are uncommonly high) because I have only a short time with the performers, and they have so many other demands on them. And you know what? That’s fine. But when it’s good, it can be *really* good.

I think sound has a lot to do with it as well. I wrote an adaptation of *Don Giovanni* that I directed for Manitoba Underground Opera, and it was taking place in the Winnipeg Art Gallery. The audience followed them around, and it was set contemporarily. The idea was that Don Giovanni owned this semi-private gallery that was being rented out for the wedding. The lobby of the Art Gallery is a big open space, and it's got gigantic limestone stairs. We needed to figure out how the father gets killed right at the beginning of the play. (We made it her brother because the actor was the same age.) In the play, he's supposed to die in a duel; Don Giovanni kills him with a sword. But what we choreographed was this: they got into a tussle because Don Giovanni was being a bit of a dick, and then Don Giovanni threw the brother a bit, pushed him. I asked the actor playing the brother to trip and pretend to hit his head on the balustrade, this really thick piece of limestone. All he

would have to do is the trick of slamming your head into a wall—which I taught him—and slap his hand on the stone. When he would do that though, the sound would echo, and it sounded like his head hitting the limestone. And in performance, every time, there would be a number of women in the audience who would gasp and groan at the sound. Everybody knows it's not really happening, but if the trick works properly, the audience is not thinking about it with their brains, and it's not an emotional thing: it's that thing in between, viscerality, and they just react to it. That's gold.

What are some of the obstacles for you when you work?

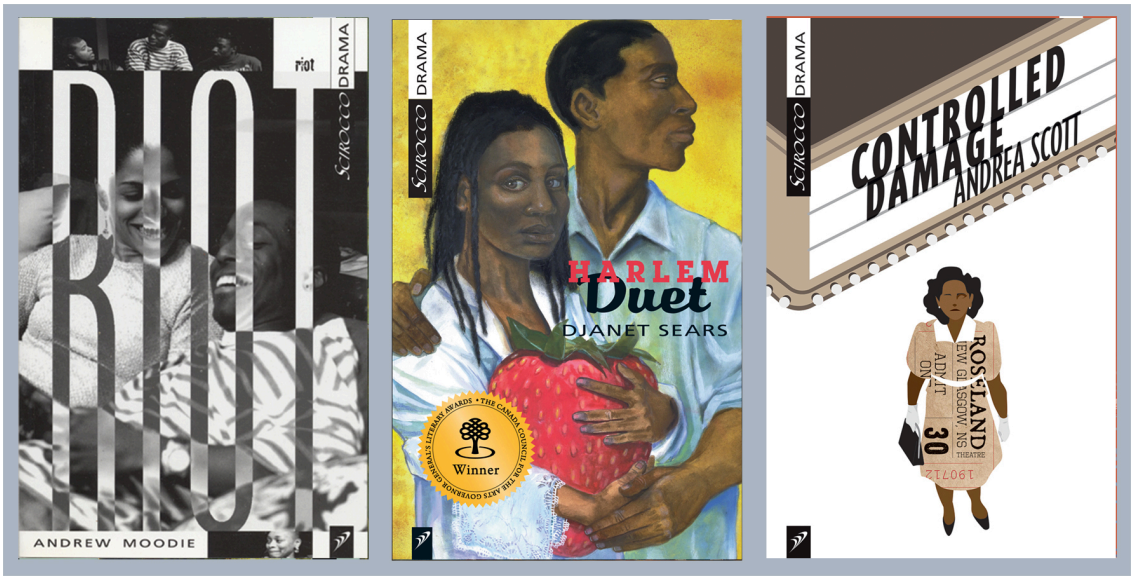
People whose brains and bodies don't work well together. Honestly. What that boils down to is a discomfort with engagement, whether it's with your own body and/or your partner's body. A lot of times, as soon as I see an actor try something physical for the first time, I'm going to know: you going to be good at this, or…you're going to take a lot of work.

I've done a couple of workshops recently and I've realized I'm bored of teaching punches and slaps. It's not interesting to me; what I am really interested in is teaching people how their bodies can move. How you can use the physics of your body in motion. The direction of where you're putting your force is the basis of every bit of fight choreography, whether you're trying to hit something, or you're absorbing something. The classic example is if you fall straight down, that hurts, because it's a sudden stop. But if you fall and slide, it hurts less because you're dispersing the force over a larger area. And it's like that for every bit of fight choreography, when you have two bodies that are going to actually do something together. So I've just started having people walk into each other starting at slow speeds, increasing with force until they reach the maximum of where they can't absorb it any longer; they can't do it without falling over. And what's cool is that in doing that exercise first, before getting people to do other moves, it helps to inform the way they start to engage with their partners throughout the class. A lot fewer people needed to get their brains around their bodies after doing this simple exercise. So I think it's an interesting hack: to get them doing something simple with their bodies before they have to start thinking about layering in moves and intentions, etc. And I think that it's also the basis for good learning. Good physical learning is starting slow. And by the time you're done, you're going to be miles beyond where you could have been at the beginning of the day. And that's the whole point of being on stage, right? To be able to give something to the audience, show something, perform something, create artistically SOMETHING that is built from skills that they probably don't have as they're sitting there watching!

Thanks for this, Jacquie!

Read the Full Interview

JANUARY 20 IS MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY



Coming Attractions

• IN THEATRES •

Controlled Damage by Andrea Scott
Neptune Theatre, Halifax, NS, January 14–February 2, 2025.

For Both Resting and Breeding by Adam Meisner
Talk Is Free Theatre, Toronto, ON, January 15–31, 2025.

The Strange and Eerie Memoirs of Billy Wuthergloom by Eric Woolfe
Eldritch Theatre, Toronto, ON, January 29–February 9, 2025.

Perfect on Paper by Marcia Johnson
Talk Is Free Theatre, Barrie, ON, January 30–February 8, 2025.

The Secret to Good Tea by Rosanna Deerchild
Grand Theatre, London, ON, February 18–March 8, 2025.

Casey and Diana by Nick Green
Theatre Aquarius, Hamilton, ON, February 19–March 8, 2025

The New Canadian Curling Club by Mark Crawford
Neptune Theatre, Halifax, NS, February 25–March 23, 2025.

No Big Deal by Michael Kras
Roseneath Theatre, Touring ON, Spring 2025.

Bed and Breakfast by Mark Crawford
Theatre Orangeville, Orangeville, ON, March 13–30, 2025.

Casey and Diana by Nick Green
Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, Winnipeg, MB, March 19–April 12, 2025.

Feast by Guillermo Verdecchia
Tarragon Theatre, Toronto, ON, April 1–27, 2025.

Casey and Diana by Nick Green
Neptune Theatre, Halifax, NS, April 22–May 18, 2025.

Casey and Diana by Nick Green
Arts Club Theatre, Vancouver, BC, April 24–May 25, 2025.

The Runner by Christopher Morris
Harold Green Jewish Theatre, North York, ON, April 26–May 4, 2025.

I'm in Love with Your Sister by Norm Foster
Theatre Orangeville, Orangeville, ON, May 1–18, 2025.

Macbeth: A Tale Told by an Idiot by Eric Woolfe
Eldritch Theatre, Toronto, ON, May 7–18, 2025.

After the Rain by Rose Napoli and Suzy Wilde
Tarragon Theatre, Toronto, ON, May 27–June 22, 2025.

Serving Elizabeth (Reading) by Marcia Johnson
New Stages, Peterborough, ON, June 14, 2025.

• ON SCREEN •

With Love and a Major Organ by Julia Lederer
Starring Anna Maguire, Hamza Haq, and Veena Sood. Finalist for the Grand Jury Prize, 2023 Nashville Film Festival, winner Best Feature Film, Reelworld Film Festival, winner, Best Feature, Canadian Film Festival. Available to rent or buy on Google Play, AppleTV or Amazon Prime.

The Swearing Jar by Kate Hewlett
Starring Adelaide Clemens, Douglas Smith, Patrick J. Adams, and Kathleen Turner. Now streaming on Amazon Prime!

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