

Handsome Alice Em

By **VICTORIA BAILEY**

Launched in April 2016, Calgary's Handsome Alice Theatre devotes itself to "unleashing the female voice through the development, creation and production of theatre works that are inclusive, curious and rebellious."

The company's roots are entwined with those of Urban Curvz, a theatre group that, which, after several years in operation, began the process of reinventing itself in 2015. The result was a new mandate, bringing together a new board and hiring new staff. A key part of the transformation was the hiring of award-winning director, actor and festival curator Kate Newby as artistic producer. Newby's work has appeared on numerous stages across Western Canada.

Christine Clements, who was board chair at the time Newby was hired, describes Newby's role in the creation of Handsome Alice.

"When we hired Kate Newby, we knew we had found someone who wanted to take the company to a whole new level in terms of professionalism and imagination. Kate's vision put us back on the map. We went full throttle and changed everything about ourselves—mission, vision, values, website, name and logo."

The rebrand produced a curious new name for the company, which Clements describes the following way: "There is something about the character of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* that has continued to capture people's imagination since Lewis Carroll created her 150 years ago. She embodies the traits a small independent feminist theatre company needs to make it: perseverance, bravery, curiosity and forthrightness—coupled with wit, intelligence and common sense."

She adds, "[Actor] Tilda Swinton was quoted as saying, 'I would rather be handsome for an hour than pretty for a week,' and that resonated with us."

Embarking on a new vision was not daunting for Newby; rather it was part of the appeal. "The opportunity to build a theatre company basically



Handsome Alice Theatre is poised to celebrate theatre that is inclusive, curious and rebellious. (Photo of Makambe Simamba by Tim Nguyen)

boldens Thespians

from the ground up while providing creative opportunities that support diverse female perspectives is what attracted me,” she says.

Hired in late 2015, Newby reached out to community members and groups—both theatre-focussed and not—to create key partnerships. Her vision, as Newby sees it, is “to honour the female voice through artistic excellence, inclusivity and equity, to achieve financial sustainability and to provide opportunities for artists to create.”

The mandate is intentionally broad, or inclusive.

“Inclusivity allows for the support of women, those who identify as female, and the female side in us all,” she explains. “That’s what I believe has the potential to make this company unique.”

Newby distinguishes between what might be categorized as “women’s theatre” and theatre that focuses on the expression and exploration of the female voice and female experience. “The term ‘women’s theatre’ feels slightly out of touch with a society that is transitioning into a period where identity is defined on a much broader spectrum than ‘man’ or ‘woman,’” she notes.

Jamie Dunsdon, artistic director of Calgary’s Verb Theatre, adds, “Unfortunately, there’s a frighteningly low bar set for the inclusion of female perspectives and voices in theatre. So anytime somebody cares to include those perspectives, it can seem like women’s theatre when, in fact, it’s theatre for everybody.... Why does a story have to be about a man for it to be considered universal?”

Women are still a minority in theatre. According to the group Equity in Theatre, “As artistic directors, directors and playwrights, women in Canada’s professional theatre industry have not yet surpassed the 35-percent employment marker.”

The main challenges for women working in theatre in Canada, according to Newby, are a lack of wage parity, a lack of leadership opportunities, a lack of complex female characters and a lack of diverse female narratives.

In May, Handsome Alice’s first co-production, *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet*, by Ann-Marie Macdonald, marked Newby’s first role as director for the organization. The all-female production, co-produced with Calgary’s Shakespeare Company, was nominated for three local theatre “critter awards.” *The Tall Building*, written by Jill Connell, was staged in September, as well as a co-production of *The Good Bride* by Rosemary Rowe.

The work of Handsome Alice carries on offstage. The company facilitates bimonthly artist salons—gatherings where female theatre makers share, discuss, practise and reflect. The aim is also to connect emerging artists with more established theatre professionals. Dunsdon facilitated one of the salon meetings earlier this year, and she believes salons have great potential.

“Right now, the majority of produced plays are being written by male playwrights, so onstage we’re mostly hearing male voices. Maybe these salons can be a place where women know their voices will be heard. There have only been three so far, so I’m looking forward to seeing where they go.”

Handsome Alice is also collaborating in a partnership with Calgary Sexual Health Centre and Mount Royal University called inVISIBLE, a project aimed at creating a theatre production by, about and for young women. Focusing on examining issues of identity and gender, inVISIBLE is led by local theatre artists with support from professional counsellors. A multimedia performance is scheduled for 2017.

Jamie Konchak, an artist participating in inVISIBLE, says the partnership is generating benefits for all participants: “Creating opportunities, like this project, is essential if we are to learn from one another and if we are to grow together. It gives us all a chance to open our awareness to the experiences of the women around us.”

Newby describes theatre as a powerful means of communication. “It is a shared experience between artist and community that also has the potential to be deeply personal. I find something extraordinarily profound about a group of strangers gathering together to experience the unfolding of story.”

Konchak agrees. “To feel a part of something strong and positive and rich with possibility is a powerful sensation. To feel scared and small and diminished are also powerful sensations—and I think there are too many places where those fears are confirmed. I strive to be a part of more projects of female power and possibility.”

In the dictionary, the word “handsome” is said to include attributes such as attractive, skilled, striking, impressive and substantial. Indeed, by combining these traits with the adventurous spirit of its namesake Alice, Handsome Alice Theatre seems poised to make and to celebrate theatre that is inclusive, curious and rebellious for years to come. ❀

To find out more about Handsome Alice Theatre visit www.handsomealice.com.