



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Drama is most certainly not a flourishing genre in Canadian Literature: Allison McWood interfacing

R.P. Singh

Allison McWood is a full-time, multi award-winning playwright, screenwriter and librettist from Ontario, Canada, who takes a particular interest in farce and satire. Allison holds an honours degree in English Literature from York University in Toronto, with a specialisation in Renaissance Drama. She also spent two years studying Playwriting and Dramaturgy through York's Department of Theatre and received a diploma from the Institute of Children's Literature. To date, she has written more than 30 plays and more than 20 feature screenplays, with a character count of more than 1000. Her plays have been produced across Canada and have received national and international acclaim, both theatrically and academically. In addition to playwriting, she has also worked for multiple seasons as a production dramaturge for Canadian, Shakespeare companies. Her book, Scribble Guys, a children's story about racism, was published in 2005 and endorsed by the ERACE Foundation (Eliminating Racism and Creating Equality). Scribble Guys was also featured at the 2005 Martin Luther King Day Celebration in Franklin, Tennessee. Currently, Allison is working with film producers from Hollywood, Paris, London, Toronto and New Delhi

R.P. Singh: It is generally understood that, drama is not a flourishing and popular genre in Canadian literature. Your comments for our readers?

Allison McWood: I am saddened to admit that Drama is most certainly not a flourishing genre in Canadian Literature. There is no shortage of talent in Canada, and that is where the tragedy lies. On the contrary, Canada has an eclectic array of diverse artists who are distinctly charming, delightfully quirky, sharp-witted, intelligent and wildly entertaining. Most of these artists will never have a platform. Politics is the enemy of art. Canadian dramatists are completely dependent on government funding in order to finance their writing and productions. However, the Canadian government controls what we write about, how we write it, the genre in which we write and even our creative process. Thus, we run the risk of our art being entirely the same, not unlike art in Communist countries. Canadian playwrights must meet a specific profile, outlined by the government. If one does not meet this profile, one will not acquire funding. In a country as diverse as Canada, I find it confusing that the government would put restrictions on who is allowed to tell their story. It is disgraceful.

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

As a result of strict government funding criteria, Canadian plays have developed a reputation of being dark, morbid, depressing and (forgive me) immensely unenjoyable. What the government approves of and what audiences crave do not coincide. Canadians are known for their unique sense of humour, so one would guess that comedy would be a lucrative commodity in The Great White North. But no. Comedy is a doomed craft in Canadian Theatre. It is very unusual for a comedic play to be funded by the Canadian government – unless, of course, it is the sort of comedy that is not funny. So we have a nationwide audience that wants very much to laugh and be entertained, but we have nothing to satiate it. Most comedy plays are produced independently, and simply don't have the visibility of higher budget shows. To complicate matters further, Canadian theatre critics are notorious for telling people not to attend plays, thus singlehandedly lowering the rank of Toronto theatre from third in the world to perhaps last. So where do all these comedic dramatists go? Anywhere but Canada, but mostly the United States. Thus Canadian talent is annexed by other countries, leaving Canada with no credit at all for brilliant, Canadian art.

Additionally, Canada does not celebrate its playwrights the way other countries do. I noticed during my travels in Paris that street names and even neighbourhoods are named in honour of writers. I remember writing a postcard to my little nephew, telling him that 'Paris should tell Canada to treat its writers better.' If Canada does not take pride in its dramatists, how can other countries be expected to recognise and respect them? Or even to know who they are? Not long ago, a playwriting colleague wrote an article about the lack of dramatic publications in Canada. She maintained that with publication comes respect and permanency. Because few Canadian plays are published, they are always treated as incomplete works and the productions are subject to change by the director, cast and crew of the theatre production. Novelists, on the other hand, can hold a tangible, published book in their hand, like a trophy. Canadian playwrights, however, are forgotten the moment the curtain comes down on closing night.

R.P.SINGH : Please enlighten our readers about your literary enterprise.

Allison McWood: I studied English Literature at York University in Toronto, with a specialisation in Renaissance Drama. Concurrently, I studied Playwriting and Dramaturgy through York's Department of Theatre. During my final two years in University, I was steeped in Marlovian Studies, as I completed my honours thesis on the subject of Christopher Marlowe and the conspiracy surrounding his death. My academic writings have been discussed by the Marlovian Society of America and my Marlovian plays have received international acclaim. I also hold a college diploma in Children's Literature. After graduation, I worked for several years as a production dramaturge for Shakespeare companies, and my plays have been produced across Canada. I also wrote a children's book about racism which was endorsed by the ERACE Foundation and featured at the 2005 Martin Luther King Day Celebration in Franklin, Tennessee.

R.P. Singh: What is the inspiration behind your writing?

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Allison McWood: My inspiration comes from a variety of different things. My passion for Renaissance Drama inspired my various plays involving Elizabethan playwrights. Travelling to different countries provides inspiration for exciting story settings. Naturally, reading great literature keeps my creative instincts sharp. (P.G. Wodehouse comes to mind.) However, one of my greatest sources of inspiration is music. I particularly love upbeat music, which is incredibly important to anyone who wants to write comedy. Fast tempo and succinct rhythm mirror the craft of comedic writing; comedy being defined by its speed and cadence much like the composition of a song. I am inspired by the deep spirituality of U2. I am charmed by the upbeat and playful aspects of 1950's Rock and Roll. I am intrigued by the cunning rhythm and clever lyrics of Swiss musician, Marco Bliggendorfer (aka Bligg), whose music can be both fantastically uplifting and at times, beautifully heartbreaking.

R.P. Singh: How far does your play *Shakespeare's Brain* relate to the poet William Shakespeare and the Elizabethan era in English literature?

Allison McWood: The character of Shakespeare in *Shakespeare's Brain* is completely imagined, which is the case for all the plays I have written about him. Despite his fame, Shakespeare was a relatively private man, so we know very little about him other than trivial details. Imagining what Shakespeare was like as a person is absolutely tantalising for me. Sure, we think we know him based on his writings, but have you ever thought about what it might be like to play checkers with him and talk about mundane things? That is the entire premise of the play. I was ridiculing the over-analysis of Shakespeare's work. While studying in University, my friends and I would often have that conversation – *What if Shakespeare walked into one of our lectures and heard us talking about his plays?* The concept was just too delicious so I simply had to write a play about it. Actually, the play itself was originally written for one of my best friends as a wedding gift. My friend said that instead of giving him a salad spinner, he wished for me to write a play reflecting our friendship, to be performed at his wedding reception. Since I met my friend in a Playwriting class, he used to refer to me as *Will*, and I affectionately called him *Kit*. Thus, *Shakespeare's Brain* materialised. After my friend's wedding, the play went on to win awards, was published and produced in several venues across Canada.

R.P. Singh: Further, can we find any correlation between *It was Kit: The TRUE Story of Christopher Marlowe* and the historical playwright Christopher Marlowe?

Allison McWood: If we know little about Shakespeare, we know even less about the mysterious Christopher Marlowe. In school, we are taught that Marlowe was notorious, dangerous, a loose cannon, even a scandalous criminal! The reality is we only know what others have written about him. Finding personal memoirs of this elusive man is virtually impossible. Also, Queen Elizabeth the First instigated a massive book burning campaign, destroying most of Marlowe's work and any personal writings he may have left behind. It seems we have been misguided and victimised by an early form of media propaganda. If you dig deeper, you will find accounts from Marlowe's friends (notably Thomas Nash), who claim

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

that Marlowe was a decent and well-liked man with lots of friends who adored him. He was funny. He was social. He had an excellent sense of style. He was brutally honest and incredibly brave. He stood up for what he believed in. And despite the fact that he had a lofty education from the prestigious Cambridge University, he associated with uneducated people, looking upon everyone as a potential friend. It seems he lacked the pompous edge of the many other university wits of his age.

I wrote *It Was Kit* out of necessity. I was working on my thesis, trying to either prove or disprove Marlowe's innocence in the charges that were laid against him. No such evidence existed. It seemed as though someone, (perhaps the Queen Elizabeth the First) was trying to hide the truth, leaving conspicuous, gaping holes in the story. Instead of merely speculating and proving nothing with my thesis, I asked my professor if I could write a play, instead of an academic paper, to highlight how little we do know about Christopher Marlowe. Every event in the play was inspired by a true event in history, but instead of taking the plot directly from the history books, I used farce as a literary device to prompt the audience to question everything we *think* we know about Marlowe.

So to answer your question, the Marlowe character in *It Was Kit* is a product of my warped imagination. I wrote him the way I want him to be; that is to say, the opposite of what the Queen wanted us to think about him. Perhaps I am right and Marlowe's soul is nodding in approval somewhere, grateful that someone finally defended his honour. We will never know.

R.P. Singh: Tell us the contexts and connotations of your play *The Embarrassing Life of King Ficklefred*.

Allison McWood: *The Embarrassing Life of King Ficklefred* is a play for children, intended to introduce Shakespeare to a young audience. In particular, the play references Shakespeare's history plays, which are often not taught at the elementary level. Shakespeare appears as a peripheral character in the play, observing a ridiculously flawed king as inspiration for a new play. I explored the theme of 'to thine own self be true,' encouraging children to embrace their unique qualities and not to be afraid to be themselves. When the absurd king finds out he is the subject for Shakespeare's next play, he quickly attempts to garner the respect of his disgusted subjects. The plan backfires, causing the kingdom to become too perfect. Hence, the kingdom is no longer interesting enough to be in a play.

R.P. Singh: Your audience finds your inclination in farce and satire. Any particular interest towards it?

Allison McWood: Comedy is my passion. Laughter is the sound of happiness. When I hear a theatre fill up with laughter, and I know that I made that sound happen, the emotions I feel cannot be described. When there are say, 200 people in a theatre and they all laugh together, there are 200 individual sounds which blend together like a harmonious symphony – the laughter becomes one sound. Comedy connects people and makes them forget their problems for a short time. I can think of no other sound as beautiful or as spiritual. When I

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hear laughter, I become anxious to begin another project just so I can hear the beautiful symphony again.

Satire, I suppose was an inevitable direction for me, given my sardonic perspective of the world and the extremely sarcastic family I grew up in. I perceive issues such as injustice, intolerance, bigotry, abuse, inequality, corruption, manipulation and other social and political indecencies to be utterly absurd, and despite my parents' efforts to teach me manners, I cannot resist the urge to blurt out the truth (much to my family's embarrassment). When I started to experiment with satire, I realised that entertaining people makes a bigger impact than merely screaming yourself hoarse. I discovered this in one of my early satirical plays when I accidentally started a boycott of a major corporation (oops).

Farce, on the other hand, I stumbled upon accidentally. While studying playwriting in university, I was under a lot of pressure to maintain my place in the highly competitive Playwriting program. I thought the only way to do this was to write what other Canadian playwrights were writing – depressing, minimalist plays about hopelessness, emotional agony, alienation and despair. I was not very good at that. I wrote what I thought was a nice, little existential piece with just the right amount of dark undertones and disturbing themes, and brought it to my class to be workshopped by actors. The whole class, including the professor, fell out of their seats laughing at my play. Even the actors could not get through the scene without gasping for air as they howled with laughter. I was horrified. I thought they were making fun of me. My professor told the class that my play was a *farce* and I told her she did not have to be so mean about it. I had no idea it was a compliment. My professor told the class that I had mastered the most difficult genre of writing at the age of 22. I did not know I was writing farce because at the time, I did not know what farce was. After some research, I learned that farce is essentially *tragedy performed very quickly*. So the quick tempo of my writing turned my depressing play into a wildly entertaining piece of art. With that knowledge, I began reading and admiring writers such as Georges Feydeau, Moliere, P.G. Wodehouse and the like. With full understanding of the genre, farce writing is truly a liberating experience, as limitless as imagination.

R.P. Singh: And the same question for your fascination with Renaissance drama.

Allison McWood: I read my first Shakespeare play (*Twelfth Night*) in the ninth grade, and I was instantly enamoured. However, my choice to pursue Renaissance Drama as an area of study was purely accidental. I initially studied Canadian Drama, thinking it would be helpful as I wanted to be a Canadian playwright. To make a long story short, I was bored. All the plays on the reading lists were so similar and the same three essay topics were assigned for every assignment. The following year, I took a compulsory Shakespeare class, and I was inspired in a way I never was in my Canadian Drama classes. I felt as though I had been reunited with my one true love after having been in an unhappy relationship for a year. Despite the antiquity of Renaissance Drama, the themes, stories and characters remain fresh and relevant, even in modern times. And the words in Renaissance plays are so delicious to read aloud, rolling so elegantly off the tongue – they are words one can almost taste.

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Actually, this question reminds me of when I was interviewed by a Torontonian periodical when *It Was Kit* made its Toronto debut. The interview only had one question, so I had to make sure my answer left an impression. The question was this: *'The English Renaissance is for nerds and losers. Why would anyone want to see your play?'* I didn't have much time to reply, so I said, *'Apparently, Toronto disagrees with you. Have you tried to get a ticket to my show? It's impossible!'* I admit, that was a bit cocky, but the interviewer should have known better than to ask a satirist such an idiotic question. To conclude, passion is contagious. If you truly love what you do, people will love what you do as well.

R.P. Singh: In your view, what did Shakespeare's contemporaries really think about him?

Allison McWood: This is difficult to know for sure. We can only assume that Shakespeare was respected to some degree, based on how prolific he was. However, as I mentioned earlier, his life was relatively private. It is generally understood that Shakespeare found a friend in Christopher Marlowe, despite their differences in personality, education and writing. (I do not, however, believe that Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's plays, as that is much too convenient.) So I like to imagine that Shakespeare was an agreeable man who easily made friends, but that is speculation.

On the other hand, Shakespeare did have one known enemy. Robert Greene is best known for being the theatre critic who said that Shakespeare would not amount to anything, complaining that Shakespeare, with only a grammar school education, was stealing audiences from more deserving, university-educated playwrights like Greene himself. I imagine that Shakespeare and Greene would not be able to stand the sight of each other, and it would be interesting to be a fly on the wall during a well-versed argument between these two.

R.P.SINGH : Tell us your thematic concerns.

Allison McWood: I have explored many themes in my repertoire. My answer to this question would probably be different, depending on when you ask me. I usually prefer to write themes that appeal to a broad audience. I strive to exploit evil – not in a way that buries the audience in a hole of despair, but in a way that empowers the audience to connect with one another as human beings and make the world better together. And of course, I want the audience to leave the theatre feeling uplifted, entertained and excited about what they just saw.

R.P. Singh: Which character from your plays is dearer to you, and why?

Allison McWood: This is a very difficult question, much like asking me which of my children I love the most! I have written more than one thousand characters, so it would take me a while to recall every single one. Since we are on the topic, I would have to say that Kit Marlowe from *It Was Kit* is among my favourites. I am very proud of him. I remember writing the first draft and even though I knew Kit was going to die, I was very emotional when it

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came time to write his death scene. I recall going through a kind of grieving process. In a way, it was like losing a good friend. I do not want to spoil the ending of the play for our readers, but there is a surprise at the end that reflects my reluctance to let Kit go.

R.P. Singh: Could you share your views on cross-cultural and inter-genre overlapping in the postmodern scenario?

Allison Mc Wood: Cross-cultural overlapping of contemporary art makes excellent sense. With the rise of the international travel, internet and other media outlets, cultures are constantly influencing each other and learning from one another. Art reflects the struggles, triumphs and relevant issues of the time we live in. Therefore, it is necessary for cultural overlapping to exist. Postmodernism, by its very definition, questions artistic constructs, so in this regard, there is a place for inter-genre overlapping. Stories should most definitely have a strong structure, but if we do not explore alternatives, perhaps a new and more exciting genre will go undiscovered. Audiences generally crave new stories, not so much stories that are recycled or constricted by formula.

R.P. Singh: Allison, tell us something about your future projects?

Allison McWood: The future of Canadian theatre is unstable at best. The most prudent option I have right now is to get as many irons in the fire as I can, all in different disciplines. So in addition to playwriting, I am also doing a lot of screenwriting and writing books for children.

R.P. Singh: Share with us your upcoming and in-hand projects?

Allison McWood: Currently, I am working on two musicals for the stage. The first is a winsome musical comedy about Hell. The second takes place in Ireland during the Potato Famine, and contains traditional Irish music. I am also working as a screenwriter with film producers from Hollywood, New York, Paris, London, Toronto and New Delhi. In addition, I am in negotiations to write a children's television program about Shakespeare. Several more of my children's books are also slated for publication in the next couple of years.

R.P. Singh: Finally, would you comment on the state of Canadian literature in world literary scenario?

Allison McWood: Considering the amount of literary talent in Canada, it is frustrating that we are not as involved in the world literary scenario as we could be. Many Canadian writers remain in obscurity while American and British writers seem to be much more well-known. There are many reasons for this. Morale among Canadian writers is incredibly low, mainly because we are not celebrated or taken as seriously as writers in other countries. Little to no art funding in our country not only limits the amount of visibility writers achieve, but also manipulates writers into thinking our work is less valuable than literature throughout the rest of the world. I regard Canadian literature as more of a support group than an industry. Our writers literally segregate themselves. Canadian writers write for Canadians, seek out

'Drama is most certainly not a flourishing genre in Canadian Literature': Allison McWood interfacing. R.P. Singh.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Canadian platforms and receive awards that are only recognised in Canada. This is all fine. However, when are we going to reach past the Canadian border and share our stories with the rest of the world? I think Canadian literature would be widely accepted and loved if others simply knew about us. Until Canada starts taking artists more seriously, we will never be taken seriously on a cultural, creative and literary level in the world literary scenario.

R.P. Singh teaches at the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow (India). He has published two anthologies and six books, including Mosaic to Salad Bowl: Essays on Canadian Writing (Book Shelf, 2011), and Sui Generis Alliance: G.B. Shaw and Fabianism (Book Shelf, 2011). His creative writing includes three English plays: Flea Market and other Plays (Orientalia, 2014), When Brancho Flies (Orientalia, 2014) and Ecologue (Orientalia, 2013), and Hindi plays. He is currently working on two more plays.

Academically he has published a large number of journal articles, book chapters and encyclopedia entries in cultural studies. Apart from this, he has worked on different projects, fellowships and programs of the University Grants Commission, the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, the Indian Council for Social Science Research, the Indian Council for Philosophical Research, the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, F.M.S.H., France, and H.S.B., Hungary.

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Writers in Conversation Vol. 2 no. 2, August 2015
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/