

Kicker: Developing the Child

Header: Allen MacInnis Adopts a 40 Year-old

By Dave Carley

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Things were definitely not okay at the old corral. By 2001, Young People's Theatre (YPT), housed in the renovated former City of Toronto transit stables, was on the financial and artistic ropes. And when the YPT Board announced it was changing the theatre's name to 'Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People' (LKTYP) the community was shocked. The name change was the result of a \$1.5 million donation from businessman Kevin Kimsa, but for many, the cash was irrelevant.

The rebranding of the theatre (which quickly and derisively came to be referred to as 'Licktip') was only part of the problem. YPT was stumbling along with a whopping deficit. A reduction in the number of shows geared to non-school audiences had diminished its public profile and, artistically, a theatre that was once seen as a creative equal of any in town was now being ignored (at best) by critics. For a TYA venue, ticket prices were discouragingly high; at \$29 a pop, a family of four attending a Saturday matinee could be set back nearly \$120.

But every theatre tale worth its salt has a hero. Out of Canada's near-west strode Allen MacInnis, a lanky artistic sheriff determined to set things right in the TYA end of Hogtown. The ever-diplomatic MacInnis says he found the theatre in a "somewhat tricky, transitional phase." He concedes that the rebranding of the theatre was awkward but insists, "That Kimsa cash was critical. The company would have closed without it. Yes, it was bad public relations but the money to save the place had to come from somewhere and if the theatre community had known exactly how dire things were, they'd have applauded the name change."

Founded in 1966 by Susan Rubes, YPT had forged a national reputation for the quality of its work and breadth of its vision. Previous artistic directors had made a habit of hiring Canada's top directors and commissioning innovative playwrights such as John Lazarus, Dennis Foon, Mordecai Richler, Michael O'Brien and Paula Wing. At its best YPT had been producing work that was engaged and engaging, must-see theatre to which you could, coincidentally, bring young people.

Meanwhile, the Edmonton-born and raised MacInnis was attending the University of Alberta during the tenure of David Barnet, an alternative-theatre radical in the Drama Department. From Barnet he inherited the belief that theatre should be a vehicle for social change. "That's where I was at as a 19 year-old," says MacInnis, "And that's where I am now."

Over the next three decades, MacInnis went from participating in the start-up of Edmonton's Catalyst Theatre, to Artistic Associate at Alberta Theatre Projects, where he set up youth programs, to coast-to-coast freelance directing and then, in 1996, to Prairie Theatre Exchange. Towards the end of his PTE artistic directorship, the rumour mill began pegging him to take the helm of any one of a number of prominent theatres - but MacInnis wasn't looking for a sinecure. "It's easier to take over a place that needs to change than one that just has to stay the course." LKTYP seemed the perfect challenge.

At his LKTYP interview, MacInnis was asked to describe his vision in two words, and he replied "child development". He says, "The centre of our work is to use theatre to impact the emotional social and intellectual health of children." He believes that programming for children carries with it a distinct set of responsibilities. "Since we are required to be mindful of what is appropriate then I believe every play must have a purpose. It can be as simple as telling three year-olds that it's great to be alive – or as sophisticated as creating a theatrical form to teach that different people look at different things from different starting points – and not only is it important to accept that, it's also not necessary to abandon one's own point of view to do so."

MacInnis waited a couple of seasons before tackling the \$29 tickets. Working with the energetic support of his new Managing Director, Nancy Webster, they agreed to celebrate LKTYP's 40th anniversary in 2005-6 by dropping ticket prices by 40%. On the surface it seemed both ballsy and economically foolish, but the gamble paid off immediately, with ticket sales increasing by 24% in the first year. MacInnis admits that declining sales had meant that the theatre was already furiously discounting its top-priced tickets. But with the reduced rates, a psychological barrier to attendance was smashed. MacInnis and Webster next did something else which seems (in retrospect) utterly logical, but had not been tried before – they instituted different prices for children and adults.

LKTYP currently has a full-time staff of 33 and hires over 50 actors a year. Respect from critics and peers has returned; LKTYP's recent hits include the eco-spectacle *Blue Planet*, Michael Miller's *In The Freedom of Dreams - the Story of Nelson Mandela*, Emil Sher's adaptation of *Hana's Suitcase* and, currently, *i think i can*, a dance piece about bullying conceived by Florence Gibson and Shawn Byfield. The theatre is now selling 70-80,000 tickets a year but MacInnis gets quite steamed if it is suggested that the real value of those sales is to build the audience for tomorrow for (presumably "more legitimate") adult theatres. "I am not creating the audience of tomorrow," he says. "Hell no, I'm not doing this for Marty Bragg (artistic director of nearby CanStage). Kids are real audiences, right now."

Despite the new stability, there are some serious clouds on LKTYP's horizon. School subsidies are, at best, static. There is growing competition from many sources for school audiences, including non-Equity touring companies. And there is also a sense that LKTYP is constrained by the very thing that gives it such civic prominence – the real estate. The converted horse stables has a very large, 468-seat mainstage and a very small studio space, which seats at most 120 on risers. The Studio is too small to make money and must also be used for rehearsals and classroom; it is often necessary to rent rehearsal space in the neighbourhood. LKTYP's downtown location means confronting parking issues – and Toronto's notorious gridlock. One morning snowstorm can wipe out a performance if the incoming schoolbuses are stuck on the Don Valley Parkway. And

there is always the fear of a teachers' strike; even a rumour of labour trouble affects ticket sales dramatically.

The good news is, these are the kind of challenges that MacInnis and Co. likes. LKTYP's western saviour (and his deputy, Webster) thrive on problem-solving and, so far, they have managed well. Torontonians might still nickname the theatre on Front Street as 'Licktip', but now it's pronounced with respect.