

CULTIVATING CONVERSATION

An Interview with Artistic Director of Green Thumb Theatre, **Patrick McDonald**

Actors (L-R) Ella Simon and Aslam Husain in *500 WORDS* (2011) by Jamie Norris. Photo by Emily Cooper

For more than 40 years, Green Thumb Theatre has been a driving force in theatre for young people in Canada and internationally. Green Thumb has done more than 100 productions, exploring an extensive scope of contemporary topics including: Internet safety; consent and personal relationships; racism; mental illness; and simply being different.

Since its inception, Green Thumb has been planting seeds of curiosity in young viewers through innovative performance art, with the hope of sparking meaningful conversations.

We sat down with Patrick McDonald, Artistic Director of Green Thumb Theatre since 1988, and asked him about the roots of Green Thumb, their impact over the last 40 years, and their mission to get young people talking.

by
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How did Green Thumb Theatre come to be?

PM: Green Thumb Theatre started in 1975, by a group of theatre and writing students that graduated from UBC. A lot of Canadian theatres started around then because there was a grant program that provided university students with start-up money for different enterprises.

It would have been in 1979, a play called *HILARY'S BIRTHDAY*, produced by Green Thumb and written by Joe Wisenfeld, that really changed the direction of theatre for young people and the work that Green Thumb produced. Prior to *HILARY'S BIRTHDAY*, most plays for young people were of the fairy tale variety. *HILARY'S BIRTHDAY* deals with a 10-year-old girl whose parents are going through a divorce on her birthday. It was focused on a real social issue and

was dealt with very sensitively. It was a big deal: it was unlike anything that had been seen before.

With the success and recognition from *HILARY'S BIRTHDAY*, Green Thumb evolved and became not only a provincial and national leader, but, an international leader in developing and producing plays on social issues for elementary students, and eventually for high school students and young adults.

What is Green Thumb's mission? Why is Green Thumb's work important?

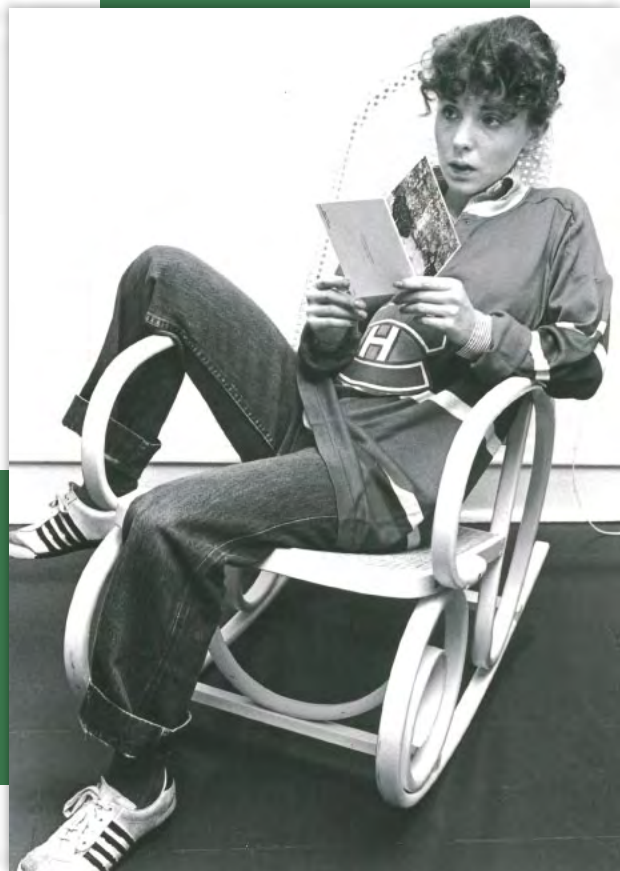
PM: Green Thumb Theatre is really about creating world class theatre that can be shared across Canada. That's always been a part of our mandate — to tour entire provinces and get the show out to as many young people as possible. Our shows never want to be didactic. We've never in our entire history told the

student what they should do. First and foremost, it's just entertainment. But it's entertainment based on a social issue.

For example, you yourself, may never have any trouble with Internet safety but, lo and behold, there are those quiet students who are being bullied on the Internet. So, a play on Internet safety may give them an opportunity to speak to someone about it. It may liberate them to think, *'hey, I'm not alone in this'*.

Over the years, I have received hundreds to thousands of letters and comments from students who have seen our shows, and the common thread is: *'Thank you very much for your play. It made me realize I'm not the only person dealing with this'*. Or more briefly, *'That's it. That's my story'*. We're just one 40-minute window and we want to make that an important 40-minute window.

There's a Green Thumb solo show called *STILL/FALLING*, written by Rachel Aberle. It's about a 15-year-old girl who really has everything going in life: upper-middle-class, has mobility, and all that kind of stuff. She has one sibling and they're going to be moving to Vancouver. She makes friends at school, and she's a really good creative writer — that's her thing, writing — but she's completely overwhelmed by anxiety and depression. Rather than talking about it, she does her best to hide it from everybody.



HILARY'S BIRTHDAY (1979) by Joe Wisenfeld. Actor Ruth Smilie. Photo courtesy of Green Thumb Theatre.

"We're just one 40-minute window and we want to make that an important 40-minute window."

What we really wanted to do was to get anxiety and depression onto the conversational floor. Let's face it and not hide it. It's a heavy show. Well, the first show that we did was at an all-girls high school — there were about 300 students in the audience. After the show was finished — other than the sounds of a bit of sobbing — all you could hear was a pin drop. I thought to myself, *'they're going to think we've gone too far, right?'*

It turns out that on the day of the performance, nine girls went to the counselor's office, seeking help for anxiety and depression, and not one of the nine had ever been red-flagged by staff before. The school wanted to say thank you, because these girls are now getting the help they need and deserve.

Is there a Green Thumb production that is especially important to you?

PM: We developed a show about a 10-year-old girl, named Celeste, who has Asperger's. In the show, she's building a rocket ship in her backyard to go back to her home, planet 'Celestia', because she's being bullied at school. It's called **CELESTIAL BEING**, written by Dave Deveau. And why is that production closer to me? Because I have an adopted daughter and she has Asperger's. So yeah, it's her story to a degree. This one to me, at the core of it — at the core of all of the shows probably — is friendship and communication.

You don't have to say that you're different because you have Asperger's — you just happen to be different! And that's the point of that story: we're all different, and it's a gift. It's not holding Celeste back. She's one



CELESTIAL BEING (2014) by Dave Deveau. Actors (L-R) Jordan Jenkins and Katey Hoffman. Set, Props and Costume by Drew Facey. Photo by Moonrider Productions.

of the most creative 10-year olds you'll ever meet! It's just that for certain things, her mind takes more time to figure out and adjust.

In theory, she goes to space in the rocket ship that she built — she's escaping the world! Yet not one kid, out of thousands and tens of thousands who have seen that play, have ever gone: *'Was she really in space?'* No, they believe it. They believe it because the production was strong enough and kids want to believe that is what was actually happening.

How do you see Green Thumb's work, and, more broadly, performance art being used as an educational tool?

PM: We want the shows to have huge lives beyond Green Thumb — these are not one-off shows. We

also want educators and students to begin to be able to differentiate between a so-so show and a really good show. Sometimes, as creators, we mystify what theatre is. And because there isn't enough of it, the general public can feel that they don't have the lexicon to discuss it.

I don't know what we've done culturally to create this, but people are in fear of how to talk about a play. We may have gotten away from just discussing a play and put too much emphasis on *what's the educational value*, or *what's the message*. Rather than framing it as: it's just 40 minutes with your fellow students and teachers to share a story — and there's nothing wrong with that. I think we need to drive ourselves back to that position.

Imagine if you took your cousin to a movie and you got in your car afterwards. You would just casually start talking about the movie and it wouldn't faze you. But because we've put such an emphasis on the message

and the education value, kids are afraid they're going to get the message wrong, rather than just talking about it. All of Green Thumb's productions do come with a study guide that includes activities and resources to help teachers and students with having those conversations — inside and outside the classroom.

People have often said to me, '*You're building tomorrow's audience!*'. And I say, '*No, adult theatres can find their own audience. I'm just dealing with the audience today*'. My job is to make sure the audience is engaged and entertained to give them a little bit of subject matter to chew on.

We don't even necessarily need to worry about what discussion we'll have with them. We just need to talk. I think that will make our culture richer and I think we'll make all of our students richer in many, many ways.

STILL/FALLING (2015) by Rachel Aberle featuring actor Olivia Hutt. Set by Ken MacDonald. Props and Costume by Tina Ozols. Photo by Moonrider Productions.



“For students, the opportunity to observe the process of production development and also provide feedback on performances was truly an amazing artistic opportunity and one which definitely impacted students as they moved on to High School.

Partnerships like the one we enjoyed with Green Thumb need to be developed more often, as the positive, reciprocal benefits to both the school community and the outside agency are immeasurable.”

Tim Krug, SD39 Principal, John Norquay Elementary

DERWENT IS DIFFERENT (2000) by Jamie Norris. Actor Allan Zinyk. Photo by Green Thumb Theatre.



Green Thumb Theatre is currently pivoting and planning adaptive programming in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keep an eye on their website greenthumb.bc.ca or email touring@greenthumb.bc.ca to learn more!



Special thanks to Patrick McDonald and Green Thumb Theatre. After a distinguished 32-year tenure, Patrick will be passing the reins and retiring at the end of 2020.

Award-winning theatre artist Rachel Aberle has been appointed as the next Artistic Director of Green Thumb Theatre, effective January 1, 2021.



THE CODE (2018) cast during an interview (L-R) Actors Joe Rose, Elizabeth Barrett, and Teo Saefkow. Set by Ruth Bruhn. Photo by Green Thumb Theatre.