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Dora-nominated director Ashlie Corcoran on her workaholic life

J. Kelly Nestruck

From May to October, Ashlie Corcoran runs the idyllic Thousand Islands Playhouse on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River in Gananoque, Ont., but she doesn't spend the rest of the year hibernating.

This winter, the Dora-nominated director has three shows at three different theatres in Toronto. *The Gay Heritage Project* was the first out of the gate at Buddies in Bad Times – and now heads out on tour to the Citadel Theatre in Alberta this month and The Cultch and the Belfry Theatre in Corcoran's home province of British Columbia in March. J. Kelly Nestruck spoke with Corcoran at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto.

You've been working with these three men – Damien Atkins, Paul Dunn and Andrew Kushnir – on a show about the idea of gay heritage. Were you brought in to be the straight eye for the queer guys?

Usually, in my experience as a director, I have come into the first day of rehearsal with a lot of information about the piece itself – the history, the style, the context. This piece is quite different because they had already done four years of research. I was not an expert on queer theory or history. I was also, importantly, not an expert on vocal masque.

What is vocal masque?

It's a style where the creators are writing on their feet. It's very athletic and energetic. It can be quite fantastical – for instance, the HIV virus is a character in the play – and very personal. Really what they were looking for was that outside eye – to just respond. And it was through those responses that we then started to work together on the overall structure.

Obviously, the show has been a big success at Buddies where it was just remounted. How will the show change as it tours to theatres without a specifically queer mandate in Edmonton, Vancouver and Victoria?

We really thought a lot about the Western audiences who would be seeing the piece and wanted them to feel like they were included in it as well. So we did re-examine some scenes to do that. There is a joke in the show about straight audiences watching shows at Buddies – and every night, that gets one of the biggest laughs. I think the piece is incredibly accessible.

You're staying in Toronto – and directing Kat Sandler's new play *Mustard* at Tarragon Theatre in February. How did you two come together?

It was matchmaking. But Kat and I had a pen-pal relationship before this, because I was curious about her. The things we share in common is, from an aesthetic point of view, a desire for incredibly pacey, quick shows – and comedy. *Mustard* is a family dramedy colliding with a Roald Dahl/Lemony Snicket, magical/scary/child-like world. It's that collision of the two styles that really excites me.

Then you move to the German play *Das Ding* at Canadian Stage. I remember being at the first reading – your indie company Theatre Smash commissioned the translation, right?

Philipp Löhle is definitely one of Germany's most prolific young playwrights. This play has had a lot of success, but hadn't yet had an English translation – and we've not only translated it, but are also adapting it to take place partly in Toronto.

***Das Ding* is about a cotton seed that eventually becomes part of a T-shirt – and all the people it crosses paths with. What is it that attracts you to German scripts like this and *The Ugly One*, which you were nominated for a Dora for directing?**

Both plays are talking about really big ideas – narcissism in *The Ugly One*, and globalization and the way we misconstrue how we are connected to each other in *Das Ding*. And they talk about them in incredibly theatrical ways – ways in which the form of the play and content of the play are interlinked. So with *Das Ding*, it feels rambling and a bit messy and a bit hard to grasp everything – and that is also a reflection of what the play is about.

So if reviewers say *Das Ding* feels a bit messy and rambling, you'll take it as a compliment?

I will. But hopefully, reviewers say it's feels a bit messy and rambling in a way that connects with the story that is being told.

It was also just announced that you'll be reviving *The Magic Flute* at the Canadian Opera Company in 2017. You'll be the only woman directing at the COC next season and one of only two Canadians. What's more of an obstacle to breaking into the world of opera direction?

There are definitely more male opera directors than female opera directors. I don't necessarily think of that as an obstacle, but it is something that I've noticed. As for being Canadian, there are not multitudes of opportunities to get your hands dirty as an opera director in Canada. I feel really fortunate that the COC has offered me stepping stones of experience – from being in the young artist program, to directing their young artists, to directing their school tours.

In addition to all this work in Toronto – you run the Thousand Islands Playhouse. You directed four of your eight shows there last season. Are you a workaholic?

Yes. Yep. I have a strong work ethic – I guess I like to think of it more that way than being a workaholic. And right now in my career, I'm getting to do everything that I really want to do and I feel lucky and fortunate and blessed.