

Some questions for Kristen Thomson
Asked by Sasha Singer-Wilson
At R Squared Espresso Bar, Queen West, Toronto
On Monday, August 5th, 2013 at 3:13pm.

SSW: How does Toronto inform your work?

KT: I moved to Toronto after high school. I did a year of volunteer work with an organization called Katimavik and I worked in Toronto working with The Ontario Public Research Group doing basic information gathering about U of T so that they could start the first recycling program! It's very cool. I loved being in Toronto and I loved my experience so that's why I moved here. Sometimes you get so far inside your perspective it's hard to know what's outside of your perspective, so I would probably, I probably don't know the answer to that question. I do know, when I have had the experience of performing my work in other environments, I've travelled across Canada to perform *I, Claudia*, and I felt the response to the play was very familiar. But when I was asked to send the play to the States or at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the response was very unfamiliar. I thought "oh, I guess I'm some sort of Canadian or Torontonion in some way that I'm not aware of..." Where some of it is, something about my perspective seemed to work here that didn't work elsewhere or wasn't as accessible somewhere else. Having said that, there was a lady that did the show in South Africa, and it seemed to go well for her so... I don't know.

SSW: How does being an actor inform being a writer?

KT: I would say... The truth is, I always wanted to be a writer. I found performance when I was twenty-two, I didn't get into it until I was twenty-two, and that was after five years of school, and then, like, a good chunk of professional experience, it was then I started to think – I really do want to write. I really do want to create my own work. That initial idea of wanting to be a writer somehow got grounded in my experience as a performer and so... yes, it informs a lot. The way that I write is up on my feet, recording myself, it's lonesome, I don't work with anybody, I do my own stuff in a studio, but to kind of explore raw material and ideas I do it on my feet in character voices that I explore and develop over time. I record it so that I'm capturing the idiom of speech as I improvise and that spontaneity is captured in what then gets transcribed and that becomes raw material for a play. And then a whole other level kicks in after – how do I want to coordinate the scenes and what do I want to explore next and trying to balance my feeling of instinctively what I want to pursue, with what I have to pursue to flesh out the story. It's a strong connection. I don't think I'm ever going to be a novelist. That's not my engine. It's very connected.

SSW: What's your strategy for wearing multiple creative hats in a rehearsal process?

Interesting... My number one strategy is that I collaborate with Chris Abraham. It's a very trusting, safe relationship. He's not somebody who is interested in fixing me or fixing my ideas or... He's a person who is very motivated by

curiosity, and he also, something unusual can happen in a room improvising, the way that story can emerge can be a little less direct than if you're starting from a plot. If you're starting from the characters and then the plot emerges, um, the story doesn't always look like a good storytelling narrative and he is very interested in that. In fact, he's more interested than I am! There are times I want to clean things up a little and he wants to keep things messy. I guess, that's a huge part of it. Having somebody in place, who brings not their own agenda, but a real desire for process and motivated by curiosity to help go deeper in the material and help to give an eye to what you may not see. Chris is very much responsible for the fact that I really do as much as I possibly can, directly use my transcriptions as dialogue. That I'm not trying to go "okay, I've researched the idea, now let me make it something, crafting the dialogue". He's the one that said to me, "Look at the way the unconscious world of the character comes through in non-obvious ways" and to use that. I've had that in my pocket since then. I recently wrote and performed a play at CanStage, *Someone Else*, and I was just very focused on meeting my deadlines and obligations for writing well in advance of performing so that I was not in a tangle when we were in rehearsal. In fact, I had a bunch of stuff over-written and I said, "the only thing we're going to do in performance is cut", and cut as early on as possible. Another strategy for me, as an actor, is I stay away from any kind of Facebook, media, or anything like that because I feel like you're vulnerable in a different kind of way as a creator, when you're acting. You still have to go up there and act. I'm on lockdown when I'm in performance mode.

SSW: So smart...

KT: It is... liberating beyond... I am able to do things that I can't when I have my ear to the ground and I'm distracted.

SSW: How do you define "success"?

KT: Do you know what, honestly, success isn't even a thing... I, um, I feel like I'm allergic to that kind of stuff. Anything about that stuff shuts me down, one way or the other. If I think I'm successful I think it makes you think things you shouldn't be thinking and if I think I'm not successful I think you think things you shouldn't be thinking... I've spent a lot of time engaged in what I love to do, thinking about what I love to do, thinking about the importance, from my own perspective, of what I'm involved in doing, not what I personally do, but what I'm involved in – this process of telling stories. I think it's a very, there's a lot of things that come together to be able to feel okay about working in an area where there's no prestige, no power, no status, no money, there is nothing except relationships and... I'm 47, I've got my family here, and I want to have a whole life, where there's a unity in my life, of the things in my life that are important to me. Maybe if I felt frustrated, if I couldn't get a role, or my plays weren't getting produced, maybe then I'd be thinking about success. The fact that I'm able to do what I want to do and I honestly have a wholesome perspective on what I do... In a squeaky clean way, about what I do. I'm a little idealistic but not too idealistic. I want a life. A life I can really live. This is one I can live. I like it.

SSW: What is your writing/creative practice? Is it daily?

KT: I think that practice is the key to completing a project. My own personal practice is: I get up every morning before my kids and I do yoga and meditate for an hour and that doesn't just kind of wake me up, but I think it gives me perspective that I need on my day to do what I need to do; I get my kids off to school; I go for a run; and then I write for three to four hours, that's about all I get to scrape together in a day, and sometimes I don't get to do it at all but I try to make it part of every day. I work Monday to Friday, I don't work on the weekends, I don't work at night, I can't, my kids are around, you know, and I'm there for my kids at the end of the day. That's the important thing in my life. I want to be there at the end of the day to pick them up from school. I also think about writing, I think about it, the practice of it. I read books – I read recently *The War of Art*. He says, "everything in the world is going to conspire to make you not want to write, and you can't listen to the voices that tell you not to write..." It's a fun book and you see all your little demons on parade.

SSW: How do you deal with writer's block?

KT: I have had that issue. I try to step back, step away, without walking away from writing. I try to step back, if I'm having a hard time writing a scene, I'll go to another scene, or... I try to de-escalate my anxiety. To step away from the intensity. That's one of my life mantras, for me as a person, it's to step away from the intensity, and I do it in writing too. Another thing is meditation, you know, to keep my mind, because I kind of have an issue with my mind (*Laughter*) and it can be a bit dicey up there. Meditation helps me to not be overly intense in general. In a long-term way have an effect on writers block.

SSW: How do you balance work/art and motherhood/family life?

KT: Balancing is that you're never in balance. You have to be engaged with it at all times. So it's not like you get on top of the balance beam and then you're there. You get on top of the balance beam and then you make little adjustments to stay up. There's a lot of negativity about having a family and having kids (in this business). People make it sound like it's impossible. I think that's super unfair. It's extremely intense but, should we all be so lucky, life is long, and there's a moment for everything and there are things that, you know, like, continuing to be engaged fully in your life, whatever that might mean, whether it's travelling or children, those are the things that keep you alive, inside. If you aren't alive inside you can't write.

SSW: What's the artists role in society?

KT: There are so many amazing artists in the world. Most people are doing things beyond what I can comprehend, beyond the scope of what I actually do myself. I feel like, how would I know? There are so many things to think about and share and put out there and create and, I do think that one of the things about any artist is that you have to bring a point of view to what you do. Therefore, completely obvious, each person that's doing it is bringing their own point of view and must, so, I mean honestly? I think, to be true to what you feel

you have to do and to do it. If there's relevance to it, it's not for you to decide anyway. It's for other people! If they want to listen, if they want to come, it's up to them. That's a tall order; anyway, to be deeply engaged in what it is that you really want to do. I read this Walt Whitman quote the other day, I was reading my kids this book called *The Incredible Journey*, it's a Canadian novel about these three animals and their journey to go and find their master. It's beautiful. The quote at the beginning is from Walt Whitman's *A Song to Myself* and it's an ode to these creatures who are in no way illustrious, or morally upright, or doing the right thing. They are being themselves in the word. They are being the cat that they are or the dog that they are. To take your place in the world. For some people this might be the level of engagement in theatre, it will be something else for someone else. If everyone's doing their part and doing what they should be doing, it will all come together and it will all get done.

SSW: Do you read reviews of your work?

KT: I do after. But not during. Even on my last play, they were so miserable, at a certain point I just stopped. I was like, "I don't fucking need this abuse..." (*Laughter*). I don't need to feel this way. I actually really liked that, I had a good time doing it and I thought it was really worthwhile and so, I have no desire to hear pettily little stuff, when, like, my blood was on the page and, you were thinking about that? I mean, I don't mean to sound like... But seriously, you don't write for free. You kill yourself and you feel like shit about yourself so, like... And so, yeah, but I'm changing with that, over time. It's a process to kind of, to learn. How are we equipped to deal with what that is? It's not in my purview. I have no control over it. It's becoming less important to me. I want people to come to the shows, I really do, so it's a drag. I want my play to be produced again and I'm thinking, how do we do it with these reviews, but like, I don't know. Some people are tougher than I am. When I was really young, I would read reviews and destroy myself, imploding, and now I'm in the point where I'm finally, like, I really, I went through a phase where I would have to work really hard not to read them. But now I'm in a phase where... When I finally get to the point where I could read them or not read them? I'll probably be dead by then. (*Laughter*). I feel like that's probably the best place to get to... But, I'll leave that to another person for now!

SSW: What's a dream gig?

KT: I kind of think, what I'm doing is a bit of a dream gig. I have my life, I have an ongoing creative relationship with collaborators who I really like... I guess the only thing, you know, I would love to do something like go somewhere and train more and, do intensives and workshops and travel and get a greater perspective on what I do, and what other people are doing. I would love that. But, I've got three little kids and I'm not going anywhere, you know. I'm making their lunches and that what I'm doing. I mean, kids need you for a long time. Maybe when they're older I can go away but, like, I'm not gonna go away for a big long hunk of time.

SSW: What drew you to *This Wide Night*?

(Director) Kelli Fox. I didn't know Maggie, but if I had, she would have, too. I think it's a beautiful play. I think it's so intelligent and so elegant and I think that Chloe Moss has a deep understanding of her subject. I have a good friend who has worked with women in conflict with the law for her whole professional life and so I feel like I've spent a lot of time in my friendship with her hearing about the experience of women who are in conflict with the law and how their marginalized existence gets criminalized. I had a peaked interest and when I read the play I felt that this was a woman who wasn't like, "let's talk about the crime". She was talking about the people, the women.

SSW: What are you working on right now?

I got first-time hired adapting, *Anne of Green Gables: The Musical* to a film. It's with a production company that I've worked with before, and it's serving some particular interests that I have. I just finished a round of grant applications for a project that I'd be starting with Crow's Theatre, again, next year.