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ORPHANS FOR THE CZAR

SCIROCCO DRAMA



GEORGE F. WALKER



“A dark and funny return to form for veteran Canadian playwright and provocateur George F. Walker.”

— *Globe and Mail*

“Hilarious, poignant, deeply compelling theatre.”

— *Istvan Reviews*

“A wonderful, bracing, very funny play for our times.”

— *The Slotkin Letter*

“Timely, sharp, and hysterically funny.”

— *Intermission Magazine*

[George F. Walker's *Orphans for the Czar*](#) exposes the duplicity, revenge, and self-interest at the core of a culture about to go up in flames. Set in 1905, shortly before Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg, the play focuses on a hapless double agent as he tries to stay on the right side of both the revolutionaries and the czarists. The orphaned fool Vasley leaves his

impoverished village to work in his uncle's bookstore in the city, and becomes engrossed by the women, the intelligentsia, the spies, and all their conflicting ideologies. A comedy of pathos about the fragility of people in unstable times, *Orphans for the Czar* is also a plea for the possibility of decency.

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THE INTERVIEW

[Kelley Jo Burke](#) is an award-winning Regina playwright, creative nonfiction writer and documentarian, and was for many years host of CBC Radio's SoundXchange. In 2017, she and composer Jeffery Straker won the Playwrights Guild of Canada's national Best New Musical Award for *Us*, which premiered at the Globe Theatre 2018. Kelley Jo's other plays include *The Lucky Ones*, *Somewhere, Sask.*, *Ducks on the Moon*, [The Selkie Wife](#), *Jane's Thumb*, *Charming* and *Rose: True Love*, *The Curst*, and the upcoming *Greensleep*. She's also written three books, and eight creative nonfiction documentaries for CBC Radio's IDEAS. Kelley Jo was the 2009 winner of the Sask. Lieutenant-Governor's Award for Leadership in the Arts, the 2008 Saskatoon and Area Theatre Award for Playwriting, and has received the City of Regina Writing Award four times.



Kelley Jo, you've worked as a playwright, director, memoirist, performer, professor, dramaturge, editor, documentarian, broadcaster, and more. Why do you think you like to wear so many hats?

First of all, I don't think it's different hats. I think it's all one hat. I think I work *talk*. And I think it's a physiological issue as much as anything because I only just recently learned that not everybody thinks in speech. Some people think in pictures and some people think

in concepts, which I find eerie. I think they're all aliens. But I think in conversation; I think in spoken English—or spoken French, if you give me enough time. All of the work I do is about processing ideas through the generation of speech. I'm an extroverted thinker. I don't know what I think until I say it. I am often as surprised as anyone else as I see something go by and I go, "Oh, that's what I think!"

And so I have worked in speech my entire life. I started as an actor, in the young company in the Manitoba Theatre Workshop, (which is now Prairie Theatre Exchange,) and they figured out somehow that not only could I talk in iambic pentameter, I could write iambic pentameter. And so I became my company's playwright as well as an actor. That made me a writer. My theatre company made me a writer because I was writing speech. If I had gone the traditional route of a lot of young writers, which is to move directly into prose, I don't think I would have become a writer as quickly.

And then I was a journalist—journalist is in the list, too—but I was primarily an essayist and editorialist. Again, because it's speech. So moving into CBC came naturally from that. Then I was a broadcaster, and then I was a radio playwright and I was doing stage plays at the same time. So I think it's all the same job. I think it is creating. Generating ideas and putting them into conversations. I think I'm having an ongoing conversation with the world, and I'm doing it through a number of venues.

So, all one job. But playwriting is so hard. I teach playwriting, and the first thing I tell my students is: Find another form. If there's any possibility for writing in another form, please, God, do it. Even film scripting is full of heartbreak, but if you actually get a gig, the money is so much better. Playwriting is such a challenging form because you really only have what people say and what people do to tell the story. That's it. The first thing I teach my students is: If you do any cheesy exposition, you fail my course. So don't do it. "What is the knife that's in your hand that Jerry gave you when you were wearing a green dress?" We never do that. It's a very, very challenging form and it's collaborative...and I hate people! (*Laughs.*) So it's a really hard form, but it is the only form that I work in where you get to be magic. You get to make a thing happen in real time, in a real room with people for a moment. All the "I'm wearing clothes from Value Village and the set's cardboard" and all that stuff—all that stuff goes away. And for a moment a real thing happens. Something only existed in your imagination, and it happens right there in front of people, and people react to it like it's happening. And that's just addictive. So even though it's the hardest form that I work in, it's also the one that's hardest to walk away from.

Your recent play, *Rigby*, won the 2023 City of Regina Writing Award, an award you've won an incredible four times! *Rigby* features banshee characters who are living on the border between life and death. *The Selkie Wife*, published by Scirocco Drama a few years back, is a modern riff on the old Scottish legend of the seal who turns human on land. Your upcoming play, *Greensleep*, which focuses on the climate crisis, is subtitled "A Fairy Tale for the End of the World." Tell us a bit about the use of folktales and fairy tales in your work.

I discovered the 398.2 section of the library when I was four, which is the fairy tales and

folklore section. I stole a copy of *D'aulaires Book of Greek Myths* from my Grade Three class, and I have it to this day. (I think I have guilt, but it's still my book). I became deeply enamored of the kind of story that passes hands. You know, it becomes this thing made out of bone where the bits and pieces are all gone, but it just passes hands and it gets smoother, and everyone that holds it changes it a little bit more. I think that sort of meshed up with the part where I deeply, deeply wanted to be Mary Poppins when I was a kid, and I wanted to be able to do magic. And so I saw the fairy tales and myth books as basically on-the-job training, and I read them so that I could learn how to do magic, too. It became a deep part of my life.

And as I got older and I began to investigate those stories with my understanding of the adult world, I began to see how those stories were baked into how we understand the life's journey. Like, really, those stories are what we pass from hand to hand, generation to generation, to tell the next generation what to expect and how to get through it. So I began to feel like I could have a small part in that. I could take those stories and put them through my hands and see what I had to share with that structure.

On a more prosaic note, I hate plot. I just hate plot. I hated plot when I was 25. At 62, I am *over* plot. I have read thousands and thousands of books. I've seen thousands and thousands of movies. I have heard story over and over and over again, and it comes down to about seven plots and I'm tired of it. I'm so interested in anything that I can watch or read where I don't know what's going to happen next. And so I love to build with stories that people think they know, and then say, "Yeah, no, but let's talk about it *this way*." I think that's how I started to mess with fairy tales. My very first play was rooted in mythology. The next one was about images of women. The next one was about a very specific fairy tale. And I come back to myth and fairy tales again and again. Because they're my Bible, you know?

[Read the Full Interview](#)

BEHIND THE SCENES



This month, JGS talked with Brian Drader, Daniel Thau-Eleff, and Will Green about the Scirocco Drama Manitoba High School Playwriting Program. Brian is the Executive Director of the [Manitoba Association of Playwrights](#), which runs the High School Playwriting Program, Daniel is the administrator of the program, and Will is a student playwright who is participating in the program for the second time.

Brian, I'm wondering if you might like to give an overview of the program for people who are not familiar with it.

Brian Drader: Yeah, for sure! The program is now in its 24th year. It started in 2001, as an initiative to give our young people an opportunity to explore writing for theatre, and it sort of took off in that first year. It has evolved over the years, but at its core, it's remained the same, which is supporting high school playwrights through a development process, towards a share with an audience. It gives participants an opportunity to explore what it means to rewrite. We all know writing is rewriting, but this program allows them to explore what it *means* to rewrite and to continue developing their plays. And then the playwrights discover how it influences their relationship to the work when it actually has that final, vitally important component, which is, "Oh, here's the audience!"

In its present incarnation, each of the playwrights is assigned individual dramaturgical support. This year, Will is working with Scott Douglas, a local professional playwright. Last year, he worked with Katie German, also a local professional theatre artist. The playwrights in the program work from draft to draft. At the midpoint, we do a little workshop so that they can actually hear it and then get back in there, continue with their dramaturgs. Now—and this is a very important element for me—peers work with peers, which means that the student playwright is working with student actors. Not to be ageist, but it gives the playwrights freedom in talking to their peers about their work as opposed to talking to old people like us. There's so much more freedom when you take the power structure out of it so that they're not surrounded completely by older professional people. We were

connected with Prairie Theatre Exchange for many years, but they have since moved on from their school programming, so this will be our second year working with Manitoba Theatre for Young People. It's a terrific relationship, and of course, they have a huge school and young company. So we work with them on the casting of the workshop, and then we also work with them on the final share; we present at the MTYP Theatre with MTYP students and the share is open to parents, friends, anyone that wants to come.

So that's somewhat of an historical overview, focusing on where we're presently at with the program. And I would offer that I think one of the reasons the program has survived and thrived for 24 years is that it is adaptable. We are constantly, every year, looking at what serves the young playwrights best; they're always at the centre of it and the focus of it. That adaptability has provided the engine for not only sustaining the program, but sustaining it in a really healthy and very contemporary and current way.

Thank you very much, Brian; that's great. Daniel, I wanted to ask you about your role as coordinator. Can you tell us some specifics about the program?

Daniel Thau-Eleff: Let me first pick up on what I thought Brian was going to say. I agree that those are all reasons that the program has survived. And this program has also survived thanks to Scirocco's support. You've been sponsoring us for 24 years! And I know that Brian has a list of the artists who came through this program as high school students who are now established theatre professionals in Winnipeg. So thank you, always, for your support. It is very welcome.

It's our pleasure—we're very proud to sponsor the program!

Daniel: I'm the associate managing director here at MAP. That's a new role, but I've been program coordinator for a number of years. We take submissions from all over the province; some teachers make this part of their curriculum, and some give the students bonus marks for entering. Some teachers just say, "Hey, this is an opportunity," and students like Will apply. We have a panel here: khBrian and I, and we bring in one external person, and the three of us go through all the scripts and evaluate them just like the Manitoba Arts Council or other assessment panels would. We evaluate which scripts are showing promise, which scripts are going to benefit from what this program has to offer. And then I have the wonderful job of contacting the students to tell them they're in and to describe what the program is. As Brian was saying, it mirrors a professional play development process. When I'm developing a play of my own, it can be developed over many years, but with this program we fit the process into one year. It makes sense to make it a small and manageable process where they write their first drafts and are accepted into the program based on that. We usually have 3 or 4 playwrights per year. This year we have three; last year we had four—it varies a little bit from year to year just depending on what gets submitted. When I started, we had one dramaturg to work with everyone, and we've moved towards matching a dramaturg to the play and playwright. (We have two in the program this year; that also varies a little from year to year.) The playwrights and the dramaturgs have an initial meeting to talk about their script, then they go back and rewrite their second draft. And that's when we bring in the MTYP students to do a table read, a

reading and discussion of the script with the playwright and the dramaturg and Brian and/or myself there. And then based on that, they go into another rewrite for their third draft. And then we do a presentation towards the end of the school year, where they invite their friends and family, and the student actors can invite people as well. We of course shifted onto virtual presentations for a few years, but last year we were back in the theatre, and we're looking forward to that again.

Can you give us an idea of the timeline, Daniel? When do you invite submissions?

Daniel: The call for scripts goes out in the fall, November, with a deadline of mid-January. We get all the scripts mid-January, and we notify the playwrights mid-February. The first orientation meeting is in March, then the workshops are mid-April. And then the final presentation is in May or June. This year it's going to be a little earlier in May.

I have lots of questions for you, Will. The first one is: why do you like to write for the theatre?

Will Green: Basically, I've always had a passion towards writing; I love English and writing is something that has always really connected with me. And I find I'm just really connected to the intimacy of the theatre. With films, I find often it can get a little too perfect, whereas I'm really drawn towards the one long stream, the one production. Everyone knows their lines. They're all together putting this on, it's an event. Theatre allows for such great spectacle, like in MTC's [Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre's] *Clue*, but also such intimacy, like in *The First Métis Man of Odessa* in the Warehouse. It's such a broad medium that it really connects with me personally a lot.

Do you have a favourite play or a favourite playwright?

Will: I've really only started playwriting seriously, like the past 2 or 3 years when I found out it was a possibility, around the same time that I submitted my first play to the Scirocco program. And since then I've read a bunch of plays. I've really, really enjoyed classics like *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But also I've read Ian Ross's *Bereav'd of Light* recently. That was really awesome, just like, the different approach. I really enjoyed *Twelve Angry Men*; it's twelve characters, one room; never cuts, never changes. It's one conversation about the life of someone and what it means in the justice system. In *Bereav'd of Light*, it's just four characters and it's such a simple encounter...I don't know, it's hard to explain, but I find it's often those ones that are sort of adjacent to the mainstream, not quite absurdist, but those are the ones I like. I also really loved *The Waltz*, at PTE [Prairie Theatre Exchange] this year.

Now I want to ask you about your plays, Will. You had one that went through the program last year. Can you tell us a little about it?

Will: Yeah. Some time ago, I got the opportunity to interview my grandmother about her life story. And then the idea came up of how to write it down, how to make it into a play. My drama teacher suggested that. And so I interviewed my grandmother over a couple of

summers. And after the first summer, I wrote up the first act of this play and I put it into the Scirocco/MAP program.

It's a way of honoring the family parts of me that I haven't been able to otherwise. I've also been able to actually record these interviews, so I can maintain them for longer. Also, the more I go into it, the more I find how much it's changed my life. Because my grandmother, she's Indigenous, and she really separated herself from the Indigenous life for what she saw was more advantageous, better for the family. But now I don't know anything about it really. My dad, for as long as he has been around, he thought he was Cree, but apparently he's Oji-Cree! Like, oh wow. So it's also a way of trying to reconnect to that, to try to shed light on that aspect of it. Over this last summer, I've been expanding it to a full play, which now I'm going to have the opportunity of performing in my school and directing.

Read the Full Interview

Many of our authors are available for classroom visits, in person or via Zoom. If there's an author you'd like to invite to your class, [contact us](#) for more information.

We're also happy to supply free desk copies of titles you'd like to consider for your courses. Send us the details on what you're teaching, the class enrolment and where you'd like books sent.

MARCH 27 IS WORLD THEATRE DAY



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IN THE NEWS

[Julia Mackey](#) has recently been awarded a Meritorious Service Decoration (Civil Division), one of the highest honours in Canada. These awards recognize remarkable contributions in many different fields of endeavour, from advocacy initiatives and health care services, to research and humanitarian efforts. Julia received the award for her work in bringing the stories of veterans to Canadians from coast to coast with her play *Jake's Gift*, and for her advocacy work on behalf of veterans. The award was conferred by The Right Honourable Mary Simon, Canada's Governor General, and a presentation ceremony will take place later this year.

[Sharon Bajer](#) has just been named ACTRA Manitoba's Woman of the Year. Part of the citation for the award reads: "Sharon Bajer is the embodiment of empowerment for the women of our industry. Her commitment is to make our work and our lives as individuals have meaning, hold value, and garner the respect of the film community at large." Congratulations, Sharon!

[Les Filles du Roi](#), by Corey Payette and Julie McIsaac, won three major awards at the Flathead Lake International Cinemafest in Polson, Montana: Best Picture, Best Director (Corey Payette) and Best Original Score. Congrats to all!

The Drama Department at the University of Alberta has made changes to its Lee Playwriting Residency, and is offering a \$10,000 playwriting prize for an unproduced play. Further information about the residency can be found [here](#), and information about the prize can be found [here](#).

[Darla Contois](#) has been nominated for the Canadian Screen Award for Best Lead Performer for her role in the acclaimed series *Little Bird*.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

• IN THEATRES •

Father Tartuffe: An Indigenous Misadventure by Herbie Barnes
[Touchstone Theatre](#), Vancouver, BC, February 22–March 24, 2024.

3 Fingers Back by Donna-Michelle St. Bernard
[Tarragon Theatre](#), Toronto, ON, February 27–March 24, 2024.

Café Daughter by Kenneth T. Williams
[Globe Theatre](#), Regina, SK, March 6–24, 2024.

By the Light of a Story by Kristen Da Silva
[Theatre Orangeville](#), Orangeville, ON, March 7–24, 2024.

Rise, Red River by Tara Beagan
[Prairie Theatre Exchange](#), Winnipeg, MB, March 8–23, 2024.

1939 by Jani Lauzon and Kaitlyn Riordan
[Yes Theatre](#), Sudbury, ON, March 15–31, 2024.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls by Dave Deveau
[Roseneath Theatre](#), on tour in Ontario, March 2024.

Mad Madge by Rose Napoli
[Nightwood Theatre](#), Toronto, ON, April 9–21, 2024.

The Comeback by Trish Cooper and Sam Vint
[Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre](#), Winnipeg, MB, April 24–May 18, 2024.

Greensleep by Kelley Jo Burke
[Dancing Sky Theatre](#), Meacham, SK, April 26–May 12, 2024.

The Outside Inn by Sharon Bajer and Elio Zarrillo
[Prairie Theatre Exchange](#), Winnipeg, MB, May 7–19, 2024.

The Birds and the Bees by Mark Crawford
[Alberta Theatre Projects](#), Calgary, AB, May 7–May 25, 2024.

Doris and Ivy in the Home by Norm Foster
[St. Jacob's Country Playhouse](#), St. Jacob's ON, June 19–July 6, 2024.

Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz by Alison Lawrence
[4th Line Theatre](#), Millbrook, ON, July 1–20, 2024.

Halfway There by Norm Foster
[Drayton Festival Theatre](#), Drayton, ON, July 3–21, 2024.

Doris and Ivy in the Home by Norm Foster
[Huron County Playhouse](#), Grand Bend, ON, July 11–28, 2024.

Jim Watts, Girl Reporter by Beverley Cooper
[4th Line Theatre](#), Millbrook, ON, July 30–August 24, 2024.

• ONLINE •

A Time to Dream, a documentary about the extraordinary women of the CASA project. [Playwrights Guild of Canada](#) production, available online now.

Inose/Field Trip, a sound walk created by Yolanda Bonnell in partnership with Dr. Jesse Popp that encourages participants to connect with the natural world. [Common Boots Theatre](#). (A video ASL version of *Inose/Field Trip* is now available.)

Buffy, a five-part podcast about Buffy Sainte-Marie by Falen Johnson. [CBC Listen](#). All episodes online now.

• ON SCREEN •

Les Filles du Roi by Corey Payette and Julie Maclsaac
Premiered at the Rhode Island International Film Festival, with screenings at the Vancouver International Film Festival, the Hamilton Film Festival, the St. Louis International Film Festival, and the Orlando Film Festival.

With Love and a Major Organ by Julia Lederer
Starring Anna Maguire, Hamza Haq, and Veena Sood. Finalist for the Grand Jury Prize, 2023 Nashville Film Festival, winner Best Feature Film, Reelworld Film Festival. Coming to Cineplex cinemas on April 12, 2024.

The Swearing Jar by Kate Hewlett
Starring Adelaide Clemens, Douglas Smith, Patrick J. Adams, and Kathleen Turner. Now available to buy or rent on various streaming services including Apple TV and Digital TIFF Bell Lightbox.

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