



HOME NEWS OPINION BUSINESS SPORTS **ARTS** LIFE HEALTH TECHNOLOGY

Greg MacArthur has two plays running – in French

BY PAT DONNELLY, GAZETTE CULTURE CRITIC FEBRUARY 18, 2011



Montreal's Greg MacArthur has set up office at the University of Alberta for a two-year contract as the university's new playwright in residence. Two of the anglophone writer's plays, *Réhabilitation* and *Toxique*, are being performed in French in Montreal.

Photograph by: Michael Davies-Venn

Montreal - Not so long ago, seeing the name of an anglophone playwright such as Greg MacArthur on the marquee of a francophone theatre in Montreal would have caused jaws to drop. No more.

Daniel MacIvor, Steve Galluccio, Judith Thompson, George F. Walker and Michael Mackenzie are among those who have successfully crossed over into the language of Molière and Michel Tremblay.

This season, Kristen Thomson (*Attends-moi*) and Daniel Brooks (*Insomnie*) have stepped over the linguistic divide, along with MacArthur.

But for an anglo to have two plays running concurrently in French remains rare. It may even be a first.

MacArthur's *Réhabilitation*, translated by Emmanuel Schwartz and directed by Stacey Christodoulou, opens next week at the Segal Studio. *Toxique*, translated by Maryse Warda and directed by Geoffrey Gaquere, begins March 1 at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui.

This 41-year-old Montreal playwright has reason to celebrate.

But he's obliged to fly in from Edmonton to do it.

MacArthur, was born and raised in Lindsay, Ont., and studied theatre at Ryerson University in Toronto. For the past 11 years, however, he has been a Montrealer by choice.

He got his big break here in 2000 when Festival TransAmériques artistic director Marie-Hélène Falcon discovered his Peter Hinton-directed play *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (based on the tragic death of B.C. teenager Reena Virk) at the Montreal Fringe Festival. Thanks to the FTA, MacArthur's plays began to garner interest around the world. They've been produced across Canada, in South Africa, Germany and the U.K. His biggest hit, *Snowman*, about the discovery of an ancient corpse in a glacier, has been especially popular outside the country. It was launched by Imago Theatre in Montreal.

Last month MacArthur left us, temporarily, for Edmonton, having landed a two-year playwright-in-residence contract at the University of Alberta, which includes a commission for a new play. (Titled *The Mission Position*, it's inspired by the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.) But he's determined to return to Montreal.

"It will be a bit of a fluid life for a few years," he said over the phone from Alberta, explaining that he will be working four-month sessions in Edmonton, then taking a break, perhaps in Montreal. "Even the years when I was living in Montreal, I travelled a lot," he added. "Like any theatre artist, I had a kind of nomadic existence."

In other words, he hasn't given up his Montreal apartment yet.

Next week he's flying in to attend the openings of *Toxique* and *Réhabilitation* – two plays that, he assured me, are not intimately linked, "Although they both explore a world of fear and paranoia," he added. *Réhabilitation* premiered, in English (titled *Recovery*), at the National Arts Centre in 2006. It's being produced here by a bilingual company, the Other Theatre, that in recent years has been working mainly in French.

MacArthur described *Réhabilitation* as "speculative fictionish." Set in a recovery centre in Antarctica, it follows the progress of three addicts hooked on a never-defined substance. It was written in response to a post-9/11 world that saw a "rise of fascism and the trampling of civil rights," he said. "You get the sense that these large recovery centres, which are being set up around the globe, are being run by huge corporations and governments." Inmates see their rights being stripped away incrementally.

Réhabilitation's translator, Schwartz, is also an actor, last seen in Wajdi Mouawad's *Littoral* at the 2010 FTA. The formidable cast includes Danièle Lorain, Michel Mongeau, Catherine Lavoie, Michel Bertrand, Charles-Smith Métellus and Vanessa Schmit-Craan.

Toxique, however, is likely to have more impact within the francophone milieu, as it is being presented at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui, a play-birthing company whose season includes new works by Mouawad and Michel-Marc Bouchard. The cast includes the stellar combo of Guy Nadon and Élise Guilbault.

The play was inspired by the “toxic bus” incident that occurred in Vancouver in 2004. A mysterious malady was apparently triggered by a toxic substance after a threat from a dark-skinned man on the Richmond Express bus. Later, the whole thing came to be regarded as a case of “mass psychogenic illness.”

MacArthur said his play “doesn’t specifically follow that narrative.” He just taps the paranoia and fear. A woman living in a Canadian suburb becomes convinced that she is the victim of a terrorist attack.

His works may be dark, but they’re funny, too. Really.

This is the first time in many years that a MacArthur play has been produced in Montreal – in any language.

He has no illusions about bicultural or even international recognition ensuring a breakthrough into Montreal’s two main anglophone venues: Centaur Theatre and the main stage of the Segal Centre Theatre. (The Segal Studio hosts independent companies). For him, it hasn’t happened.

Montreal is a great city for anglo playwrights to live in, perhaps even to launch their careers. After that, it’s take on the world, land a job in Alberta or break into the French scene.

MacArthur seems to be doing all of the above in style. “I haven’t had a job that’s out of my profession for many years,” he said. To a Canadian playwright, that’s the jackpot.

Réhabilitation runs Thursday to March 10 at the Segal Studio, 5170 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd. Call 514-739-7944 or visit www.segalcentre.org.

Toxique runs March 1 to 26 at Theatre d’Aujourd’hui, 3900 St. Denis St. 514-282-3900; www.theatredaujourdhui.qc.ca.

pdonnell@montrealgazette.com

Pat Donnelly continues her coverage of the Montreal-area theatre scene at her blog Stage & Page, at montrealgazette.com/stageandpage

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette