

## PAUL THOMPSON

Director, Writer, Teacher, Administrator, Maverick and Innovator

Paul William Thompson is one of the most remarkable and accomplished voices in Canadian theatre. Born in Charlottetown, P.E.I. in 1940, he was raised in the farming community of Listowel, Ontario, where he worked on his uncle's farm in the summers. As a young boy he was a voracious reader and a gifted athlete, particularly excelling in wrestling. He began his undergraduate career at the University of Western Ontario, where he obtained his Honours B.A. (English and French), and in 1963 won a scholarship to the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris, where his academic and creative life was transformed forever. There he first discovered the work of Roger Planchon at the Théâtre National Populaire in Lyon. After completing his M.A. in French (specializing in Theatre) at the University of Toronto, he returned to France to work with Planchon as *stagiaire de la mise en scène* (apprentice director), 1965–67. Upon his return to Canada he began his apprenticeship with the legendary Jean Gascon at The Stratford Festival, where he worked as his assistant director until 1970.

In 1970 Thompson was appointed Artistic Director of Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto, a ground-breaking theatre company born out of the cultural crucible that was Rochdale College, where he would help create some of the most influential theatrical events in Canadian history. During his 12-year artistic directorship he not only programmed and produced over 175 plays by authors ranging from Claude Jutra to Judith Thompson, but transformed the Canadian theatrical landscape forever with his own creations. *The Farm Show* (1973) was a revolutionary production, credited as one of the first true “collective creations” in Canada. Originally created for a rural audience near Clinton, Ontario, it was an immediate sensation: it went on to play Toronto and toured to major theatres across the country, including The Stratford Festival, the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, and the National Arts Centre. It was broadcast on CBC TV and made into a film (*The Clinton Special*) directed by Michael Ondaatje. Countless productions and remounts have followed, and *The Farm Show* has featured on the curriculum of almost every theatre school and centre of theatre study in the country.

A brief outline of his groundbreaking hits at Theatre Passe Muraille between 1970 and 1982 demonstrates the dynamic range of his success and his ability to harness Canadian stories as never before: *Doukhobours* (1971); *1837: The Farmers' Revolt* (1973) and *The Adventures of an Immigrant* (1974), both created with Rick Salutin; *Pauline* (1973), with Carol Bolt; and the controversial but hugely profitable *I Love You Baby Blue* (1975). By this time, Thompson's highly creative and original process had begun to spread west to companies such as Saskatoon's 25<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre, where he presented *The West Show* and later created *If You're So Good Why Are You In Saskatoon?* In 1977 his influence spread to Edmonton, where he helped create *Far As The Eye Can See* with Rudy Wiebe in a coproduction with Theatre Three. In 1978 he took Quebec by storm with *Les Maudits Anglais*, created with Gary Geddes and Claude Roussin and coproduced with Montreal's Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui. The same year he created *Shakespeare for Fun and Profit*, an unflinching look at The Stratford Festival and the politics of Canadian theatre. The actors,

writers and directors brought into his company during this period read like a Who's Who of Canadian theatre: they include his wife Anne Anglin, Graham Greene, Eric Peterson, David Fox, Linda Griffiths, Layne Coleman, John Jarvis, Connie Kaldor, Gordon Tootoosis, Ted Johns, Janet-Laine Green, Booth Savage, Mary Vingoe, John Gray, Saul Rubinek and Des MacAnuff.

His artistic directorship of Passe Muraille fostered the growth of many new voices, including CODCO, a vibrant young company based in St. John's, Newfoundland and composed of Andy and Cathy Jones, Mary Walsh, Tommy Sexton and Greg Malone. Recognizing their talent, Thompson gave this virtually unknown troupe his full support and presented their first production, *Cod On A Stick*. In subsequent years they would go on to great success, including two long-running television series, one being the hugely popular *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*. Thompson's discovery of a young actress from Saskatoon by the name of Linda Griffiths would lead to one of his most notable international successes after *The Farm Show. Maggie and Pierre*, a daring solo production chronicling the complex relationship between Prime Minister Trudeau and his wife Margaret, played for an extended run in Toronto when it debuted in 1980, toured across the country, was recorded for television and was presented on Broadway, joining only a handful of Canadian productions ever to do so. It was successfully remounted in the 1990s. This was followed by two productions (1996 and 1998) of *The Duchess*, written by Griffiths and directed by Thompson, examining the controversial relationship between Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. During and after his time at Passe Muraille he is also credited with supporting fledgling companies such as Buddies in Bad Times, Nightwood Theatre, Videocab and most notably the Blyth Festival, which has produced over 100 original Canadian plays over the last 30 years.

At the Blyth Festival, Thompson has created some of the most notable productions of the last three decades, including box office hits *Barndance Live!* (1996 and 1997), *Death of the Hired Man* (1999 and 2000), *He Won't Come In from the Barn* (1994), and perhaps his greatest success, *The Outdoor Donnellys* (2000–04), a massive event in which the whole village of Blyth was transformed into a performance space. Performed by professional actors and local citizens, it drew thousands of patrons every season it was presented. Thompson has also helped nurture and develop the careers of current Passe Muraille artistic director Eric Coates and such young writers as Gil Garret and Jonathan Garfinkle.

He has collaborated with some of Canada's most notable writers, including Michael Ondaatje (*Coming Through Slaughter*, 1980) and David Fennario (*The Death of René Lévesque*, 1991, and *Balconville*, 1992). Thompson's long association with Timothy Findley began with *Stones* for the first Vancouver International Writers' Festival (1988) and continued with *Mute Court: Censorship on Trial* for the PEN World Congress in Toronto (1989). The hugely successful *The Piano Man's Daughter* (1997), written in collaboration with Veronica Tenant and Sylvia Tyson and produced by David and Ed Mirvish, was performed in Toronto at the Royal Alexandra Theatre and toured across the country. Another notable Thompson/Findley success, several years in the making, was *Elizabeth Rex* (2000), which won the Governor General's Literary Award for English-Language Drama.

In 1987, Paul Thompson was named Director General of the National Theatre School of Canada (NTSC), where he helped initiate directing and playwriting programs, established the Gascon-Thomas Prize for excellence in Canadian theatre, and was instrumental in the revitalization of the Monument National, the performing home of NTSC.

One of the first non-Aboriginal artists of his generation to take an interest in Aboriginal theatre, Thompson has worked extensively with Native Earth Theatre, the Native Theatre School and the Centre for Indigenous Theatre. His directing credits with First Nations artists include Ben Cardinal's *Generic Warrior and No-Name Indians* (1994–95), Yves Sioui Durand and Catherine Joncas' *Uquamaq* (1999) for Native Earth Theatre, and *The Manitoulin Incident* (1994) and *The Tommy Prince Story* (1995) by Alanis King Odjig for De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre at Wikwemikong, Manitoulin Island. He has taught at Brock University, the University of Toronto, Glendon College, the University of Alberta, George Brown College, the National Theatre School of Canada and the University of Ottawa, among others.

Abroad, Thompson's extensive international collaborations and research projects have taken him to Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, Italy, Russia, the UK (where he was appointed Guest Artistic Director of Theatre 7:84), the Republic of Georgia, and most recently a multi-year project in Brazil. As a valued advisor and jury member, he has assisted the Canada, Toronto and Ontario Arts Councils, the Chalmers Award jury and the Savard Commission. He has served on the boards of many theatres, including the Blyth Festival, Theatre W.U.M., the Summerworks Festival and Theatre Passe Muraille. His long list of distinctions includes the Chalmers Award, the Silver Ticket Award from the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts, the Dora Mavor Moore Award, the Drama Bench Award, and Canada Council A and B Grants. In 2003 he was the inaugural recipient of the Huron University College Medal of Distinction, and in 2002 was named an Honorary Member of the Association of Canadian Theatre Research. In 1997 he was honoured with a tribute at the Toronto International Festival of Authors at Harbourfront Centre.

Paul Thompson's vital career and significant contributions continue to influence Canadian theatre today, some 40 years after he began. He lives in Toronto, Ontario with his wife Anne Anglin, and is the proud father of renowned stage actress Severn Thompson and documentarian/teacher Rachel Thompson.