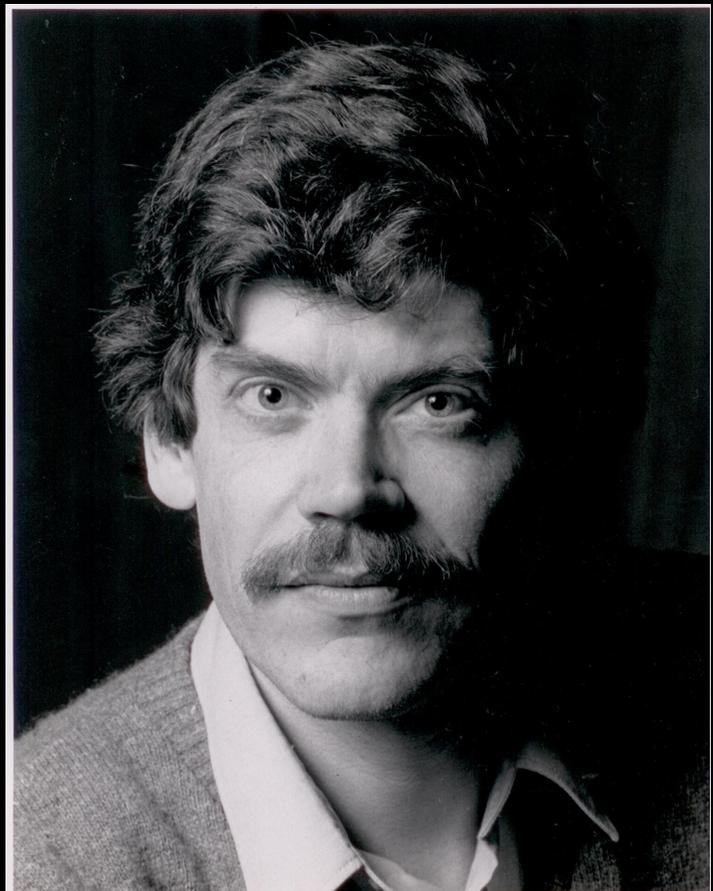


**WORKSHOP WEST**  
**PLAYWRIGHTS' THEATRE**

# A Place to Play

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A Conversation with Gerry Potter, Founding  
Artistic Director of Workshop West



**by Jonah Dunch**

Forty years after he founded Workshop West, Gerry Potter still has a hunger for the live, communal experience of theatre.

What's more, the company's inaugural artistic director thinks he's not alone: the public shares this hunger, and it only grows as we interact with stories and people in a technologically mediated way. And so, we return to the theatre.

"Theatre is the most communal of the art forms: the audience gasps together, and they laugh together, and they cry together sometimes," Potter says. "And that's one of the last areas we can do that in."

Potter and I sit on swivel-chairs in the middle of the Workshop West headquarters' main hall, an old record collection sitting to one side (Potter speculates it belonged to a former artistic director of Northern Light Theatre, from back when the two companies shared the space). He regales me with tales from the company's early days, when its headquarters was his and his wife's living room.

"I knew I wanted to start a theatre company," he reflects. "I just didn't know exactly how."

## PRESENTING: WORKSHOP WEST



Workshop West Playwright's Theatre is a brand new professional theatre founded to help answer the increasing demand to give you, the people of Edmonton, a chance to see the best and most exciting new Canadian plays. These plays will be chosen from both the hits — new works that are packing audiences in at theatre after theatre across the country — and from the most dynamic original plays by our own Alberta Playwrights. At Workshop West we believe you deserve the opportunity to experience plays that accurately reflect your lives as Albertans and Canadians. And our scores of talented playwrights deserve a chance for their works to be seen regularly in this city. We've given our athletes a chance to show their stuff . . . let's do the same for our playwrights!

Workshop West is committed to close work with playwrights — that's why we're a "workshop". But make no mistake: our main activity is to mount full professional productions with the best Canadian actors, designers and directors. To this end we've lined up a blockbuster opening season including a bizarre and hilarious black comedy, a highly charged thriller, and a scorching social protest on its way to becoming a Canadian classic. One is a world Premiere. All are fresh from the pens of Canadian playwrights, written for you and about you, in what critics are calling "the explosion in new Canadian drama".

*Gerry Potter*

GERRY POTTER  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Subscribe to our opening season and share in the excitement.



Fresh from his MFA in Directing at the University of Alberta, Potter consulted with the theatre officer at Alberta Culture, and started recruiting board members for a new theatre company devoted to developing and premiering Canadian plays. Taking his cue from Quebec's Quiet Revolution, he was inspired to promote Canadian cultural nationalism through the arts.

"At that time, the theatre environment was really different from now," Potter explains. "Even to do a Canadian play was a relatively rare thing in Western Canada."

At a party Potter threw to announce he had started Workshop West, one person in attendance — a vocal coach working at the U of A — gave a 75-dollar donation, which is what kickstarted the company's treasury. Potter and the board got around this capital challenge by doing co-op productions, taking a cut of the box office revenue in exchange for venue rental.

Potter's stories about the company's financial survival are the stuff of a Dickens novel. In its second season, Workshop West was struggling to finance its production of *Benny the Beaver* and *the Third World War*. The board chair at the time, Ross Hill — a former production manager at the Citadel — told Potter, "Go and see Margaret."



Margaret Mooney was the assistant to the artistic director at the Citadel, which was almost the enemy at that point!” Potter explains. But he took Hill’s advice: “She wrote a name on a piece of paper and passed it to me, and said, ‘Don’t say anything, just go and phone this person.’”

Potter left and dialed the number, which belonged to a rich benefactor of the arts named Margaret Brine. He laid out the case for his new theatre company when they later met in person, and she sat down and wrote out a cheque for \$3,000.

“And that allowed us to do the production,” Potter says.

While his ingenuity undoubtedly steered Workshop West through the high seas of the arts sector, Potter emphasizes that it was the company’s allies and supporters — people like Hill and the two Margarets — who kept the operation afloat.

“I’m getting a lot of credit for starting the company and doing a lot of things, but always theatre is a team sport,” Potter remarks. “And there have been a huge number of other people who helped make it happen.”

Workshop West’s successes from those early years include productions of David Fennario’s *On the Job* and David French’s *Of the Fields, Lately*. The latter garnered critical acclaim and awards, putting the company on the map.

“Some folks at the Citadel were furious!” Potter recalls with a laugh.

By the late ‘80s, Potter had brought together a loose ensemble of actors who were geared to the then-novel task of working on new plays together. Workshop West also started a playwriting course to encourage Alberta artists to write for the theatre. “We didn’t try to make people forget they were in the theatre,” Potter says. “We tried to make them enjoy it.”

“We were developing playwrights as much as we were developing plays,” Potter says. “If we were doing a new play, I made a vow that [the playwright] would be paid the same amount as the actors to be there in rehearsal, and if they wanted to change the play, they could up till the last week.”

In the summer of 1985, Workshop West hired actors for a five-month period to help a group of playwrights workshop new pieces, including what became Brad Fraser’s *Unidentified Human Remains* and *the True Nature of Love*. The company premiered several of these plays in later seasons.

Potter went on sabbatical in the '86-'87 season to study new play development and ensemble models in other theatre centres, hoping to create an environment where playwrights would write for the actors performing their roles.

“I saw [this vision as] bringing the playwright into the theatre as a living person who was... the centre of the artistic process,” Potter says, although he stresses that the company also produced plays in non-traditional ways, such as collective creation. “I don’t think it matters how the play is written, as long as it’s done in a humane, reasonable fashion... It’s the process of creation that we were honouring.”



When Potter returned in the '87-'88 season, Workshop West produced its smash-hit premiere of *The Rich Man*, adapted from Henry Kreisel's novel of the same name. Potter and Joanne Osborne scripted *The Rich Man* from improvisations the ensemble had done in that 1985 workshop period. The actors interacted with the audience as storytellers, and even got audience members to supply some lighting: An actor found three audience members each night during the pre-show, giving them heavy-duty flashlights to hold up during the show.

Although Potter oversaw dynamic growth in the '80s, the succeeding decade brought an economic downturn, and with it, a decline in the company's audiences and revenue. These were tough years. But through this period, Workshop West persevered — often in inventive ways.

"We'd done things on a shoestring before," Potter remarks — and as the story of *Benny the Beaver's* mysterious benefactor shows, indeed they had.

"I got called out of rehearsal one day in '91," Potter recounts. "Our administrator said, 'The bank won't honour our cheques this week.'"

At the time, every theatre had to post a bond with Actors' Equity. As Potter explains, if Workshop West hadn't met payroll that week, Actors' Equity may have called its bond, paying the actors with the bond money held in the bank — and potentially shutting the company down. The bank demanded the board of directors to give it jointly and severally liable guarantees of \$60,000, in exchange for continuing to honour its loan.

Potter went to the emergency board meeting that had been called the next night.

"I said to the board, 'Is anyone willing to sign any of these things? We've got to make payroll,'" he says.

No one coughed up, and Potter went home. At 5:30 on the morning after, he woke up in a cold sweat.

“I had some kind of nightmare that I didn’t really remember. But it said, ‘Do something!’” he says.

Starting at 7:30, Potter called the longest-running members of the board, asking them to sign guarantees alongside him. He got two board members on board, and went into the bank at 10:30 to throw down the gauntlet.

Okay, this is what we’ll guarantee, not jointly and severally liable,” Potter told the bank staffer. “I will personally guarantee \$20,000, and I have another person here who will guarantee \$20,000, and another person who will give us \$2,000. Okay? Take it or leave it.”

“Oh, that’s not what we asked for,” the bank staffer said.

“Take it or leave it,” Potter repeated.

The staffer went to talk to his manager, coming back five minutes later to give Potter the good news: The bank agreed to loan Workshop West \$60,000 on the basis of those guarantees. That money got the company through the season.

“As an artist, you need to get your hands dirty. You need to know about the business. You need to jump in,” Potter says.

Potter resigned as artistic director in 1994, thinking it was time for new blood to invigorate the company. After leaving Workshop West, he did some contract work as a director, dramaturge, and teacher, before taking a crack at filmmaking.



Fast-forward to 2019, and Potter's embedded his artistic practice in marginalized communities. He's now busy working on his eighth film, *Professor Precarious*, which sheds light on the unstable employment of sessional instructors in post-secondary education across Canada. He's also one of the artistic forces at Rising Sun Theatre, a non-profit creating theatre with people who have cognitive and developmental disabilities.

"I have a belief in freedom and equality — most people do, I guess — but those have been important things to me, and those have informed my work, wherever possible, throughout my life," Potter says. Inspired in part by his work at Rising Sun, Potter thinks theatre artists could engage with disenfranchised and disadvantaged communities a lot more, as theatre is "the most educational medium there is."

"Theatre magically transforms people — emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually," Potter says. "You learn to work with other people, you learn discipline, you learn to use your imagination, you learn to tap into your creativity... That is what drew me into theatre in the first place."

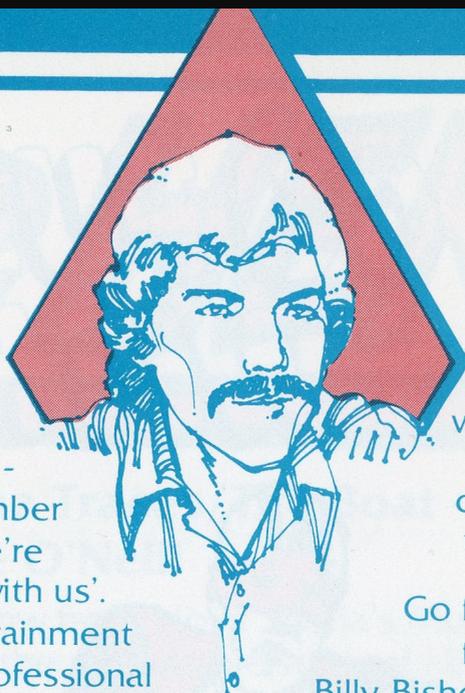
Along with his call for community engagement, Potter encourages emerging artists to make their own opportunities, rather than waiting for someone else to give them a gig. It's how he's approached his work from the beginning, and part of what continues to drive Workshop West forward.

"The company, over those 40 years, has always privileged the people at the core of the creative process, and not divorced them from the theatre," Potter says. "Always, we've tried to develop playwrights and plays, and we've honoured Canadian plays by doing them."

Potter hopes Workshop West continues providing opportunities for artists to write and create plays "in whatever way they create them."

"I hope it's a place where people can play," Potter says. "And I hope it's a place where at least a few people can actually make something of a living, devoting their lives to art."

## Artistic Director's Message



Last year we asked you to 'take off with us' - and Edmontonians responded - doubling our previous number of subscribers. This year we're asking you to 'go further with us'. Go further with your entertainment dollar -- top quality live professional theatre at bargain rates. And go further into the rich experience of theatre by Canadian playwrights. Because we're not only going to continue giving you the best plays by Canadians, for

Canadians, but this year we're adding a twist that we hope will extend and even deepen your experience of theatre: the Canadian hero season.

Go further with us into the rich, funny and inspiring lives of Billy Bishop, Leo Kennedy and Mary Crawford. Join our company of theatre artists to celebrate the very best in all of us, as Canadians, as human beings. You can go further with us.

Gerry Potter  
Artistic Director



Shows 1 and 3 will be at the Citadel's beautiful Rice Theatre, 9828 - 101A Ave. with shows 2 and 4 at the wonderful new Kaasa Theatre. The Kaasa Theatre, located in the lower floor of the Jubilee Auditorium is a beautiful new gem of a facility with excellent accoustics and sight lines. Plenty of free parking is available. We know you'll enjoy both theatres and find them easy to locate.