

Smillie stands tall among the country's theatre leaders

BY CAM FULLER, QC JANUARY 19, 2012



Ruth Smillie, artistic director of the Globe Theatre in Regina.

Photograph by: Don Healy, QC

"You see, Ruth is an artist who cares about other artists. That's the kind of fundamental thing about her. She's working to make the Globe better." —David Latham

When Ruth Smillie opens the door and extends her hand, you can't help but think, "she's so small!" Indeed, there's only five feet of her. She's not going to get in anyone's way at a parade.

But underestimate her at your peril. She's a huge force in Regina theatre, a pioneer, a builder, an innovator, a risk-taker.

"There's an amazing amount of energy packed in there," says Stratford Theatre's David Latham, a friend and colleague.

Smillie has run the Globe Theatre since 1998. As artistic director, she chooses the mainstage plays, directs, fundraises, updates the business model and keeps the old ship afloat. She's also a writer. Her recent adaptation of Robin Hood was the theatre's highest grossing play ever.

The next stage would be a new building, the biggest change in Globe Theatre's 46-year history.

Colleagues like Latham don't see Smillie in terms of feet and inches. They see unshakable determination.

"She has a huge capacity. I find her daunting just in terms of the work that she does."

Smillie, 57, was born in Vanderhoof, B.C., her father a United Church minister. At various times, the family lived in Vancouver, Boston, New York City and Saskatoon, where she met legendary high school drama teacher Bob Hinitt.

"I think a lot of us would say that if it were not for Bob Hinitt, we wouldn't be doing what we're doing now," Smillie says.

She was always drawn to the arts, first in dance until her teacher let her down gently ("I had the joy and love of it but not the technique"), then drama.

Professional theatre in Saskatchewan was just starting to form in the 1960s and '70s. Smillie was in the orbit of the big boom that would create 25th Street Theatre and Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon. She ran Persephone's Youththeatre and also taught drama to Aboriginal youth at the Native Survival School.

The Globe Theatre was out of reach, however.

"I couldn't even get an audition because I didn't come from a British theatre school."

If Smillie has an affinity for the underdog, it's because she was one. Acting in Vancouver early in her career, she found out she was pregnant.

"When I had Emmaline in 1979 it made no sense but I was elated to be pregnant. I was a single mom and an actor. I was very determined to make it work and to be a good mom. I was terrified that I would fail but at the same time very determined."

A lot of people in the theatre have overcome adversity, says Marti Maraden, who is directing the next play in Globe's season, *39 Steps*. Maraden, who played roles like Ophelia and Miranda at Stratford and went on to become the artistic director of the National Theatre School's English program, marvels at the thought of Smillie as a young working mother.

"I can't imagine having a newborn infant on my hip while I'm doing my work in the theatre. It's astounding."

Smillie's work with disadvantaged young mothers led to her writing the play *Teenage Moms*.

"I realized that the only difference between a really great outcome for a child and not so great an outcome is poverty. I don't know that I had greater or lesser capacity. I just had more money."

In her work and life, Smillie doesn't seem to know a hurdle when she runs up to one. She was back on stage, playing Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Emmaline was three weeks old. She had an international hit playing the title role in Hilary's *Birthday*, the first time an adult played a child in a naturalistic drama.

But the grind of acting with a young child started to wear on Smillie. By her first birthday, Emmaline had been on an airplane 22 times. Wanting to settle down, Smillie approached her friend Dennis Foon of Vancouver's Green Thumb Theatre with the idea of directing her first play.

"I was very tiny. I was 25 or 26 years old at the time and there weren't many women directing plays in Canada."

Foon couldn't stop laughing. He asked her if she had any idea how much a production would cost. She did — \$30,000 to \$40,000.

There's more than a hint of indignation in Smillie's eyes as she completes the story. Foon delivered a blow she'll never forget, asking her "do you think I would risk that on you?"

It was a slap in the face. She told Foon she'd never work for him again. They're still friends, but she never did.

"I don't think I would have been as assertive about wanting to be a director. I thank Dennis for that. That really was a kick in the butt for me."

Smillie went on to direct numerous plays and she remains one of the few women in charge of a Canadian regional theatre.

At the Globe, Smillie has continued to turn obstacles into advantages. The playing space is unique — the only full-time theatre-in-the-round in the country.

Artists are attracted to the challenge of the stage, the intimacy.

"The energy in that space is phenomenal," says Latham.

At first, Smillie thought the set-up was an impediment. Now, she says, "I wouldn't want to work any other way. I love it. Every production demands innovation and rethinking and reimagining. Inherently, it challenges the creative juices in a really significant way."

Another thing that defines the Globe is its view of the future. Getting new blood into theatre has always been a priority. It starts practically at birth — babies as young as 18 months can attend the theatre school for music and creative play.

"The cute factor is high when those little kids are here," Smillie says.

The school, which has various classes all the way to adulthood, has grown to 500 from 100 in five years.

Says Maraden: "I love what she's doing here at the Globe in terms of working with children, getting them involved with the theatre and having their lives enhanced by it. But also rigorously training young artists. And I can see the fruit of that."

The theatre's conservatory program is Smillie's coup de grace. Run every second year, it gives emerging professionals three months of intensive training with the best instructors in the country.

Smillie names the conservatory, along with her early work with the Native Survival School as her most significant professional accomplishments.

"Those two things actually did change the world. They weren't there before and they did change the world."

On a personal level, she couldn't be more proud of her children and grandson.

Emmaline Hill is a senior planning and strategy consultant with the City of Regina. She's the mom of 20-month-old Davey.

Thomas Hill is involved in TV production in Vancouver and works with the comedy groups Hip Bang and Pump Trolley.

Lucy Hill, a Globe conservatory graduate, is a professional actor.

"It's a cliché, but statistically I bucked the trend in terms of having really successful, amazing children who have grown up primarily in a single parent home," Smillie says.

Her ex-husband is Regina writer Gerry Hill. They raised their children together and remain close.

Globe Theatre's next act has yet to be written, but it promises to be exciting. The theatre's success is forcing big changes. The audience has doubled to about 60,000 over the last 10 years. In 1998, its annual budget was \$1.1 million. Now it's around \$3.5 million.

The Globe has outgrown its home in the 1906 Prince Edward Building. The building has no loading dock or freight elevator. If a grand piano is needed, it has to be carried up the stairs.

The next Globe might be part of a downtown cultural centre in conjunction with a new library or an element in a new retail and residential complex. Two things are certain. The theatre will continue to be in the round. And the building will be downtown.

"A key part of the city is the revitalization of the downtown. If you want to be supported by the city you better demonstrate that you're a long-term priority for the city," says Smillie.

She is confident about the future but admits she sometimes has doubts about herself. Receiving the Saskatchewan Order of Merit late last year was rather surreal.

"It doesn't feel like it should be you. 'Surely they should have found me out by now!'" she laughs.

But she also has a very useful blind spot.

There have been "big, scary moments along the way" but things that seem difficult for other people don't seem that way to her, she says.

"Maybe my ability to not see things terribly realistically at the time has been an asset."

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