Flights of Fancy

Director **Heather Inglis** and playwright **Beth Graham** discuss *Slight of Mind*
By **Bevin Dooley** - January 29, 2018

It began with a window.

More specifically, it began with the window of the Citadel Theatre's boardroom, where Theatre Yes' Artistic Director and Producer, **Heather Inglis**, teaches the Young Playwrights Company. From the boardroom on the third floor of the Citadel's administrative spaces, a person can see into the windows of the Sun Life Building with astonishing clarity.

But where most people would just see cubicles, Inglis saw an opportunity: "I had imagined it would be great if we could have an audience in the board room, who watched actors in Sun Life across the way, and listened to the story on headset – I was interested in that tension."

It was in the same boardroom where Inglis met the Citadel Theatre's Artistic Director **Daryl Cloran** at the beginning of his tenure. Standing in front of that window, she explained the performance she had envisioned. Shortly after, Cloran got a taste of what Theatre Yes is all about with ANXIETY, an epic immersive collaboration by seven Canadian theatre companies. Shortly after, he approached Inglis with a proposal: create a piece for the Citadel Theatre that uses its many spaces in a variety of ways.

Anyone who has set foot inside the Citadel knows this is no small feat.

What has grown out of the possibilities presented by a single window is now a theatrical experiment of mythic proportions. *Slight of Mind*, penned by Governor General Award- nominated playwright **Beth Graham**, is a sprawling immersive performance that takes audiences into every nook and cranny of the Citadel space, from hallways and stairwells, to lobbies and boardrooms – everywhere except for the theatres themselves. "The architecture of the Citadel is so interesting and expansive," muses Graham, "The Shoctor lobby is a big expanse of space, and what does it feel like to have someone walk away from you in that lobby, or walk towards you? What's it like being in a small, dark room?"

I met with Heather Inglis and Beth Graham over breakfast on a brisk January morning to discuss the origins and evolution of this unique piece of theatre, which will be touching down in Edmonton from March 27 until April 7, 2019. For both artists, the parameters of space, their protracted timeline, and good old-fashioned nerves catalyzed them into action.

"We were both sort of scared at a particular time," admits Inglis. "I think part of that was, as opposed to having an idea and deciding to carry through with it, we were asked to create something, and then

asked what it was going to be about very early on. So then we had to figure out how to find our way in creatively."

"I think that was the big challenge at first. Because I come from a text-based place, I had to think in terms of space and ideas and images, and then I had to marry that with my own process of story, character, and let it emerge from that and have it all still make sense," explains Graham, between sips of coffee. "I was feeling intimidated by the scale. I had to find my leaping-off point from the theme of truth, and so I went to myth, and then things kind of took off from there."

It was near-literal takeoff as well; ruminating on myth led Graham to the concept of flight, and finally to the well-known Greek tale of Icarus. The myth of the young man who flew too close to the sun led Graham to the stories of other people lost or nearly-lost in flight, and has since become the frame for *Slight of Mind.*

Audiences will arrive in the departure lounge of the dubiously-named Icarus Air at the beginning of the piece and be guided by a group of flight attendants through the world of the play. They will traverse time and space to 1938, meeting Amelia Earhart right before her disappearance, to 1958 when Valentina Tereshkova became to first woman sent into space, and make many more stops to gather stories along the way.

Slight of Mind's other significant point of origin is the model of collective creation in the style of European companies such as Complicité and Frantic Assembly. In the spring of 2017, Theatre Yes partnered with Theatre Alberta to host a workshop in Banff with long-time Complicité company member Joyce Henderson. Inglis' thought was: "Maybe I can try to experiment with the notion of ensemble feeding the literary creation of work on a small-scale basis." Following and adapting the Complicité model, Theatre Yes assembled a group of six performers who met monthly, and then bi-weekly, from March through July to explore the themes of the piece they were most interested in, helping to fuel Graham's writing through the process.

In line with the approach of British company Frantic Assembly, Inglis' team also involved the designers very early on. The result is densely-integrated, multi-disciplinary artistry at its finest. The design for *Slight of Mind* boasts a variety of installations and lighting designs by Daniela Masellis and Tessa Stamp, costumes by Brian Bast, video and visuals by Ian Jackson, and sound design – including a full sound installation –by renowned sound artist Gary James Joynes.

It's intriguing - heartening, even - that a piece of theatre as expansive as *Slight of Mind* bloomed from something as quotidian as the view from a particular window. "It's interesting where ideas come from," Inglis agrees. "In this case, it came from contemplating what was right before my eyes." And how much of that source material made the final cut? Inglis hinted that a component of it remains in the project. She won't reveal what it is, so the curious among you will have to board this flight of fancy in order to find out.

SLIGHT OF MIND plays March 27 to April 7, 2019 at the Citadel Theatre. For more information, and to purchase tickets, visit www.citadeltheatre.com.