

Anonymous Toronto theatre Twitter user is generating offstage buzz

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BY GLENN SUMI Mar 1, 2017



The Toronto theatre scene can be pretty drama-free. But the appearance last month of an anonymous Twitter account called [PhantomOfTheTarragon](#) has stirred things up. While most anonymous accounts, like the one named after my inebriated self, [@DrunkGlennSumi](#), are happy tweeting out snark or silliness, the Phantom is concerned with everything from why people mount solo shows and whether writers should direct their own work to which theatre has the best lobby bar. In other words: stuff anyone who sees a lot of theatre occasionally thinks about. Best, he or she seems open – actually encourages – discussion. So I thought I'd request a Direct Message Q&A.

So what prompted you to start this anonymous account?

I love theatre, and the idea of sharing some of my ideas and opinions about it without the context of my identity intrigued me.

I do like that word “sharing.” You really do seem to want to engage in discussions on here, unlike some users who just want to make pronouncements.

Yeah, I chose Twitter over a blog because I like the back-and-forth. People disagree with me, and it helps refine my thinking.

You have an impressive knowledge of theatre. Have you worked professionally in any aspect of it yourself?

No comment!

Fair enough. I'm not trying to seek out your identity but... have we ever met before?

No comment!

Ha-ha. Okay. Why Phantom of the *Tarragon*? Why not *Passe Muraille*, or even the more generic "PhantomOfTheTorontoTheatre"?

The Tarragon is, to me, such an archetypal Canadian theatre. It's consistent, well-managed, modest, staid and unglamorous. It's the perfect hiding place for a Canadian theatre phantom. And that's not necessarily an endorsement.

And you use the Panasonic as your Twitter background picture because....

The Panasonic is the worst-looking theatre probably in Canada, maybe the world. I think it's important to draw attention to its ugliness.

Which brings up an interesting point. Anonymity lets you call out particular people and organizations. You did it with Mirvish and the Panasonic. Recently you did it with George Brown Theatre School and its hiring practices. Have you got many responses to these?

No. I did have a DM conversation with the nice woman who does marketing at Tarragon over their (in my opinion) not-great marketing images, but I don't think theatres are interested in online discussion that isn't just retweeting praise.

“ Deep down, do you want your theatre to make you:

PhantomOfTheTarragon (@lobbywhisper) [February 23, 2017](#)

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It's my impression that, with the exception of Annie Baker's *John*, you avoid naming specific productions or your responses to them. Even in your survey/mini-essay about intellectual vs emotional responses to theatre, you didn't refer to a show you had just seen. Were you, in fact, inspired to tweet that because of a particular show?

Usually it's in response to something I've seen recently. I'm okay with praising shows I feel passionately about, but I have no interest in criticizing individual artists or shows. Making any art is very difficult, and artists are generally powerless. Giving them a bad review anonymously on Twitter doesn't seem very nice. If I'm going to call people out, I'd rather they be people in positions of power, like artistic directors.

Speaking of artistic directors, with Eda Holmes hired at the Centaur Theatre and Daryl Cloran at the Citadel, are you optimistic about the future?

Oh yeah, those are both artists I respect a great deal. The Indigenous Associate Artist position at the Citadel is really exciting. Hopefully it's a meaningful one, and something other theatres copy (especially places like Soulpepper or Canadian Stage). I'm looking forward to seeing what Eda does. There need to be a lot more female ADs in this country, so it's encouraging when someone as good as Eda gets to helm a place as large as the Centaur.

One of the most frustrating things about this job is how regular non-theatre people think going to the theatre is such a big deal. That's one of the reasons why I love the Fringe so much – it's just something regular people do. Why do you think non-theatre-lovers have this attitude, and what can be done to change it? Or does it need changing?

Well, changing the funereal atmosphere of theatre lobbies would probably help. I'm undecided as to whether or not theatre should try to feel like a big event, where people dress up and there's all sorts of decorum, or if it should feel like the circus. Probably there should be both kinds. At the moment, though, you're right. Too often it feels like this uptight, niche thing, where everyone is quietly

whispering amongst themselves before the show, and the work itself too often doesn't feel like it's there to really excite you. The biggest problem, and I know it's something most theatres are aware of and trying to varying degrees to address, is that theatre audiences are too old and white. Reorienting the work toward a younger, more diverse audience will make the whole thing feel more accessible, I think. And when I say young, I don't mean theatre school grads, but people who also consume literature, TV, concerts – young people who don't work in the arts.

Playwrights like Kat Sandler seem to be writing for them. And certainly audiences at the Storefront or Outside the March seem to be drawing them, too. So it can be done.

Definitely. The atmosphere of Storefront or Outside the March shows, or even Videofag in its day, is very friendly to young people.

“ A critic gives your show a not-great review (and you disagree with them):

PhantomOfTheTarragon (@lobbywhisper) [February 22, 2017](#)

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Who are some of your favourite current theatre artists?

Weyni Mengesha, Haley McGee, Tom Rooney, Daren A. Herbert, Chris Abraham, Jordan Tannahill, Kristen Thomson.

Which of your Twitter essays has generated the most discussion and/or attention so far?

Probably the one about good art (or training) not requiring psychological abuse.

Did you wonder at all about [the ethics of naming the teacher](#) anonymously referred to in that piece?

Not at all! If he's going to make comments about an 18-year-old student's weight and sexual experience, I'm going to make comments about how he sounds like a lousy, abusive teacher and should probably be fired. I think if I hadn't heard many other stories about him, I would have refrained, but the guy has a bad reputation.

You've had this account for almost a month now. Has the community responded in the way you'd hoped?

I didn't have many hopes for the account, but I'm very happy that people have responded with thoughtfulness and humour.

Is there something Toronto theatre critics should be doing differently?

I'd like to see critics spend a bit more space arguing for a set of aesthetic principles. I suspect (and I could be wrong) sometimes shows get a good review because they've achieved what they set out to do, but I'd like to see more of a stance taken on whether what they set out to do is worthwhile, and why.

About your avatar: You began with the Phantom of the Paradise, moved on to Bette Davis in All About Eve, and now it's Fellini muse Giulietta Masina. Is there a common link, perhaps movies about stage people?

Yep! At the very beginning I had Corky St. Clair [from Waiting For Guffman].

Damn. Im so sorry I missed that. Anything else you want to bring up? Anything you want to ask me?

Let me just say that I am very impressed by theatre critics and Dora jurors. The thought of having to watch shows I'm 99 per cent sure I won't like fills me with dread. So thank you for doing that.

Tags

KAT SANDLER MIRVISH PRODUCTIONS OUTSIDE THE MARCH STOREFRONT THEATRE TARRAGON THEATRE THIS WEEK IN NOW
TORONTO THEATRE

Glenn Sumi

Glenn started writing for NOW's theatre section in 1997. Currently, he edits and contributes to the film and stage sections. He sees approximately 280 live stage shows and 150 movies a year. His mother