



Toronto Premiere

Canadian Rep Theatre presents

Armstrong's War

by Colleen Murphy
directed by Ken Gass

"a thought-provoking theatrical gem"
What'sOn, London (UK)

featuring
Alex McCulloch and Paolo Santalucia

Nov 11 - Dec 6, 2015

The Citadel, 304 Parliament St

Tickets online: www.canadianrep.ca

Phone: 416.504.7529

**STUDY
GUIDE**

canadian rep theatre

Presents

ARMSTRONG'S WAR

By Colleen Murphy

CREATIVE TEAM -

Director - Ken Gass

Producer - Andre du Toit

Set Designer - Marian Wihak

Lighting Designer - Rebecca Picherack

Costume Designer - Jung-Hye Kim

Original Music & Sound Design - Wayne Kelso

Movement Consultant - Laurence Lemieux

CAST -

Halley Armstrong - Alex McCulloch

Corporal Michael Armstrong - Paolo Santalucia

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ABOUT CANADIAN REP THEATRE

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Canadian Rep Theatre was founded in 1983 by Ken Gass. The company operated out of a church space on Avenue Rd (since destroyed by arson) and there presented the first Robert LePage work outside of Quebec, *Circulations*. We also produced *Le Rail*; Herschel Hardin's *Esker Mike and his Wife*, Agiluk, Hrant Alianak's *Lucky Strike*, John Palmer's *A Day at the Beach*; Ken Gass' *Claudius*; and *Amazon Dream* with a multi-racial cast of 17. In 1996, Canadian Rep co-produced, with Passe Muraille, a new production of *Lucky Strike*. Then Gass returned to the Factory and Canadian Rep was put 'on ice' for several years.

Since 2013, Gass has been committed to re-launching and re-building Canadian Rep Theatre. In January, 2014, Canadian Rep launched its first real season with the English language premiere of *Pacamambo* by Wajdi Mouawad. Subsequently, Canadian Rep Theatre produced the world premiere of Judith Thompson's *Watching Glory Die* in May 2014. The production starred Judith Thompson (her first time on stage in 30 years) and received three Dora nominations including Outstanding New Play, Outstanding Set, and Outstanding Set/Lighting Projections. Canadian Rep Theatre also co-produced with Mirvish Productions the Canadian premiere of George F. Walker's *Dead Metaphor*, playing at the 450-seat Panasonic Theatre in Toronto for three weeks to strong houses and positive reviews.

Canadian Rep's exciting 2015 season began with the critically-acclaimed *How Do I Love Thee?* by Florence Gibson MacDonald in January/February. The production also received five Dora nominations, for Outstanding New Script; Outstanding Direction; Outstanding Female Performance; Outstanding Sets and Outstanding Costumes. The 2015 season continues with Colleen Murphy's *Armstrong's War* in November/December and George F. Walker's incredibly successful *Nothing Sacred* in winter of 2016.

REVIEWS OF PAST PRODUCTIONS OF *ARMSTRONG'S WAR*

"...a study of the fine line between truth and fiction and a celebration of the cathartic power of written words to heal psychological wounds...a rewarding experience." –Steven Bates, The Public Reviews

"fast-paced, detail-rich writing...*Armstrong's War* portrays the very human, decidedly unglamorous consequences of war." – Bruce Cinnamon, Vue Weekly

"tight, well-constructed and focused...a small but powerful play that packs a considerable emotional wallop." – Edmonton Sun

"a thought-provoking theatrical gem." – WhatsOnStage, London UK

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR, KEN GASS

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Why I chose *Armstrong's War*:

- *Armstrong's War* is an important play by an exceptional Canadian writer and theatre artist; a play that is already becoming a part of the major Canadian repertoire. This is also a play grounded in current and relevant social issues, one that can generate wide community discourse, particularly with young audiences.
- *Armstrong's War* brings together an emotionally complex, over-achieving 12-year old girl, wheelchair bound as a result of a devastating accident, and 21-year-old soldier, recovering from physical injuries in an Ottawa rehab hospital. Halley, the girl, is a Pathfinder (Girl Guide) determined to earn a community badge by reading to hospital patients; Michael's real wounds lie, of course, beneath the surface.
- Colleen Murphy is a playwright I have admired greatly for many years—her 2007 Governor General Award winning, *The December Man*, epitomizes her strengths: detailed, carefully constructed characters and scenes, ultimately unfolding to reveal a complex and gripping social reality forcefully impacting on the characters' lives.
- There are many predictable paths a story like this could take, but Colleen Murphy spent five years researching and honing the piece, and the journey is full of painful twists and surprises as these unlikely protagonists unravel threads in common beyond their coincidentally shared surname.
- This is a play with two rich and hugely challenging roles for young actors. Though essentially realistic, this is a play that also invites a bold theatrical response.
- This is a play that deals with empowerment through reading. It also celebrates the importance of giving voice to one's own story, through the act of writing.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: COLLEEN MURPHY

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Colleen Murphy was born in Rouyn-Noranda, Quebec, and grew up in Northern Ontario. She is an award-winning playwright, librettist, and filmmaker based in Toronto. Colleen's play *The December Man* (*L'homme de décembre*) won the 2007 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama, the CAA/Carol Bolt Award, and the Enbridge Playwrights Award. Other plays include *Beating Heart Cadaver* (nominated for a 1999 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama), *The Piper, Down in Adoration Falling*, and *All Other Destinations Are Cancelled*. She won awards in the CBC Literary Competition for the radio dramas *Fire-Engine Red* and *Pumpkin Eaters*. Colleen is currently the Lee Playwright-in-Residence at the University of Alberta. She has served as Playwright in Residence for Finborough Theatre in London, UK, Factory Theatre, Necessary Angel Theatre in Toronto, and continues to serve as Guest Playwright at the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Armstrong's War was staged in a workshop production, presented by Flying Bear Productions and ABG Productions in association with Neil McPherson, at Finborough Theatre in London, UK, from August 11 to 27, 2013. The world premiere was produced by the Arts Club Theatre in Vancouver, from October 17 to November 9, 2013. It has also been performed in Edmonton and Winnipeg.



Matreya Scarrwener and Mik Byskov in the 2013 world premiere of *Armstrong's War* at Arts Club Theatre, Vancouver. Photo by David Cooper.

SYNOPSIS

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Armstrong's War is set in the rehabilitation wing of a hospital in Ottawa, Ontario, in the spring of 2007. It involves two characters and takes place in a hospital room over the course of six weeks. Halley Armstrong is an energetic 12-year-old in a wheelchair, who wants to earn her Pathfinders community service badge by reading to someone in a hospital. The patient she chooses is Afghan war veteran Corporal Michael Armstrong, because they have the same last name. At first, Michael greets Halley's positive energy and optimism with scorn. He tells her he does not want to be read to and angrily tells Halley to go away.

Halley returns the following week, determined to earn her community service badge. She decides that maybe a book about war would be more appealing to Michael, and brings in *The Red Badge of Courage*, a novel about a soldier in the American Civil War. Michael can identify with the soldier in the novel as he describes both the excitement and fear of war. He asks Halley if he can keep the book to read on his own. Halley is encouraged by Michael's interest in the book, and shares with him the story of the skiing accident that put her in a wheelchair.

The next week, Michael admits to Halley that he already finished *The Red Badge of Courage*. Michael suggests that they read their favourite parts aloud, and Michael knows the book so well that Halley thinks he has actually read it several times. Michael's connection to the story helps him open up about his own experience fighting in Afghanistan.



Eva Foote as Halley and Jamie Cavanagh as Michael in the Theatre Network production in Edmonton, April 2015.

When Halley arrives the following week, Michael surprises her with a story he has written that he calls “Armstrong’s War”. Halley reads the story aloud; it is about two “friends” Aidan and Danny who pledged each other that, if either was so badly wounded they wouldn’t be able to live a normal life, the other would kill him rather than allowing him to go on living in such a terrible state. In the story, Danny is wounded very badly, and Aidan carries out his promise. The story makes Halley very upset, and she tells Michael that Aidan should not have killed Danny even though the two friends had a pact. Halley is so angry that she leaves the hospital.

Michael is very surprised when Halley returns the next week. She has written her own version of “Armstrong’s War” in which Aidan does not kill Danny, and Danny goes on to lead a normal and happy life despite his injuries. Michael gets angry with Halley and tells her that her version of the story is not realistic, but he respects Halley’s optimism. Michael and Halley now trust each other enough to reveal deeper secrets about themselves. Halley tells Michael the real story of her accident, and Michael admits that “Armstrong’s War” is really about him and his friend Robbie. He tells Halley what really happened when Robbie was wounded. Michael gets ready to return to his normal life and Halley teaches him the Armstrong family motto, “I remain unvanquished.”

HISTORICAL & SOCIAL CONTEXT

Pathfinders

The Pathfinders are for girls aged 12-14 and are part of the Girl Guides of Canada. Girl Guides can trace their roots back to 1909, when a group of girls in England were angry that they weren’t allowed to join the Boy Scouts, so they formed their own group. The Girl Guides have been active in Canada since 1910. Pathfinders emphasize community building and outdoor activities, and focus on self-esteem building, leadership, teamwork, and caring for the environment. They earn badges for completing various activities, such as community service like Halley in the play.



War in Afghanistan

HALLEY: Can I ask you a question?

MICHAEL: What?

HALLEY: Are we going to win the war?

MICHAEL: No one's gonna win.

HALLEY: Why not?

MICHAEL: Lot of reasons...



Following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City on September 11th, 2001, The United States launched invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan, the beginning of what became known as the “war on terror”. Canada decided it would contribute to the war in Afghanistan to fight terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, who were being fostered by the corrupt Taliban government. Once the Taliban fell, Al Qaeda left Afghanistan, and Canadian forces remained to try and rebuild Afghanistan as a democratic and secure country.

At this point, many people thought that Canada’s involvement in the war would come to an end. However, the war continued longer than predicted. The Taliban government had been supported by the majority Pashtun ethnic group and had been financed and supplied by factions within Pakistan. Once the government was defeated, those who had supported it were filled with resentment at the loss of their political power. The United States and its allies created a mostly non-Pashtun governing regime, which saw little support from the Pashtun-dominated areas of the country, particularly in the southern region around Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second-largest city. As a result, the Taliban reorganized into a guerrilla insurgency that waged a war against the Afghan government and the forces supporting it. This made the efforts to fight against the insurgents very difficult; as Michael says in the play, “you can’t defeat an insurgency, best you can do is marginalize it.”

By the mid-2000s, the Canadian Armed Forces had suffered more casualties than expected in a war that claimed tens of thousands of Afghan lives. As time went on, the Canadian population supported the war less and less. It became increasingly clear that there would be no clear “victory” over the Taliban. In 2014, Canada withdrew its final soldiers from Afghanistan. Canada’s 12-year involvement in the war in Afghanistan resulted in the deaths of 158 soldiers and the wounding of more than 2,000 others, and Afghanistan still has a long and complicated road to becoming a peaceful and democratic nation.

Soldiers Returning from War



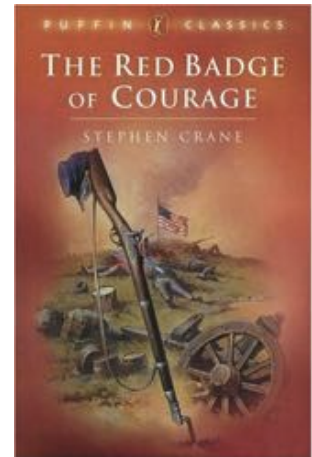
Mark Quartley as Michael.
Finborough Theatre, London,

There are a variety of social and psychological issues that a person who has been in an armed conflict must deal with, the most well known being Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Post-traumatic stress disorder is a mental illness involving exposure to trauma such as death, the threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Something is traumatic when it is very frightening, overwhelming and causes a lot of distress. Trauma is often unexpected, and many people say that they felt powerless to stop or change the event. Traumatic events may include crimes, natural disasters, accidents, war or conflict, or other threats to life.

PTSD among war veterans has been known to exist at least since the times of ancient Greece and has been called by many different names. In the American Civil War, it was referred to as "soldier's heart;" in the First World War, it was called "shell shock" and in the Second World War, it was known as "war neurosis." PTSD affects everyone differently. Sufferers may experience nightmares, flashbacks, and distressing memories surrounding the traumatic event. They may attempt to cut themselves off from memories of the event and withdraw from friends and family, which can lead to feelings of depression and isolation. They may suffer from angry outbursts, problems with concentration, and insomnia.

Playwright Colleen Murphy has stated that Michael does not suffer from PTSD in the play, but the guilt he feels for what happened to Robbie is obviously affecting him on a deep psychological level. In recent years, psychologists have begun to identify what they call moral injury: the guilt that affects veterans over both killing someone in a combat situation, and surviving while others have not survived. What separates moral injury from PTSD is a sense of violating one’s own basic moral values and transgressing against what is right.

The Red Badge of Courage is a novel by American writer Stephen Crane, first published in 1895 when Crane was 24. The story takes place during the American Civil War and focuses on a young private in the Union Army named Henry Fleming. Henry has a romantic image of what he thinks war will be like and dreams of heroism and glory. However, when he is confronted with the enemy, Henry flees into the woods. He is immediately ashamed and wishes that he had received a wound in battle (the “red badge of courage” referred to in the title). He eventually returns to his regiment and proves himself to be a worthy and brave soldier. Although Stephen Crane wrote the novel without any experience in war, the novel was praised as being very realistic. The novel remains a major American text and continues to be read widely in both the United States and beyond.



PRE-SHOW CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: War in Afghanistan (Geography, History, Civics)

Find information on Canada’s participation in the war in Afghanistan. Break into groups and give each group a specific topic to research:

- Afghanistan before the war (political climate, social and economic conditions, etc.)
- A timeline of the war and Canada’s involvement
- The Taliban
- Establishing democracy in Afghanistan and the first election
- Canada’s role in building infrastructure (schools, hospitals, clean water, food, etc.)
- Reactions to Canada’s involvement in the war from people at home

Activity Time: 70 minutes

40 minutes: research and presentation planning

30 minutes: group presentations

Each group can present their findings to the rest of the class in a 5-minute presentation. Based on their findings, each group should decide whether or not Canada should have been involved in the war, and why or why not.

Activity 2: Trauma and PTSD (Health, English)

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Divide into groups. Have each group research one of many possible problems that affect war veterans, such as:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Depression and Anxiety
- Work, relationship, and family challenges

The Veterans Canada article “Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and war-related stress” is a great place to start, and can be found here: http://www.veterans.gc.ca/pdf/mental-health/ptsd_warstress_e.pdf

Each group can compile a report that includes both **primary** and **secondary** sources.

Primary sources: People use original, first-hand accounts as building blocks to create stories from the past. These accounts are called primary sources, because they are the first evidence of something happening, or being thought or said.

Primary sources are created at the time of an event, or very soon after something has happened. These sources are often rare or one-of-a-kind. However, some primary sources can also exist in many copies, if they were popular and widely available at the time that they were created.

Some examples of primary sources are diaries, letters, photographs, video footage, sound recordings, interviews and published first-hand accounts or stories, and maps.

Secondary sources: Second-hand, published accounts are called secondary sources. They are called secondary sources because they are created **after** primary sources and they often use or talk about primary sources. Secondary sources can give additional opinions (sometimes called bias) on a past event or on a primary source. Secondary sources often have many copies, found in libraries, schools or homes.

Secondary sources include history textbooks, biographies, published stories, movies of historical events, works of art, and music recordings.

Activity Time: 60 minutes

30 minutes: research

30 minutes: synthesis and
report compilation

POST-SHOW CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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Activity 3: *The Red Badge of Courage* (English)

"He sprang from the bunk and began to pace nervously to and fro, "Good Lord, what's th' matter with me?" he said aloud. He felt that in this crisis his laws of life were useless."

--*The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane

Have students read all or part of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (the full text is available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/73/73-h/73-h.htm>).

Discussion Questions:

Compare the novel to *Armstrong's War*. What similarities can you find between the play and the story?

What comparisons can be drawn between the character of Michael in the play and Henry Fleming in the novel?

Why do you think Michael is so interested in this novel?

Synthesis:

Write a story or poem about a traumatic event (it can be real or imagined).

Have several students share their creative works. Discuss how you think creative outlets, such as writing a real event as fiction, can be helpful in the healing process.

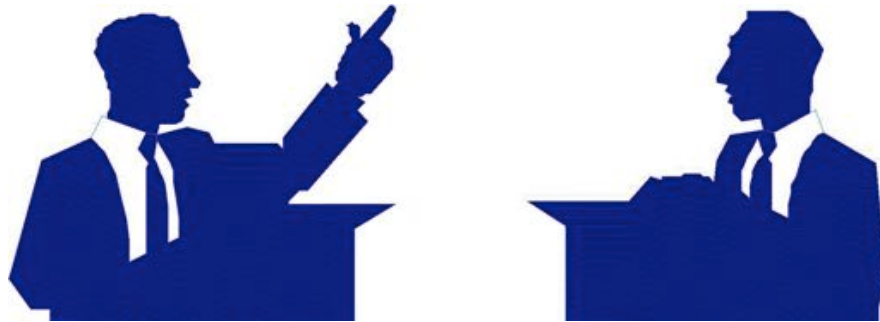
Activity Time: 60 minutes

20 minutes: discussion

20 minutes: creative writing

20 minutes: additional discussion





Have the students form two teams to debate the following question:

Did Michael do the right thing when he went back on his word to Robbie? Was the pact between soldiers morally right or wrong?

Proposition: Michael did the right thing when he went back on his word. The pact between soldiers was morally wrong.

Opposition: Michael did not do the right thing when he went back on his word. The pact between soldiers was morally right.

You may also choose to have students act as a panel of judges.

20 minutes: preparation of arguments
5 minutes: First speaker, Proposition
5 minutes: First speaker, Opposition
5 minutes: Second speaker, Proposition
5 minutes: Second speaker, Opposition
5 minutes: preparation of rebuttals
5 minutes: Rebuttal speaker, proposition
5 minutes: Rebuttal speaker, Opposition

Activity Time: 60 minutes

20 minutes: argument
preparation

20 minutes: argument
presentation

10 minutes: rebuttal
presentation

10 minutes: discussion

After the debate, discuss what worked and didn't work. You may or may not want to declare a "winner" based on the strength of arguments and the effectiveness of their delivery.

Activity 5: Scene Creation (Drama)

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In *Armstrong's War*, the action takes place during six weekly visits that Halley makes to Michael's hospital room. What do you think happens to each of the characters in the time between each visit? How does the passage of time between scenes inform the action of the play?

- Imagine that Michael and Halley's first meeting has just happened. With a partner, write a scene in which either Michael or Halley is describing their encounter to someone else (a friend at school, a doctor, a parent, etc.). How would you describe the other character? How did it make you feel? How would an outside listener react?
- Share your scenes with the class as a staged reading. What are the similarities and differences between all the scenes involving Michael? How about the scenes involving Halley?

Activity Time: 75 minutes

30 minutes: scene creation and rehearsal

30 minutes: staged reading presentations

15 minutes: class discussion

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does the play's title contain multiple meanings?
- Reading aloud is a prominent part of the play. How is reading aloud different from solitary reading? What are the pros and cons of both? Which do you prefer and why?
- This play has two characters, which is also known as a "two-hander". What are the benefits and challenges of a play with only two actors? As a director, how would your approach to the play differ from one with a large cast?
- Compare and contrast the ways in which Halley and Michael cope with the traumas in their lives. Why do you think they respond in different ways?
- What do you think will happen to Michael and Halley after the action of the play is over? In what ways have each of the characters changed throughout the course of the play? In what ways have they remained the same? Why do you think Michael is so fixed on going back to Afghanistan, despite his traumatic experience there?
- Both Halley and Michael have faced personal tests in their lives, in the form of Halley's accident and Michael's experience in Afghanistan. What is a personal test you have faced? Did succeeding or failing at this test affect what you learned about yourself, help you grow, or make you feel wiser?

ARMSTRONG'S WAR CREATIVE TEAM

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Paolo Santalucia, Corporal Michael Armstrong



Paulo Santalucia is an actor born and raised in Toronto, Ontario. His credits include *The Dybbuk*, *Idiot's Delight*, *Of Human Bondage*, *Great Expectations*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *The Royal Comedians*, *The Crucible*, *Dirt* (Soulpepper) *Romeo and Juliet* (Hart House Theatre) *Twelfth Night* (Canopy Theatre) *Dog Sees God*, *The Selkie Wife*, *Mr. Marmalade* (Fly By Night Theatre) *After Juliet* (YPT). He won a Dora Award for Outstanding Ensemble for his work in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Alex McCulloch, Halley Armstrong



Alex McCulloch is currently graduating from the performance stream at the Drama Centre, where she has already proved herself an extraordinary young talent, co-starring in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and in Judith Thompson's *Perfect Pie*. *Armstrong's War* will be her first full-fledged professional role.

Ken Gass, Director



Ken Gass is the founding artistic director of Canadian Rep Theatre and Factory Theatre (1970-79; 1996-2012). He has directed numerous notable productions including *The Rez Sisters* (2011); *Belle* (Capital Critics' Award for Best Direction); *The Leisure Society* (Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding Direction); *Apple* by Vern Thiessen (2006); *The Tiger of Malaya* by Hiro Kanagawa (2003); *A Short History of Night* by John Mighton (1999); *fareWel* by Ian Ross (1999) and several acclaimed revivals of plays by George F. Walker including *Better Living*, *Escape From Happiness*, *Beyond Mozambique*, and *Tough!*. Gass was the 2010 winner of the Premier's Award for Excellence in the Arts. Other awards include The George Luscombe Award for theatre mentoring, Toronto Theatre Critics' Award for contribution to Toronto Theatre, The Toronto Arts Award, and The Dora Silver Ticket Award for lifetime achievement.

André du Toit, Producer



In addition to Canadian Rep Theatre, where he has been producer since 2008, André is the Artistic Producer of The Lab Cab Festival and the Artistic Director of Rooftop Creations. Other producing credits include the 2011 Dora winning *Tomasso's Party*; Factory WIRED festival 2012 at Factory Theatre; *Tough!* (Magnetic North Theatre Festival); *Roaul Julia's Romero* (Summerworks); *From Mint Condition to Badly Used* (Fringe Festival Patron's Pick); and *fourtyseven* (Tecumseth Massive). He is also a multiple Dora Award winning lighting designer (*The Double*, *Bakelite Masterpiece*, *Take Me Back to Jefferson*), Production Manager, Technical Director, and Playwright.

Wayne Kelso, Composer & Sound Designer



Wayne Kelso has spent the last thirty years performing, composing and producing. As a composer, Wayne has written scores for numerous plays for both CBC and live theatre. His score for Factory Theatre's production of *The Leisure Society* was nominated for a Dora award in 2005. He composed music and created sound for the recent productions of *Pacamambo* and *How Do I Lovee Thee?* at Canadian Rep Theatre. He also composed original music and created the sound design for *Claudius* and *Amazon Dream* by Ken Gass (Canadian Rep Theatre); *Apple* by Vern Thiessen; and *Better Living* and *Escape From Happiness* by George F. Walker, all directed by Ken Gass.

Rebecca Picherack, Lighting Designer



Rebecca has designed lighting for numerous award-winning productions over the past 15 years at theatres such as Factory Theatre, Blyth Festival, Buddies in Bad Times, DNA, Young People's Theatre, Mammalian Diving Reflex, GCTC, MTC, Mirvish Productions, Nightwood, Tarragon, Theatre Passe Muraille, Theatre Smith Gilmour and Volcano. She has been nominated 16 times and received two Dora Mavor Moore Awards for her work in theatre. For Canadian Rep Theatre, Rebecca designed lighting for *Pacamambo*, as well as for the production of *Dead Metaphor* at the Panasonic.

Jung-Hye Kim, Costume Designer



As well as designing costumes for *Pacamambo* for Canadian Rep, Jung-Hye's set and costume design credits include *The Third Floor* (Thousand Islands Playhouse), *Passion Play* (Outside the March, Convergence Theatre and Sheep No Wool Production), *The Biographer* (TangoCo), *Boblo* (Kitchenband Production and The Theatre Centre), *Hiding Words* (Eventual Ashes), *The Great Mountain* (Red Sky Performance with YPT), *Pub Opera* (Tapestry New Opera), *After Akmatova*, *If We Were Birds* (Tarragon Theatre), *The Middle Place* (Project Humanity/Canadian Stage), *The Big League* (YPT), *Montparnasse* (Theatre Passe Muraille/Groundwater Theatre); *Minotaur* (YPT) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (Thousand Islands Playhouse).

Marian Wihak, Set Designer



Marian is a Toronto based multi-disciplinary artist working in film, television, theatre and visual art. Her work has been the recipient of numerous awards and nominations, including a Dora nomination for *The Leisure Society* and two Gemini Awards for Best Production Design for the television movies *Pit Pony*, and *September Songs: the Music of Kurt Weill*, co-designed with Michael Levine. Marian has collaborated with Ken Gass on numerous projects over the years - *Pacamambo*, *Bethune Imagined*, *Apple*, *Leisure Society*, *Amazon Dream* and *Claudius*, in addition to working on a wide range of film projects including Gordon Pinsent's *Heyday*, Agnieszka Holland's *Julie Walking Home*, and Rhombus Media's *Mulroney:the Opera*.

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