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October 9, 2002

In search of new stages

By Kate Taylor

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

It took a producer with a case of

When performing-arts producer Sherrie Johnson was a child already anxious to escape workaday Chicago, she collected maps and memorized the names of global capitals. This week, she's flying off to Scotland and the Czech Republic to launch a festival of performance from Canada, the country that only adopted her because it thought it was getting a criminologist. Johnson, who keeps apartments in New York and Prague along with a house in Toronto, has a talent for getting around, and getting her way.

"There was no way I was going to stay anywhere," she said in an interview this week on the eve of Six Stages, the festival of Canadian theatre and dance that she is currently organizing in Glasgow, Prague and Berlin.

Johnson, 35, is probably best known as producer to Toronto theatre genius Daniel MacIvor: She's the woman who got him touring internationally with one-man shows like *Here Lies Henry* and *Monster*, and is now co-producing his recent forays into film, *Past Perfect* and *Wilby Wonderful*. But she's also encouraged a whole range of Canadian performers to hit the road, either in her role as a producer or indirectly as a mentor. With artists' agent Menno Plukker working as her partner, Six Stages features everyone from Newfoundland comic Andy Jones and Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit company to Quebec dance troupe La La La Human Steps.

Wanderlust and entrepreneurship: As Johnson tells it, she comes by them honestly - as a reaction against the constraints of her upbringing. Her father died when she was 5; her stepfather was an industrial engineer and her mother was a housewife. She remembers her mother and her grandmother, who worked all her life for the same company as a bookkeeper, voicing their regrets about missed opportunities and dictatorial bosses.

It was a horsey family and Johnson, who specialized in jumping and dressage, wanted to ride with the

U.S. national team. When her parents squelched that idea, she began studying criminology at Indiana State University. She only took that first theatre course because she thought it would improve her performance in the courtroom, but she discovered it was a very different place than her male-dominated criminology classes.

"I was extremely attracted to it. There was no judgment. I could be myself," she recalled. After completing her first degree, she did an MA in theatre.

"I loved theatre, but it turned out I didn't have the best skills as an actor, writer or director. Organizing and being in charge - that was no problem."

And so, a theatre producer was born. In 1990, determined not to move with the pack as her classmates set off for careers in Chicago and New York, she simply drove across the border. Once in Toronto, she rented an apartment and fessed up to the authorities that she wasn't just visiting.

"There's a shortage of criminologists in this country. I got a work visa that day," she says, laughing.

She began working with Maclvor in 1993, and also produces for Jan Komarek's experimental Toronto company Sound Image Theatre, but it's her insistence on culture as an international exchange that is unusual on the English-Canadian theatre scene.

"There were no festivals in Toronto that were taking a chance on young artists and showcasing them for a world stage. [Meanwhile] foreign companies came for one stop and then left. It didn't make sense that we weren't profiting from their presence."

She teamed up with Menno Plukker, who was then based in Quebec, and in 1995 they organized a small Toronto festival to coincide with Montreal's Festival du Théâtre des Ameriques, plucking a Chinese show and some Quebec content from its lineup while adding Ontario artists too. It was called Six Stages, although one of the six shows cancelled. Audiences were good for some shows, poor for others, but the key was that international presenters were invited to see the Canadian work.

It took Johnson and Plukker five years to raise enough money to repeat the event, but last year they held another Six Stages in Toronto, this time piggybacking on the High Performance Rodeo run by One Yellow Rabbit in Calgary. Last year's event attracted Neil Murray, administrative director of Glasgow's Tron Theatre, and a delegation of Czech presenters. (Johnson's Czech boyfriend is ancient history, but she never broke up with Prague.) The foreigners liked the idea of inviting more Canadian artists to their cities, but they wanted to place the work in some kind of context: Why not borrow the Six Stages concept of a minifestival?

And so, with images of Mounties, mountains and maple leaves - and \$200,000 from the Canada Council - a half-dozen Scottish and Czech theatres are offering audiences a festival of Canadian theatre and dance this month. In Berlin, meanwhile, Montreal actress Marie Brassard will be performing her one-woman show *Jimmy*, and Johnson and Plukker will also organize a larger event there in 2004 timed to the opening of the new Canadian embassy.

But first, in 2003, they have invited Czech, Scottish and German artists back to Toronto for another instalment of Six Stages.

"We travel all over the world saying, 'take these Canadian artists,' but we never give anything back," Johnson observed, stressing the reciprocal nature of the project.

Whether it's Scotland, Germany or the Czech Republic, Europeans tend to associate Canada with natural beauty, not the kind of avant-garde performance and intense solo work favoured by Johnson. How will Andy Jones's off-the-wall humour play in Glasgow? How will Prague receive the experimental choreography of Edouard Lock's La La La Human Steps?

At the very least, Six Stages should explode some stereotypes of Canadians as boring. Still, while it's purely coincidental that the festival is starting in smaller capitals, Johnson agrees that getting attention in Berlin and New York, the cities she has lined up for 2004, may be harder than Glasgow and Prague.

"In English Canada, every company that calls me has the same idea: They want to go to New York and they want to go to Edinburgh [where the Edinburgh Festival and the Fringe combine to produce the largest theatre event in the world]. Those are the two hardest cities to be seen in."

So, part of the point of Six Stages is not merely to introduce the citizens of Glasgow, Berlin and Prague to more Canadian culture, but also to expand the cultural horizons of Canadian artists themselves. And the woman with three residences, dual citizenship and a thing for maps is ideally placed to do it.

The Six Stages festival runs in Prague, Berlin and Glasgow from tomorrow to Nov. 3. For more information: <http://www.sixstages.com>.

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