

da da kamera's last shot captured

Independent
theatre company
closes its doors
after 20-year run

BY J. KELLY NESTRUCK

Sitting in da da kamera's sun-flooded offices in downtown Toronto, producer Sherrie Johnson points at a wall of posters from her soon-to-shut-down theatre company's shows. "The first show I produced, *Here Lies Henry*," she indicates. "*You are Here. Cul-de-sac. The Soldier Dreams. House. In on It. Never Swim Alone. Past Perfect*, the first feature film we made [through offshoot da da kamera pictures]."

Most of these film and play posters feature artistic director, playwright and actor Daniel MacIvor's devilish mug beaming out from behind the laminate. Johnson, 38, is the less publically known half of da da kamera — the one who doesn't get her face plastered around town.

The two are currently presenting their last new production, MacIvor's *A Beautiful View*, at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. Next season, the company will mount a retrospective of three of MacIvor's one-man shows — *House, Monster* and *Here Lies Hen-*

ry — and then it's bye-bye to da da.

"We're closing the company because it feels right," says Johnson, who was also producer of the Six Stages festival and represents playwright John Mighton. "I think it's positive that when certain visions or companies run their course, they end. ... It'll be healthy for both of us."

The partnership began back in 1993 when MacIvor's *Never Swim Alone* was being presented at Theatre Passe Muraille, where Johnson was the publicist. It was a cold January and not many people were coming out to see the show. Then, the pipes burst and a few nights had to be cancelled.

"One day, Daniel and I were in the bar and I heard him say that he wanted to quit theatre, because it was just too difficult to try to run a company, write grants — it wasn't working out," Johnson recalls. "In that moment, I thought, well, if he quits theatre, there's really no point in me continuing. So I proposed that we join forces."

da da kamera was the name under which MacIvor had presented his work since 1986, but with Johnson on board it became a bona fide company. (The director Daniel Brooks is also a frequent collaborator.) She set about organizing international tours, something that was then mostly confined to French Canadian theatre artists. Their shows went across Canada, Scotland,

Ireland, the United States, Australia, Norway and Israel and met with great success. *Here Lies Henry* won an Edinburgh Fringe First Award, while the two-hander *In On It* picked up an Obie (off-Broadway award) in New York City. Johnson's ability to export Canadian theatre even earned her a spot on a European trade mission alongside then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien.

It is a little ironic that this stalwart ambassador of Canadian culture is, in fact, from the United States.

Born just south of Chicago, Johnson studied at Indiana State, where she got a bachelor's degree in criminology, another in theatre and then a master's in communications. After graduation, instead of following her theatre friends to New York and Chicago, she decamped for Toronto.

While Johnson's ability to move shows across borders is now legendary in theatre circles, she was pretty green about crossing international boundaries when she first came to Canada. She entered the country with all of her belongings, but without a job, a work visa or a place to live — and without knowing a single person in the city. "I went to Immigration and announced that I had moved here," Johnson recalls. "They promptly told me that that's not the way it's done."

Luckily for Johnson, she had her degree in criminology and Canada had a lack of criminologists at that time. Luckily for the rest of us, she couldn't find a job in the field and fell back on her theatre skills, working at Shakespeare in Action and Hillar Liitola's DNA Theatre before encountering MacIvor.

MacIvor says Johnson's American roots have been integral to



PETER REDMAN / NATIONAL POST

Sherrie Johnston says of her relationship with Daniel MacIvor: "We grew up together."

da da kamera's success. "She didn't have that Canadian attitude about, 'Oh, we're pretty good,'" he says over the phone from Halifax, where he is looking to buy a house after years of touring for eight months a year. "She had a very aggressively positive attitude about the importance of the quality of the work. ... That's just not my nature."

Johnson nonetheless describes the two as coming from similar backgrounds, albeit on different sides of the 49th parallel. "You'll often hear Daniel say there were only two books in his house growing up: the Bible and a dictionary," she says. "Our house was somewhat similar, but it was magazines

and it was *Playboy* and *National Geographic*."

Petting da da kamera's third member, Skippy the fox terrier, the petite producer does not seem particularly aggressive. But she gets straight down to business and doesn't waste any words while outlining some of her favourite da da kamera moments, such as being the first English-language company to present at Montreal's Théâtre de Quat'Sous or presenting at a 1,000-seat opera house in Tel Aviv.

Johnson has no regrets about shutting down the company, however. MacIvor wanted to settle down, focus on playwriting and direction and maybe try some teach-

ing, and she is looking forward to taking some time off. She also has her hands full with her work in film, as touring liaison with the Magnetic North festival and associate producer of the PuSh festival. (She and MacIvor are going to reunite to produce a third movie in 2007.)

"I feel quite privileged that we had that time together," she says. "We grew up together. ... It's the longest relationship either one of us has had in our lives."

■ *A Beautiful View* continues until May 21 at Buddies in Bad Times. Visit www.buddiesinbadtimes-theatre.com for details.

National Post

knestruck@nationalpost.com