Canadian theatre workers are all acutely aware of the changing nature of professional theatre in Canada today. With the recent closing of Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company, a regional theatre on Canada’s west coast established almost 50 years ago, and Toronto’s Dancap Productions, a commercial theatre producer with a specific interest in Broadway-style productions, it is clear that producers are struggling to draw crowds. The grounds beneath the feet of traditional structures of Canadian theatre are shifting; the ways in which theatre is produced and consumed are changing and theatre companies as well as individual artists are working to adapt.

One example of this changing structure is the work of the Toronto-based Theatre Passe Muraille (TPM), which translates loosely as “theatre beyond walls.” I had the opportunity to sit down with TPM’s General Manager Kendra Fry and Resident Dramaturge Samantha Serles over some cool drinks on a hot summer day to chat about how the company has been working to change its approach to how it produces theatre.

Fry and Serles discussed that at TPM there is a significant move away from the prominence of producing on the mainstage, which has traditionally been regarded as the gold standard in the world of Canadian theatre. Rather, TPM has begun to focus its efforts on increasing multi-leveled opportunities to build relationships with a diverse range of artists. And, it seems, this change has meant increased opportunities for women artists too.

Fry, who joined TPM in 2010, started her career as a stage manager before moving into administration, including stints at the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company, Cahoots Theatre Projects and The Theatre Centre, all in Toronto. “I really do love being at Passe Muraille,” says Fry. “I talk about my work with other people and they laugh at me for being all doe-eyed, but it really is that great!”

Serles, who began at TPM though an internship while pursuing her MFA at York University, also speaks about her work with a similar glowing quality. “Yeah, people think we’re just towing the
party line when we talk about how great it is here, but I have to agree that it really is a fantastic
group of people and a fantastic place to work.”

Part of what makes it so great, according to Fry and Serles, is that members of the TPM team, at all levels of the organization, have a real say in what goes on in the company. Fry spoke about how the kind of artistic work happening at TPM reflects the very structure of the company. She acknowledged that, yes, she and TPM’s Artistic Director Andy McKim have the final say regarding producing matters. But in fact, both leaders strive to work outside a traditional, hierarchical producing model, giving other members of the company opportunities to spearhead and lead events and series. TPM has a number of initiatives organized by different company members that provide grass roots opportunities for artists to connect with and build long term relationships with the company.

An example of how TPM connects differently with local artists is TheBuzz Festival, happening tri-annually in a week long format, and Buzz Nights, which are held intermittently throughout the season. As TPM’s new play development initiative, Buzz provides artists the opportunity to put new works-in-progress (or even parts of those works-in-progress) in front of an audience, in order to get direct dramaturgical feedback about what is working and what isn’t. Not only does this provide great, immediate response from audience members, giving artists much needed time and space to hone and refine their work, but it allows TPM as a company to see artists in action, building a relationship with the specific theatrical work and a longer term relationship with the artist. Buzz is curated by local theatre artist Aviva Armour-Ostroff, who has perhaps a more immediate relationship to fellow artists than the administrators in the TPM offices.

In addition to Buzz is Crap Shoot, a late-night, cabaret-style performance event geared to emerging artists. Crap Shoot takes place at 10pm on Friday nights throughout the season, and emerging artists have the chance to perform for five minutes each. A winner is chosen by the audience, who is then granted 20 minutes of performance time at the next Crap Shoot. It is a low-risk, very fun opportunity for audience members and artists alike and allows emerging artists to develop among their peers with access to the broader company, as McKim and Serles often attend. Crap Shoot is curated by a small group of young artists, recast every season.

Pitch Blitz is TPM’s opportunity for artists to pitch themselves and an artistic project to McKim. In lieu of the standard ‘general auditions,’ where actors come in to present a brief sampling of their work to an Artistic Director usually through monologues and/or song, Pitch Blitz allows McKim and TPM access to a range of artists and their creative ideas. Held throughout the year, Pitch Blitz gives artists five minutes to showcase their work beyond just “please produce my show.”
Serles sees her own role as beyond that of a traditional dramaturge, sitting at a desk a reading submitted scripts (which, for the record, she also loves to do). Serles is also actively involved in each of these initiatives described above, meeting artists on their own turf, providing feedback, learning not just about their work but about them and their processes.

“Each of these things provides different kinds of platforms for small risk taking, and really, they are opportunities for artists to engage with audiences at different stages of development,” says Serles. “We are constantly meeting artists we wouldn’t necessarily meet otherwise because, doing the organizing and the curating, are artists we have developed a strong relationship with, who are engaged with the broader theatre community.”

And, of course, TPM does also produce fully-mounted productions on their stages in addition to these smaller, accessible platforms. But as Fry puts it, when TPM produces work they pride themselves on not following any specific model, rather approaching each relationship and production with fresh eyes. Together with the artists involved, Fry and McKim work to find the right fit for the company, for the artists and for the production. Generally speaking, TPM does not do ‘straight-ahead’ productions, where TPM would hire a director, hold auditions, cast the show and hold 3 weeks of rehearsals. The producing relationship can take many shapes, including ‘in association with’ where an independent, incoming theatre company gets a break on renting the theatre, as well as publicity and marketing support from TPM, to more of a ‘co-production’ where TPM takes more of an active role in the creative and producing aspects of the specific show. Ultimately, the producing relationship is built on very frank discussions about the different needs of the various partners.

But does this kind of approach to producing, on the main stage as well as the smaller opportunities, make any difference to the access Canadian women artists have to TPM and to audiences the company draws? In a quick glance at TPM’s 2012-13 season, over 80 percent of the productions (be that main stage or smaller stage) have women at the helm – by this I mean that women are prominent partners in the creative leadership of a particular piece which might also include men. Within the season, women are either the playwright, director or a dominant part of a collaborative theatrical group for any given theatre piece.

With TPM’s approach to producing theatre, artists have the opportunity to access the company in a variety of ways and through a variety of people, not just through the Artistic Director; this grassroots approach widens the base of artists connecting with the company. TPM does not rely solely on the Artistic Director as the artistic leader as a way to build professional artistic relationships and community building. With this diversity of aesthetics and interests in the leaders of each smaller initiative, brings a diversity of artists. As Fry puts it: “Issues of diversity on our
stages are based in the issue of access as far as we're concerned. Putting power in the hands of more people opens up the levels and areas of access.”