

## **JAMIE NORRIS INTERVIEW**

*Jamie Norris started at Green Thumb in the early 90s as an actor in the play Land of Trash. After that he wrote Showdown and several other plays that have become so popular among children that they keep returning in Green Thumb's season programming. Jamie talks about his journey as a playwright and about his latest play 500 Words, which will be premiering as part of Green Thumb's 2009-10 season.*

### **How did you get started as a playwright---do you remember the moment, when it clicked in that play writing is the career for you?**

I always loved the idea of making theatre, so writing was integral to that. As a young actor it was more about what I would do with myself when I wasn't in rehearsal or on tour and I started writing that way; bits and pieces at first and then I think the first play I completed as a young adult was at the New Play Centre. They had a twenty-four hour playwriting contest, and I entered to see if I could actually finish something...I think I got second. Through acting, I had gotten to know Patrick and he suggested the idea of writing a play about competition because he knew I had background as a rugby player and knew about competition. That's how SHOWDOWN started.

### **What was your first experience like writing for Green Thumb?**

I think what was exciting about it was that we had a fair amount of time and so I did literally seven or eight drafts of that play. The first four were incredibly different and crazy so really everything was a discovery.

I had never done any training as a playwright. What I brought was my experience working as an actor and this interest in creating a big story instead of the individual story line of the character. It was through that kind of actor's instinct and from working with Patrick – he had such a great way of finding the action and cutting away everything that's not needed – that I could really learn to make things active.

### **What came after Showdown?**

I did a play called Give & Take which was about what it means to own something. It ended up being about a relationship between a brother and sister. After that we did Leaps and Bounds, which was inspired by a group of kids who lived in Vancouver who discovered this endangered frog which lived on this piece of land that was slated for development. It featured the same characters from Showdown and they learn how to work together to protest - yeah we're kids but we can still have a voice. It was about empowerment.

**Your last play was Speed which was written for Secondary students. Tell us more about why you wrote that one.**

At that time street racing was huge. You would see something about street racing two or three times a week on the cover of The Province. SPEED is about this kind of accelerated culture that we live in, how speed is in every little pocket of our lives now, whether its communication or relaxation or learning, the gaining of knowledge. In all of these things there seems to be some kind of clock ticking. The story that happens in Speed, on graduation night, is sort of that happening and the results that come out of that speed.

I remember Jerry Wasserman called it a Law and Order for teenagers which I always kind of liked.

**Can you elaborate on 500 Words, the elementary show you're working on for Green Thumb?**

This play started with the idea of literacy what that is and the idea of imagination and creativity. That kind of leads me into the world of how we learn. In my writing I think the first place I go to is the characters. So I start with two characters knowing those are the two points that can thrust together; two characters who are on completely opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their relationship to what imagination and creativity is – one of the characters functionally can't read. The other gets lost in his imagination and hides behind his vocabulary. So, the journey is these two coming together and finding a way to actually help each other and actually teach each other. It's going to be completely character driven – a story of these two children actually discovering that they can really help each other.

I'm really interested in kids working with kids, so there are no adult characters in my elementary shows. Sometimes there is an adult on the end of the phone but it's the world of the kids that I'm interested in ---how they operate in their secret world when adults are not around , The other thing that I'm conscious of, whatever the issues may be, is that this is the first time that these little human beings have been forced to face the universal challenges of life and somehow come up with their own solutions. Elementary school is also a time when we choose our first friends and our first enemies. To pack all that back into a forty minute play that's going to be done in a gym without the added texture that you can get on a stage – those are the challenges! I just put all of that in a blender and try to keep it whipping.

**Any advice for aspiring playwrights?**

The one thing I would say is to become familiar with what your triggers are and by that I mean I keep a notebook in my pocket at all times for when I hear something or when I think of something for a character.

And the other thing I would say is obviously write –you have to write. A great way to is to set yourself a deadline or search for competitions and enter– at least you'll have a deadline which means you'll have to finish something.

But most importantly – learn to type!