

Belleville

PRESS & REVIEWS



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After a galvanizing evening courtesy of The Company Theatre some years back, I made a promise to myself to check out each and every play they take on. Their bold and in-your-face presentations are some of the city's most memorable contemporary productions: A Whistle in the Dark, Festen, Through the Leaves, The Test, Speaking in Tongues. Their newest, Amy Herzog's Belleville, features Allan Hawco (Republic of Doyle) in a parable about the entitlement of a generation struggling under the weight of its own potential. Let's hope Canadian Stage renews their partnership with Company or that another theatre offers them residency soon.



By Victoria Ahearn

Published April 4, 2014

TV's Allan Hawco returns to stage roots

TORONTO – For a few years there, being the star/executive producer/showrunner/co-creator/head writer of a TV series was taking a toll on “Republic of Doyle”'s Allan Hawco.

Filling out all those roles on the CBC police procedural, which debuted in January 2010 and is set for a sixth season, was “very gruelling” and it was hard “to walk away from the machine” at its home base in St. John's, N.L., he admits.

“I was burning out. I was burning out,” the blue-eyed brunette native of Goulds, N.L., said in a recent interview.

“I was doing something that wasn't helping the show, me or any of my partners anymore.”

But in the last year, Hawco got to a place where he felt like he “could back off” because he realized everyone around him understood his vision, he said.

So when co-creator/partner Perry Chafe became a co-showrunner, and fellow partners John Vatcher and Rob Blackie took over some post-production jobs, Hawco decided to return to his stage roots for the first time in five years.

The result is his starring role in the acclaimed play “Belleville,” running April 6 to May 4 at the Canadian Stage Berkeley Street Theatre. It's being presented by the Company Theatre, which Hawco co-founded in 2004.

“I needed to get to a place where I could start to expand outside of just playing one character that I love,” said Hawco, 36. “I mean, I love the character (Jake Doyle), but I didn't want to start resenting him.

“So ... part of it is that I needed to go explore other people that I could play and sort of get my chops together as an actor.”

Pulitzer Prize-nominated American playwright Amy Herzog penned “Belleville,” a dark and suspenseful drama about a 20-something married couple who've moved from the U.S. to Paris so the doctor-husband can conduct AIDS research.

Hawco plays the husband, Zack, whose seemingly solid relationship with Abby (Christine Horne) begins to crack when she finds him home on a day when he's supposed to be at work.

Marsha Regis and Dalmar Abuzeid co-star in the show that reflects on relationships as well as cultural and generational perspectives.

“(Zack's) got so many failures and he's got such a sad ambition to do the right thing and his frailties are so clear. And he's so different from any other character I've ever

played — ever,” said Hawco, who studied at the National Theatre School of Canada and started his career onstage.

“That's what it's about, to discover different facets of your own personality that you may have locked away or you don't like people to see, and then you get to play a really interesting character who has these traits and they all kind of come out all of a sudden and it's fun.”

Helping bring out those traits is director Jason Byrne, a longtime Company Theatre collaborator Hawco adores.

The two first worked together on the Company Theatre's 2005 production, “A Whistle in the Dark,” in Toronto.

“He is able to help me find parts of myself as a performer that I otherwise might have a bit of difficulty getting to,” said Hawco, who co-founded the Company Theatre with actor Philip Riccio.

“Working with him has changed my life, so I felt like it was time to go take that risk again.”

Hawco said Byrne has an unconventional approach that involves eliminating traditional readthroughs or table work, and exploring ways to incorporate various facets of both the characters' and the actors' personalities.

“Any good actor knows what the action is going to be, but instead of just going straight at it, I guess it's foreplay for the theatre, take your time,” Hawco said with a laugh.

“Foreplay with a character — instead of going right to the thing, go around the thing for as long as possible, tease it out and see what happens.”

Since his roots are in the theatre, Hawco said he felt like things “just kind of fell into place” when he returned to it after a five-year absence.

And he relishes the lack of freedom he feels onstage versus TV, where he's always worried about what his mother is “going to think of the partial nudity or the sexuality or the violence,” he said.

“It's just such a commonplace thing in the theatre to be like, ‘If the play calls for it, it's not going to be gratuitous’ ... but in television I am very sensitive about that kind of stuff,” added Hawco.

“In the theatre, I forgot the level of freedom for all that kind of stuff. ... I guess there's a certain amount of wild abandon in the work. You've just got to commit and fall backwards and it's really kind of refreshing.

“It's a thing I haven't experienced in a while and I've really missed it.”



Q&A: Belleville

CHRISTINE HORNE ON HER ROLE IN THE COMPANY THEATRE'S LATEST PRODUCTION WITH CANADIAN STAGE

Set in the trendy Paris neighbourhood of Belleville, Amy Herzog's play tells the story of an American couple, Zack and Abby, whose marriage is not all that it appears to be. On the surface, everything looks rosy—but when Abby finds Zack at home one day instead of striving to eradicate pediatric AIDS at his job with Doctors Without Borders, their world unravels in a drama of Hitchcockian proportions.

Directed by The Company's long-time collaborator Jason Byrne, Belleville stars The Company's co-artistic director Allan Hawco (Republic of Doyle) alongside Christine Horne, Dalwar Abuzeid and Marsha Regis.

We caught up with Horne before opening to find out more about her experience working on the show.

Theatromania: What is it about Amy Herzog's play Belleville that most stood out to you at first?

CH: The writing. I thought Herzog's dialogue was so smart and nuanced. It was at turns funny, shocking, painful, uncomfortable, and always very real. There was a distinct naturalism to it but it still remained very specific and theatrical.

Theatromania: How would you describe The Company Theatre's production in a few sentences?

CH: Belleville examines a marriage with a huge lie at its core. We meet Zack and Abby when they are right on the edge of their breaking point and follow them as they grapple with the fallout of their own choices.

Theatromania: Tell us about your character Abby, what motivates her and how did you prepare for this role?

CH: Abby is an American living in Paris with her husband. He is working, and she has far too much time on her hands. Her mother died a few years ago which has intensified her relationship with her father and sister back home, and also sent her spiraling into depression and anxiety. Her relationship with Zack is co-dependent and borderline toxic, but there's still a lot of love between them. I didn't do much to prepare before starting rehearsals, and the first couple of weeks she was living pretty close to me at my most neurotic. But she's moving farther and farther away from my own personality as we spend more time in rehearsal, which is exciting. I'm still discovering what motivates all of her choices, and will hopefully keep on making those discoveries until we close (and maybe even beyond).

Theatromania: What are some of the challenges you've experienced with this particular piece?

CH: How fluid everything is, or was, particularly at the beginning of the process. I'm used to more structure and it was liberating but also terrifying to be encouraged to be bad, or boring. To make all the wrong choices, or the clichéd choices, or the obvious choices. And to know that the ones that feel like good choices won't necessarily be the same choices I make tomorrow. There is absolutely no pressure to recreate something that worked once upon a time. It can be hard to wrap my head around it, but when I do it's the most freeing work ever.

See Christine Horne on stage in Belleville from April 6 to May 4 at the Berkeley Street Theatre. Visit companytheatre.ca or canadianstage.com for more information and to buy tickets.

Republic of Doyle's Allan Hawco stars in Belleville

HAWCO IS THRILLED WITH THE RENEWAL OF HIS CBC TV SERIES AND THE CHANCE TO STAR IN THE MULTI-LAYERED BELLEVILLE BY AMY HERZOG, PRESENTED BY THE COMPANY THEATRE IN TORONTO.

Like many successful actors, Allan Hawco finds himself living a bicoastal existence. But in his case, the defining bodies of water aren't the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, but Conception Bay and Lake Ontario.

As a native Newfoundlander, he couldn't be happier that Republic of Doyle, his TV series set in St. John's, N.L., has been renewed for a sixth season on CBC while many other programs felt the budgetary headsman's axe.

And as a stage actor plying his trade in Toronto, he's thrilled to return to the group he co-founded, The Company Theatre, after a five-year absence.

The play that brought him back, Belleville, has already been a hit in New York and Chicago, making its young author, Amy Herzog, a force to be reckoned with. The production officially opening Thursday at the Berkeley Street Theatre stands poised to give her a hat-trick in North America's three largest theatre cities.

"She wasn't quite 30 when she wrote the script," enthuses Hawco before a day of rehearsals, "and for her to have been so young and to have created such a deep, deep piece of material is deeply disturbing for me.

Republic of Doyle star Allan Hawco returns to his theatre roots.

"By the end of next season on Doyle, I'll have written 77 episodes of hourly television, but I'm still in awe of one script like this. You start working on many pieces of theatre and the holes in the plot become apparent so quickly if the nuts and bolts aren't there. But with this script, every layer that you pull back reveals something deeper. There's more to discover every day."

The script of Belleville is so packed with twists and turns of character revelation that to mention much more than the title requires a spoiler alert.

Suffice it to say that it's about a young married American couple living in Paris and how their lives start falling apart when the wife returns home unexpectedly from a cancelled yoga class to find her husband surfing the web for porn.

"There are a lot of themes going on here, which could be expressed as, 'Is anyone what they ever seem to be?' or 'Can you ever really know your partner?'" says Hawco. "And hanging over it all is a portrait of a certain generation now in their late 20s who have a real sense of entitlement. People of a

certain age believing they're entitled to whatever they want.

"And although right from the beginning you say, 'Something's going on here,' it's not until the very end that it's apparent what it is."

A play like that needs a special kind of director and Hawco has one in Jason Byrne, the unconventional Irishman who has guided The Company Theatre through some of its biggest hits (*A Whistle in the Dark*, *Festen*).

"Jason's not very traditional," chuckles Hawco. "You may think the trajectory of a scene is from A to B, but he has a robust approach and tears at all the thousands of objectives, all the millions of possibilities he wants you to explore in rehearsal, so that you're ready for absolutely anything.

"He doesn't 'block' a show," explains Hawco, using the theatre term for staging the action. "He approaches the work so that there's only one answer and we have to discover it. He fights that urge to take us to a place that he's predetermined and I personally love his method of working."

He's equally enthusiastic about the tremendous success of his Newfoundland cops-and-robbers series, Republic of Doyle. With solid enough viewership after five seasons that CBC has brought it back for a sixth, it was also recently sold to 80 per cent of the United States in a syndication deal.

"I'd actually forgotten about that until a friend texted me and said, 'Friday night in Florida and Doyle is on the air,'" Hawco laughs. "How cool is that?' and I'd have to agree with him."

Hawco says, "The major thing I'd attribute its success to is that it's a lot of fun. If we were to make a cold, dark-hearted crime drama in St. John's, the sound of TVs being turned off would have been deafening. But we go for the comedy and the sense of humour, the light approach; the rock 'n' roll barrel-through-this-hour tactic seems to work.

"But it's minus any silliness. I wanted people to see our city the way we see it and love our city the way we love it. I didn't want the rest of Canada to feel excluded. I wanted them to watch us. Otherwise you get cancelled."

But that's not happening, at least not this season, which means Hawco will continue to be bicoastal, in his unique Canadian way, for at least one more season.





By Jon Kaplan

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Marital secrets and lies

ACTORS SINK THEIR TEETH INTO JUICY PLAY ABOUT AN UNRAVELLING COUPLE

Whether we intend it or not, our key relationships occasionally involve little fibs.

Amy Herzog's *Belleville* focuses on a different magnitude of falsehood. According to actor Christine Horne, Herzog wrote the script "to examine a marriage with a really big lie at its centre."

Horne and Allan Hawco play the couple, Abby and Zack, whose lives and relationship unravel when secrets come to light.

The action takes place in the culturally diverse *Belleville* section of Paris, where the American couple has moved so that Zack, who works for Doctors Without Borders, can help find a cure for pediatric AIDS.

With its twists, turns and red herrings, the show is as much a mystery as a look at a corroding marriage.

"I had a lot of initial feelings about Zack when I read the script," recalls Hawco, co-founder of the Company Theatre, which presents the play in association with Canadian Stage. "But the most obvious ideas aren't necessarily the most significant ones, as we've discovered in rehearsal.

"Zack goes through the kind of pressure I never want to experience in my own life," he continues, "and I was uncomfortable by the end of that first read. But over the course of time, digging into the script, I started to empathize with his situation, having to behave a certain way to get what he wants, making justifications for the choices he's made though they might not be the right thing to do."

Horne's character is easier to discuss but no less multi-layered.

"Abby finds herself with little to do in Paris besides teaching yoga," says Horne, whose stage work includes *Iceland* and *The Turn Of The Screw* and who's known to TV and film audiences for *Lost Girl* and *The Stone Angel*.

"Her mother died several years previously, which has intensified her relationship with her family back in the States. Her life is ruled equally by an intense marriage and an iron umbilical cord with her family.

"She's still struggling with anxiety and depression, and doing her best to get off the medication she's been taking for years."

The production marks the return of director Jason Byrne, who helmed Company Theatre productions of *A Whistle In The Dark*, *Festen* and *The Test*. His unusual style of working relies on far more than the words on the page.

"The play goes under a microscope in a way that some other directors don't consider," admits Hawco, who's best known as Jake Doyle in CBC's *The Republic Of Doyle*, which just wrapped its fifth season.

"We didn't begin, as is usually the case, with a table read," continues Horne. "We weren't confined to the words or even the order in which things happen in the script. Even so, there's a structure to what Jason does, one that at first allows us to make every possible choice."

The script provokes strong reactions from the two actors, who compare Abby and Zack's relationship to that of George and Martha in *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf* and of Macbeth and his wife.

"The writing is extremely shocking and structurally impressive," offers Hawco, who's making his first theatre appearance in five years. "But while it's dark and disturbing, it's also really funny and sexy."

"I also responded to its humour," nods Horne, "which is witty, awkward, uncomfortable and real. I like its suspense and the love at its centre.

"*Belleville* may be about a fucked-up love story, a look at unhealthy, toxic, codependent love, but this couple's relationship has lasted this long for a reason."



Allan Hawco Returns To Theatre: The 'Republic of Doyle' Star Says He's 'Having a Blast' Being Back On Stage



Photo by Guntar Kravis

Allan Hawco has been putting in long days in the lead-up to his onstage appearance in *Belleville*, a play about a dysfunctional couple, on now through May 4 at Toronto's Berkeley Street Theatre.

"I wanted to have a shot of espresso before we talk," he tells me, smiling softly.

Best known for playing the lovable bad-boy detective Jake Doyle on his CBC Television series *Republic of Doyle*, Hawco's been on a hectic schedule the last while. He isn't just the star of *Doyle*; he's also its co-creator, lead writer, and executive producer. What's more, he has his own production company, Take The Shot Productions. He oversees every aspect of his business, something he chooses, but that doesn't mean he isn't welcoming a change. "For the last five years I've been doing *Doyle*," he says, "and this is, in a lot of ways not as time-consuming ... because I'm only wearing one hat while I'm in the room."

Hawco plays Zack, an American newlywed who's moved to Paris to take a job with Doctors Without Borders; his wife (Christine Horne) has trouble adjusting to their new life and is terribly homesick. The play (a Company Theatre production done in association with the Canadian Stage Company) sees Abby coming home early from teaching a (student-less) yoga class to find her husband enjoying triple-X porn online. The play has elements of suspense

and drama comfortably weaving around painful truths that explore the nature of love and connection, aspects that are illuminated by the couple's relationship with their North African landlord Alioune (Dalmar Abuzeid) and his wife Amina (Marsha Regis). During its 2013 production at the New York Theater Workshop, New York Times theater critic Charles Isherwood observed that the Pulitzer-nominated Herzog "writes with perfect pitch in a minor key in scenes that are paced to evoke a sense of everyday domesticity slightly tinged with disquiet. Almost before we can sense it a mood of menace has come to hover in the air, like the vestiges of the smoke from the pipe that Zack keeps resorting to, with an increasing sense of desperation."

Hawco is clearly thrilled about returning to the stage. "It's a beautiful thing," he states. The Newfoundland native graduated from National Theatre School in 2000 and appeared in numerous stage works, including the title role in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare Works); he's also appeared in *The Cripple of Innishman* (Centaur Theatre), *The Shape of Things* (Canadian Stage Company), *Macbeth* (Festival of Classics), *You Are Here* (Theatre Passe Muraille), *Salt Water Moon* (Segal Centre), as well as *La Ronde* and *Present Laughter* (Soulpepper). This, in addition to a number of impressive screen credits, including a supporting role in Sir Richard Attenborough's 2007 film



Photo by Guntar Kravis

Closing the Ring (with Christopher Plummer and Shirley MacLaine), and television roles on ZOS: Zone of Separation plus CBC's political thriller H2O and its sequel Trojan Horse, has kept him busy and in-demand.

But he's perhaps best known for playing the rakish handsome, danger-loving Jake Doyle. The weekly show is aired internationally in almost 100 countries, but keeps its charming, small-town flavour by being set (and indeed, filmed) in Hawco's beloved native Newfoundland. Along with rollicking episodes that feature a unique mix of action, drama, and comedy, the show has featured a who's who of actors, including Oscar winner Russell Crowe.

Before Doyle however, Hawco and other actors found themselves frustrated at the lack of good theater roles. In reaction, he and actor Philip Riccio founded The Company Theater almost a decade ago now; it's since treated Toronto audiences to thrilling visions of chewy, challenging dramas. Their first production (in 2005) was Tom Murphy's searing *A Whistle in the Dark*, which featured Hawco as psychotic Irishman caught in a web of family violence. It was a huge hit, loved by critics and audiences, and its success buoyed the company with confidence to continue producing top-flight dramas.

"When we started, we wanted actors to feel like they were being heard, that they were being given an opportunity to do the work they want to do," he says, his finger slowly running along the side of the tiny espresso cup. "It's not about the design, or the lighting, or the building, or this-or-that taking over ... it's about the play and the actors. It's an actors' company, and we're there to allow actors to be able to have free reign of improvisation within the work."

The level of commitment Riccio and Hawco have has been expressed in the choice of plays they've produced since their founding. While *Belleville* is a small play (it has a cast of four), it has, like every other work within the company's history, a brewing interior life filled with deep, uncomfortable darkness. Hawco's Zack, isn't all that he seems, and has to keep many balls - career, new city, family, romance, desires - in the air at once. For the actor playing him, it presents a challenge, one he's happy to take on.

"The way I try to focus on things like this is the way I've always done it," he says, his azure-blue eyes widening, "which is, focus on what (Zack) is going through, to get to what he needs. I've never thought of it in a big picture way... which sounds ridiculous!"

Hawco is especially thrilled to be back working with director, Jason Byrne, who's helmed past Company Theatre productions including *Festen* and *A Whistle in the Dark*. "Jason's a special director," he observes. "He allows you to have what you don't get to have in TV or film, which is constant failure for weeks -that's what rehearsal is. I feel like with that approach, you realize failure isn't failure at all, it's discovery, you know? You allow yourself to fall backwards into something that could be nothing, and it's a discovery... that creative goo is bubbling. As long as you're not pushing for it, cool things can happen."

So what's the best thing being back onstage? There's a long pause, as Hawco stares into the distance thoughtfully.

"I just feel like I'm home. I feel like I'm back home and I feel like... I'm given an opportunity to grow with a great play and a great cast and a director, to experiment with the different approaches to the work. I'm truly having a blast."

By Brad Wheeler

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Allan Hawco moves from *Republic of Doyle* back to the stage

Allan Hawco, creator, producer and star of the CBC police drama *Republic of Doyle*, returns to his theatre roots this week to co-star in rising star Amy Herzog's *Belleville*, a heavy, suspenseful drama about a young couple in Paris. Mr. Hawco comes back to the stage for the first time since 2009 in a production mounted by a Toronto company he co-founded – the Company Theatre – and directed by Jason Byrne, his favourite collaborator. (Read J. Kelly Nestruck's review [here](#).)

You've said you were feeling burnt out working on *Republic of Doyle* and that it was gruelling. You do so many things with that show, including producing and writing, but can you compare the energy spent when it comes to theatre acting as opposed to television acting. This isn't a vacation or anything, is it?

In some ways it is more work. But actors aren't in this business not to work. Any actor worth their salt is dying to do something, constantly. And the more challenging the role, the more passion you might want to throw at it. In some ways, though, it is like a vacation to me. I'm going back to to the basics of what I love about this process. Also, working with Jason Byrne never feels like a job. We've had so much fun, exploring this work.

You once said working with him, on the Company Theatre's 2005 production of *A Whistle in the Dark*, changed your life. How so?

That first day of rehearsal in Toronto, in 2005, I knew I was at a place in my career where I wasn't getting anywhere near my full potential as an actor. But the minute I started working with Jason, something was unleashed in me. There was a connection. What he was going for, I could feel it in my gut before he even said it. So, it altered everything for me. I was playing a role no one had ever put me in before.

Something more intense, right?

A rough and tumble sociopath. People previously saw me as a big goof, which I am. But as an actor, I felt like I had much more range. And I felt like I couldn't access it without Jason. The experience gave me the confidence to pursue work in other avenues, in terms of film and television, and also other roles. I'm not saying that everybody saw me as a different kind of actor. But I felt I was.

So now you're back with him. Do you expect Jason to work his magic with you again? Is it possible for him to elevate you one more time?

It is, because his process changes every time I've worked with him. He challenges himself. In some ways, I want to have a similar experience with this production as I had with him in 2005. But one thing I've learned over the years is that it is not possible to recreate something that happened in the past. And in a lot of ways, that's the core of what we do together as artists. Every moment you go through on stage can never happen that way again. It always has to be an authentic impulse.



By J. Kelly Nestruck

Published April 12, 2014



Belleville: It's the women who kill in this thriller

How do you measure the success of a night at the theatre? If you do it in heartbeats-per-minute, then the Company Theatre's (in association with Canadian Stage) unnerving production of *Belleville* starring Allan Hawco is the most successful to premiere in Toronto so far this season.

American playwright Amy Herzog's chilling play concerns a young couple living a lonely, expatriate life in a claustrophobic apartment in Paris – though why depends on who you ask. Zack (Hawco) tells his landlord Alioune that he gave up a residency in the United States because his wife desperately wanted to live in the City of Lights; Abby (Christine Horne), however, says she reluctantly moved away from her family and across the Atlantic so Zack could take up a job at Doctors Without Borders.

That there is a distance between Zack and Abby's perceptions is immediately clear from the opening scene: Abby comes home early after the yoga class she teaches is unexpectedly cancelled to find her husband in the bedroom watching pornography instead of at work.

"You're having a slightly Victorian reaction," Zack says, in response to Abby's extreme unease at this discovery. You may be inclined to agree – until the play gradually makes you equally uneasy.

Hawco, making his long-awaited return to the Toronto stage after years of being too busy starring in and producing CBC's *Republic of Doyle*, is the draw for *Belleville*. But it's two women involved who will get your heart racing once you're in the theatre.

The first is Amy Herzog, a playwright on the up-and-up and now being discovered north of the border. (Her play *4000 Miles* is currently at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal – and was just extended.) With *Belleville*, she's penned a script that in tone and tension harkens back to an age of literate stage thrillers such as Patrick Hamilton's *Gas Light*. (If I'm not mistaken, Hawco's constant fiddling with the lights in the living room is an homage to that 1938 play that gave us the term "gaslighting" for a particular form of psychological abuse.)

Herzog's craft in building an atmosphere of isolation in an ever-connected world is impressive; cell phones have destroyed many of the great tropes of horror, but she finds a way to make one scene involving a smartphone the most terrifying of all.

The script's pleasures do go beyond the visceral – in *Abby*, in particular, Herzog has perfectly captured a

familiar type of North American, the overeducated, underemployed variety. In withdrawal as she comes off an antidepressant she started taking five years earlier after the much-referenced death of her mother, Abby is just a wonderfully rich character – and the actress-turned-yoga teacher seems almost written for Christine Horne, a slim Hitchcock blonde in a pixie haircut who does the best work I've seen from her here. She gets Abby's sense of superiority masquerading as sensitivity just right – but also nails her more admirable qualities. She's great in her ropey physicality, too, especially when drunk out of her wits and wielding a kitchen knife in a bit that had me covering my eyes.

Hawco is less varied in his performance, maintaining a strained expression as Zack, as if he is at the end of the rope dealing with a wife who remains unhappy no matter what he does and about to snap; his wide-eyed, distant look turns out to be a mask for panic, however.

I do have a complaint about his performance. The Company Theatre, which Hawco co-founded with Philip Riccio, has been known for its muscular production of contemporary plays, all until now written by men. Jason Byrne, an Irish director who pushes actors to follow impulses rather than set blocking, has been in charge of many of the best, most boisterous productions – and he is at the helm again here.

In this case, however, Hawco could stand to be reined in – as he is constantly throwing bags on the floor, knocking books off shelves and tossing a coffee across the room. These theatrical gestures often puncture the tension in a production otherwise carefully calibrated. Not enough to deflate it, mind you – as I'm still a little jumpy.



'Belleville' by The Company Theatre – Theatre Review



Photo by Guntar Kravis

A riveting theatre experience is something you are not going to forget anytime soon. The Company Theatre's production of Amy Herzog's *Belleville* is just such an experience, combining simple production techniques, sophisticated acting, and a story that will shake you.

Belleville follows an American couple – Zack (Allan Hawco) and Abby (Christine Horne) – as they live their life in the promising neighbourhood of Belleville, Paris. This very-much-in-love couple seem to have their life in order: Zach pursuing a noble career through his work at Doctors Without Borders, Abby teaching drama, and both living in beautiful Paris. Unfortunately, things take a turn for the worse when Abby finds Zach at home one day, when he was actually supposed to be at work. The chain of events that follow rock their seemingly planned lives, revealing dark secrets and hidden personalities.

Amy Herzog's play made its world introduction in October of 2011, commissioned by the Yale Repertory Theatre. It then went on to grace the off-Broadway stages of New York Theatre Workshop in 2013. Both Anne Kauffman-directed productions put Herzog and her work under the spotlight, with the play receiving many notable award nominations. To be honest, it's not difficult to see why. Her seemingly ordinary, about-everyday-life story tackles a variety of complex themes and elements surrounding relationships head-on. Herzog uses

relationship elements such as trust, respect and love – in various pivotal moments – as catalysts to chip away at the lovely outer shell these characters seem to be in, revealing deeper, darker and more unbalanced human beings. It is a story that will keep you on edge, keeping you guessing on what will happen next.

The casting decisions for this production could not have been more brilliant. The four artists become the pillars to this rather deep production, putting on performances that you genuinely enjoy watching. Allan Hawco returns to the stage and proves just how much of a multi-talented individual he is. He plays an almost opposite character to that of his Jake Doyle, balancing the humour, dark elements and moments of intensity rather well. Dalmir Abuzeid and Marsha Regis do a wonderful job of presenting the French couple they portray, nailing the Parisian accent, creating a good balance between speaking English and French, and certainly creating an opportunity for the audience to really compare the American couple to the society they are now living in. The shows highlight, however, was the performance delivered by Christine Horne. Known for playing a diverse range of characters, her performance as Abby keeps you both glued to the production and on edge, constantly. She almost glides through transitions between sanity and insanity, creating a character that you just can't describe. In fact, you will



Photo by Guntar Kravis

still be thinking about it the next day and still trying to understand how she pulled it off.

The production itself had elements you will come to love. Notably, the lighting and the set. The set is beautifully put together, featuring typical furnishings, soothing colours, and more depth than you realize. It never distracts you from what's happening between the characters but becomes a vital element to highlight things that were not the characters themselves. That is rather effective, especially if you can see that level of detail from the back of the theatre. The lighting played a big role in transitioning scenes and its simple application really made a difference to how the story was experienced. It was never in your face and it certainly didn't become a distraction. Overall, the creative aspects of the production were very well executed.

Belleville by The Company Theatre is a beautiful production; a character study with an intense story. From the moment it begins till the very end, you will be captured by the events that take place on stage. The one thing you are guaranteed to take away from this production are the remarkable performances delivered by these four Canadian artists. Whether you are a die hard follower of Amy Herzog's work or introduced for the first time, you can't overlook the effort these four artists have put into their performances. That alone makes this show worth watching.

Theatre Review: Belleville is an unusually penetrating melodrama

Amy Herzog's *Belleville* is frighteningly intense. So intense, even, that you may find yourself holding your breath and digging fingernails into your seat during one of the many unnerving scenes. These moments usually find their home in silence, which arrives after the tumult subsides.

The Company Theatre has a track record of piercing and provocative social dramas, and this latest offering is no different. Often difficult to watch due to its strong performances, *Belleville* features characters as fragile as they are volatile. While the narrative feels a bit heavy-handed, and the direction from Jason Byrne leaves little room for any sort of tenderness, a drama that penetrates as much as this one does is ultimately a drama that gets a lot right.

On the surface, the play has the trappings of a social drama about Millennial struggles with contemporary life, complete with privilege and ennui. It's seemingly one of those portraits of an over-coddled and over-medicated generation and the destruction they can end up causing. But it's dangerous to read *Belleville* in general terms. More correctly, it's a localized portrait of two individuals and their struggle with mental health and the resulting challenges it poses to the strength of their relationship.

Zack (Alan Hawco) and Abby (Christine Horne), a young couple that has left the United States to live in Paris, are on the verge of spending Christmas away from their families. When Abby finds Zack home in the afternoon, instead of at his job contributing to AIDS research, the foundation of the couple's relationship starts to crumble.

From the very first moment, Herzog drops her characters into situations of discovery. The search for, and uncovering of, new information drives the action forward and motivates the characters' erratic behaviour. The dialogue is crisp, full of suspect, and is laden with a history of conflict. The playwright layers on all manner of mental illness and deception in the build to a formidable climax. The consequence is that there's almost too much trauma to process here.

Byrne does a fine job giving colour to the fights and, more importantly, masters the silent stage actions that reveal each character's dark inner thoughts. One area that could have made the drama more complex was in finding a true tenderness, amidst the nicknames and body contact, that could have provided even more contrast to the severity of their division. Without it, both characters lack likable qualities.

Horne is a powerful force. She weaves in and out of Abby's vengeful passion and retreats to a far more complex headspace in moments of defeat and fear. Hawco, of Republic of Doyle fame, exploits the contradictions of his character to maximum effect. His portrait of delayed adulthood, on one hand charming and on the other maddening, hits the right note. Meanwhile, Alioune (Dalmar Abuzeid) and Amina (Marsha Regis), a Senegalese couple, are a fine foil to the married Americans featured in the drama.

Your reaction to *Belleville* might not be what you expect -- a lack of empathy, perhaps, or a complex response to the conclusion. What's important is not how you feel, but that the drama has inspired such a reaction in the first place.



Company Theatre's Belleville a nail-biting drama

Two plays have now opened in Toronto in rapid succession in which a character's stubbing a toe turns out to be a defining moment. In *Soliciting Temptation* it's a middle-aged man's foot that gets bumped, and it's adduced, not least by himself, as proof of what an accident-prone doofus he is. In *Belleville*, the new production from Company Theatre, it does not so much indicate character as determine future action; it's a young woman who is hurt, hurt so bad that — in one of the most stomach-churning moments of a hypnotically gripping evening — she contemplates drastic action with a kitchen knife.

The woman's name is Abby, and in this play by the rising American writer Amy Herzog, she's living with her husband Zach in the Parisian district of the title (the one cinematically known for its triplets). They have expatriated themselves from the States because it's what Abby wanted. She went into severe depression after the death of her mother; Zach fortuitously landed a Parisian posting with Doctors Without Borders, so here they both are. At least that's Zach's story. At one point Abby claims that Zach had totally misunderstood her and that all she'd really wanted in Paris was a weekend. But the two of them are having a screaming row when she says it, so you really don't know who to believe. What you do realize over the course of the action is that faults and weaknesses are more equally balanced between this couple than is at first apparent. Zach and Abby are engaged in tearing one another apart, and then patching over the wounds, until they reach the point beyond healing.

The plight of two people unable to live with or without one another is a familiar dramatic staple. It can even be a tragic staple. Herzog can't, or at least doesn't, take it to that level, though she sometimes approaches it. She gives us unusually penetrating melodrama, one that escalates smoothly, if not quite inexorably, from a troubled but controllable situation to one beyond any mitigation. Abby and Zach may be special cases, necessarily unmoored from their own society (they call one another "homey," maybe in compensation), but their dance of avoidance and confrontation strikes some painfully believable chords.

It starts with Abby coming home early from the yoga class that she teaches part-time to find Zach, who should be at work, watching porn on his computer. She's recently come off her meds, and is extremely vulnerable. She can't help letting it all hang out; Zach, apparently the more balanced and affable, is the one with things to hide. Abby at least has a kind of support system; she's in constant, dependent cellphone communication with her

father back home, largely about her sister's pregnancy and imminent delivery, about which she is extravagantly anxious; indeed, children seem to make her anxious, in any context. Zach's main solace is smoking dope with his landlord, a pleasure impaired by the fact that he's behind with the rent.

We haven't been short recently of intense plays about domestic situations. None of them, though, can match this one in the breath-holding, seat-clutching, eye-averting stakes — largely, I think, because the suspense here dwells not in what the characters might do to one another but in what they might do to themselves. It gets so you shudder every time one of them leaves the living-area that constitutes the set and goes into the kitchen or — especially, since they can lock it — the bathroom. It may also help that they have names, rather than, as so often recently, being identified as Man, Woman, He, She or by some letter of the alphabet.

Like much of Company Theatre's best work, including their unforgettable debut show *A Whistle in the Dark*, *Belleville* is directed by Jason Byrne, celebrated for his refusal to impose any set blocking on his actors — not just in rehearsal but in performance. This may or may not be a decisive factor (most plays after all, certainly realistic ones, come with a built-in supply of moves) but he does seem to get performances of exceptional force and, as far as I can tell, spontaneity. Christine Horne's Abby seems indeed less like acting than like living; she's an unstoppable electric current with a blond crop. I don't think I've ever seen a performer get closer to the nerve of mental and emotional imbalance, or convey such a sense of intelligence denied its proper emotional or professional outlet. I've also seldom seen so convincing or frightening a drunk scene. As Zach, Allan Hawco has initially the less spectacular role; he's the ordinary guy trying to survive and to help. As his mask slips, so both his aggressiveness and his defensiveness increase. Zach is out of his depth, frightened and frightening, and Hawco's performance combusts. The two remaining characters, the friendly landlord and his less friendly wife (Dalmar Abuzied and Marsha Regis) are decidedly subsidiary, but very valuable; and they share a highly effective, near silent scene at the end. At other times, the show can be quiet in less admirable ways; rather too many lines casually disappear up the actors' intensities. I'm still not sure if the word *Belleville* actually gets uttered. A good alternative title, if it hadn't already been taken, might be *There Will Be Blood*. Believe me.

By Evan Andrew Mackay

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Theatre Review: Belleville

Allan Hawco, co-artistic director of The Company Theatre (and recognizable star of CBC's Republic of Doyle), leads a cast of four in Amy Herzog's ominous drama *Belleville*, now playing at Berkeley Street Theatre until May 4th. The Company Theatre's aim to make every performance "surprising, authentic and spontaneous" pairs well with Herzog's naturalistic dialogue. Director Jason Byrne capitalizes on this, making both action and dialogue feel like they are unfolding for the first time right before your eyes.

A young American couple seems to have their loving marriage headed in a promising direction after settling in Paris where Zack (Hawco), who's recently graduated from medical school in the US, has undertaken important work with Doctors Without Borders. When his wife Abby (Christine Horne) comes home unexpectedly from a cancelled yoga class, she finds him there unable to explain why he is not at work.

Contrary to expectations, Abby is unhappy in Paris. She mopes, "I just don't have enough to do," and poignantly complains, "I'm so tired of this pressure to be happy." Zack and Abby are each so determined to be a good spouse and to do what the other wants that both wind up disillusioned. Gradually, insecurities and resentments of increasing gravity come to the surface.

Their lives are contrasted with those of their landlord Alioune (Dalmar Abuseid) and his wife Amina (Marsha Regis), young Muslim immigrants who have their lives well in hand. Abby and Zack's difficulties—such as not being able to get home for Christmas—can be called legitimate, but they would have to be categorized as "first world problems." This is especially true in the eyes of Alioune and Amina, who feel a very different set of pressures: not to be seen as happy, but rather to be responsible for themselves and their children.

Zack and Abby's apartment is subdued and undecorated, but furnished well enough to be home-like (set and costume designer Yannick Larivée). The window and French doors are used to good effect through Kevin Lamotte's lighting design, which beautifully shows passage of time and frames moods from scene to scene.

Belleville is essentially an eerie, low-key thriller, but it has some laughs that mostly originate with Horne, whose character bears superficial resemblance to Herzog (herself an erstwhile actor and yoga instructor). But whereas the 30-something American playwright is known for plays that draw on her own experiences and family, Herzog maintains that Abby is not based on her.

The story and characters chew on Generation-X angst, examining concerns that will feel more familiar and important to some theatregoers than to others. What's likely to appeal to a broad audience, however, is the freshness of the performance, which makes *Belleville* feel like an organic event rather than an orchestrated show.

Evan Andrew Mackay is a Toronto playwright and humorist who writes about culture and social justice.

Belleville

AMY HERZOG'S DARK THRILLER CAPTIVATES AT THE BERKELEY STREET THEATRE

Life takes an unexpected turn for the young American couple in Amy Herzog's *Belleville*, a suspenseful psychological drama now playing at the Berkeley Street Theatre. The Company Theatre and Canadian Stage co-production features Allan Hawco (*Republic of Doyle*) as Zack, and Christine Horne (*The Stone Angel*, *Between The Sheets*) as his wife Abby, American ex-pats living in the trendy neighbourhood of Belleville, Paris, where they relocated because of Zack's mission to eradicate pediatric AIDS through his work for Doctors Without Borders.

In the opening scene, Abby comes home to find Zack at the apartment watching pornography when he is supposed to be at work. From here, the loving couple unravels before our eyes. Herzog's nail-biting script teases the audience into believing that anything could happen as the duo discovers their marriage is not what they hoped it would be, and we wonder if either can survive the weight of the relationship. Their entitled American dreams are set against the modest lifestyle of Zack's friend and landlord Alioune (Dalmir Abuzaid) and his wife Amina (Marsha Regis), who work hard to provide for their young family, and unwittingly become involved in the marital meltdown.

Director Jason Byrne gets riveting performances out of both leads, with Horne stealing the show as the chronically depressed Abby. Her portrayal of a woman in denial is simply fascinating to watch. Hawco is also outstanding in his ability to manoeuvre between emotional extremes, frightening one moment and deeply vulnerable the next.

Featuring haunting lighting design by Kevin Lamotte, and realistic sound design by Richard Feren, this intense 90-minute performance is sure to stay with you long after curtain call.



By Glenn Sumi

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Belleville

INTENSE PERFORMANCES AND TIMELY THEMES ENRICH THIS POWERFUL LOOK AT TWO AMERICANS IN PARIS

The title of Amy Herzog's *Belleville* refers to the colourful, diverse Paris neighbourhood where her characters live. It also stands for the picture-perfect existence Zack (Allan Hawco) and Abby (Christine Horne) have set up for themselves. Young Americans abroad, he works for Doctors Without Borders as a physician helping children with AIDS, while she teaches yoga. Envious, right?

That's one of the big themes Herzog explores as her clever script – part mystery and part psychological drama – unfolds.

In the opening sequence, Abby walks into their flat to the sound of Zack masturbating to internet porn. But that's not the only secret he's keeping from her. The mysteries begin to pile up with the appearance of their Senegalese-Parisian landlord, Alioune (Dalmar Abuzeid), and phone calls from Zack's secretary and Abby's father. (Her sister's about to give birth in the States.)

Add to that the fact that Abby's still mourning her mother's death a few years earlier and is off her depression medication and you've got the ingredients for an explosive domestic situation.

The ending doesn't detonate as it should, but that's due more to the machinations of the script than to the direction by Jason Byrne, who moves things along briskly. He's helped by Yannik Larivée's naturalistic set, complete with many doors that hint at what's going on behind them, Kevin Lamotte's lighting, which suggests shadows full of mystery, and Richard Feren's urban-angst sound design.

Hawco and Horne's Zack and Abby play off each other beautifully, sharing pet names and sensitive to each other's shifting moods and desires. Their relationship – what they want from each other and what they're getting – has to hold the play together, and the two actors communicate a lot with a look, a change in voice pitch or the positioning of a limb.

As the contrasting seen-it-all landlord couple, Abuzeid and Marsha Regis are also excellent in this absorbing and disturbing look at what's beneath the American dream.

