

## Four plays in six years: Toronto's Company Theatre takes it in stages

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Founders Allan Hawco and Philip Riccio divide their creative energies between making plays and pursuing their on-screen careers

**James Bradshaw**

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**F**or a theatre company the play's the thing to do, of course, which means sometimes it takes courage not to.

Actors Allan Hawco and Philip Riccio are the increasingly recognizable names behind [The Company Theatre](#), which they launched together in 2004. On Sept. 14, they'll debut their fourth play in that six-year span – a translation of Franz Xaver Kroetz's *Through the Leaves* at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre – continuing their reputation for popping up on the theatre landscape every 12 to 18 months with a thoughtful, provocative offering. The late Tarragon founder Bill Glassco acted as a mentor to Hawco when the latter was a theatre pup, and told a story that has stuck with the actor about closing Tarragon for a year in 1975 when it wasn't running up to snuff.

"I thought, what kind of guts does it take to do that?" Hawco says.

From the get-go, Riccio and Hawco agreed that The Company would pick and choose what it performed, and when, resisting any outside pressure to make mounting a play even an annual obligation.

"We certainly don't ever want to be a company that does shows just for the sake of doing them," Riccio says.

That approach was also designed to allow their young careers to flourish elsewhere, which they have. Thirty-three-year-old Hawco, a native of Bell Island, Nfld., and a National Theatre School graduate, is the creator and star of the CBC's P.I. comedy-drama *Republic of Doyle*, currently shooting its second season in St. John's. Toronto native Riccio, 32 and a George Brown Theatre School alumnus, recently had roles on another Canadian comedy, *Rent-a-Goalie*, and in films such as *My Family's Secret*.

So far, The Company's philosophy seems to be working. They mount a play "when the story is speaking to me so loudly that it needs to be told," says Hawco, and only if it possesses "a visceral, emotional punch," says Riccio. Between them, they hammer out what feels risky enough to be worth trying.

"There's a lot to be said for going to the bar and talking about your ideas, and there's a lot to be said about never stopping that process and fantasizing about things you'd like to do," says Hawco.

For *Through the Leaves*, Riccio has taken the directorial reins for the first time in his career, leading the two-person cast of Nicholas Campbell and Maria Vaccratsis as a factory worker and butcher who struggle to squeeze some human closeness out of their drab middle age.

Behind the scenes, Hawco and Riccio are a dashing pair with very different personalities but a core creative synergy. On stage their work has an edgy honesty to it: The Company's first three shows – Irish playwright Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*, Daniel MacIvor's *Marion Bridge* and David Eldridge's *Festen* – are all stark and revealing family portraits.

It may seem unorthodox to have a pair of actors running a theatre company, but it has helped feed a methodology of giving actors considerable freedom to produce what Riccio describes as "improv with text," a style of performance that's "live" in a very literal way. That approach, they say, helps explain how an upstart company attracts high-level actors like Eric Peterson, Joseph Ziegler, Caroline Gillis, Sarah Dodd and Campbell.

"It's certainly not the money," Hawco jokes over the telephone from an editing suite in St. John's.

And because The Company makes it its mission to perform contemporary international plays that haven't often been seen in Toronto or in Canada, Hawco and Riccio have to lean heavily on the reputation they've built and the cachet of the casts they assemble to sell tickets.

"Come watch the best actors we have at their best" is the basic sales pitch, Riccio says.

He also concedes that the long gaps between shows are partly a function of the time it takes to raise the funding for them – typically anywhere from \$80,000 to \$300,000.

Since Hawco launched into *Republic of Doyle*, Riccio has devoted more of his time to steering The Company and Hawco is feeling "extremely jealous" that, for the first time, he's not involved in the day-to-day of a Company play. Still, both men balk at the idea of giving

up screen work to focus on the stage full-time, or vice versa, and cherish the flexibility their partnership gives them.

Having sold rights to *Republic of Doyle* to networks in virtually every corner of the world, and earned a Gemini nomination as best actor this past week, Hawco is riding a wave of screen success, but he's keeping one hand firmly on *The Company* reins.

"The theatre is certainly my first love, and to be in a situation where you can choose the roles and the plays you want to do is something that should never be taken lightly," he says.