

# 20 QUESTIONS

WITH JESS McLEOD

JESS McLEOD is a busy freelance director and current Resident Director of *Hamilton* in Chicago. *SDC Journal* caught up with her to find out how she balances her freelance work with *Hamilton*, what she's learned, and what's next.

**Describe your professional life in two words.**

Risk. Joy.

**How long have you lived in Chicago? What brought you there?**

Ten years. I moved from New York to Chicago to earn my MFA in Directing at Northwestern University, and I stuck around because I found the scene and cost of living exciting. Young directors who were succeeding in New York at the time were almost all straight white men with funding or familial connections I just didn't have, so I cut my losses and opted for grad school, where I could focus more on the work and less on the business.

**And did you?**

Hell yes. I was so traumatized by having work assigned to me based on ethnicity (I'm a first-generation Korean-Filipina-Scottish-American) that I went in determined to prove my Americanness by working on classic American plays. But being the only director of color in my program for three years helped me see that the most American thing about me is my otherness, ethnic and otherwise. I'm drawn to direct Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* because I understand what it's like to live inside an ethnic container and have personality and behavior projected onto you—and O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* because I'm the black sheep of my family. I learned to see my "difference" as a compass rather than a barrier.

**How does that impact your aesthetic?**

It's the alpha and omega of my aesthetic. Society teaches women and people of color to filter everything they say and do, to stay small and silent in order to maintain existing power structures. So I gravitate toward scripts with a lot of layers, a heightened awareness of language—scripts that demand radical visuals/imagery that help audiences see what's really happening around us, in us, to us. We end up with vast and complex

interior lives as a result of encountering daily systemic pushback. I'm interested in staging that. We can only dismantle what we can see.

**Have you been able to build a career working mostly in Chicago theatres?**

I'm lucky to have found artistic homes at A Red Orchid Theatre, where I'm a new ensemble member (*Do You Feel Anger?*, *Fulfillment Center*), the Goodman (*There's Always the Hudson*), The Gift Theatre (*Wolf Play*, *Hang Man*), and Haven Theatre Chicago (*How We Got On*)—companies of varied sizes interested in producing aesthetically risky, provocative work. But my career actually started to gain momentum when I expanded my work beyond the theatre community. The Chicago arts community at large—music, literature, fine art—is phenomenal and very tuned in to its massive sociopolitical issues. In the last five years, I've created original operas with community groups through Lyric Unlimited's Chicago Voices program, directed an original musical written and performed by incarcerated teenagers at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center through Storycatchers Theatre, and helped run Young Chicago Authors' Louder Than A Bomb Poetry Festival, where I used to say that you could hear more sociopolitical content in a three-minute poem by a 15-year-old Chicago Public School student than on any stage in town. That's changing, but change



PHOTO Sarah Elizabeth Larson

takes time—most theatres are still in the early stages of acknowledging their institutional homogeneity and taking steps to change it.

**When did you become the Resident Director of *Hamilton* in Chicago? How did you get that job?**

June 2017. A colleague recommended me, which led to interviews with [Associate/Supervising Director] **Patrick Vassel** and [Director] **Tommy Kail**. In between, I saw the show for the first time.

**What are your responsibilities?**

I maintain the current production, keep our formidable crew of standbys and understudies ready for anything, and rehearse incoming principals. I watch and note the show two to three times a week, and spend anywhere from four to 16 hours in rehearsal, depending on who's learning what.

**What is your relationship with Associate/Supervising Director Patrick Vassel, and how do you, Patrick, and Tommy work together to keep the show running in top form?**

Trusting and communicative. *Hamilton* Residents are encouraged to interpret, not replicate, which helps keep it fresh for everyone. Along with our PSM Scott Rowen, Resident Choreographer **Michael Balderrama**, and Music Director Mike Moise, I oversee the daily artistic business of the show, sending notes and reports to the Chicago and New York teams once a week. Patrick and I usually do a weekly phone update on who's coming and going and what impact that might have on the company and the story; Tommy and I, more like monthly. I love how much *Hamilton's* nuance and message mean to the original creators; Tommy, Alex Lacamoire, **Andy Blankenbuehler**, and/or his associate Stephanie Klemons visit every few months, not just to check in but to reengage with the work itself.

**Are you able to pursue other freelance projects at the same time? How do you make that work?**

I've directed several shows and a handful of workshops since I started. The keys to making it work are only saying yes to shows I have an intense gut reaction to; avoiding double duty when several new actors are going into *Hamilton* at once; and having Patrick Vassel, who usually comes out when I'm in tech, provide directorial support as needed and completely ruin the cast for my return with his brilliance and insights.

**Tell us about some of your recent directing projects.**

By the time this comes out, I'll have just opened Idris Goodwin's *Hype Man* at Actors



Jess McLeod + *Hamilton* Chicago Schuyler sister standby Ta-Tynisa Wilson  
PHOTO Keith Webb

Theatre of Louisville, a three-person play about a white rapper, his black best friend/hype man, and their wunderkind female beat-maker; they're on the verge of their big break when a police shooting forces them to reevaluate their artistic responsibilities. Idris is the August Wilson of hip-hop plays, and the play masterfully entangles the personal and political. And the designers (Sara Ryung Clement, Lee Fiskness, Melissa Ng, Patrick Bley) have created a world that literally keeps changing on the characters—we keep expanding from a crappy rehearsal room with recycled equipment out to flashy concert venues and then contracting back to the room as the characters work to reconcile their choices inside with the world outside and fame keeps slipping out of reach.

I also recently completed a writer's residency at the O'Neill with composer Diana Lawrence and playwright Samantha Beach on our

musical *Mill Girls*, in which a farm girl starts working in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, to help send her brother to college (it's the 1840s) and ends up in the middle of a huge literary movement; the "mill girls" started the first female-authored newspaper in America. It's about how women play a role to advance and the toll that role takes on you—we push ourselves to make every scene a scene from a woman's life we've never seen on stage.

***Hamilton* is a groundbreaking musical in so many ways. Where do you see musical theatre headed in the next 10 years?**

Where I hope it's heading is fewer lame movie adaptations and more producers taking more risks on musicals by women and artists of color, with real contemporary sound and subjects, and in artists connecting across disciplines to stretch and evolve the form. I also hope we're officially opening up the casting process—one of the reasons I took my job at *Hamilton* was to work every day almost exclusively with incredible musical theatre performers of color on complex roles with real resources. It doesn't exist anywhere else. And we out here.

**What do you love best about working on a musical?**

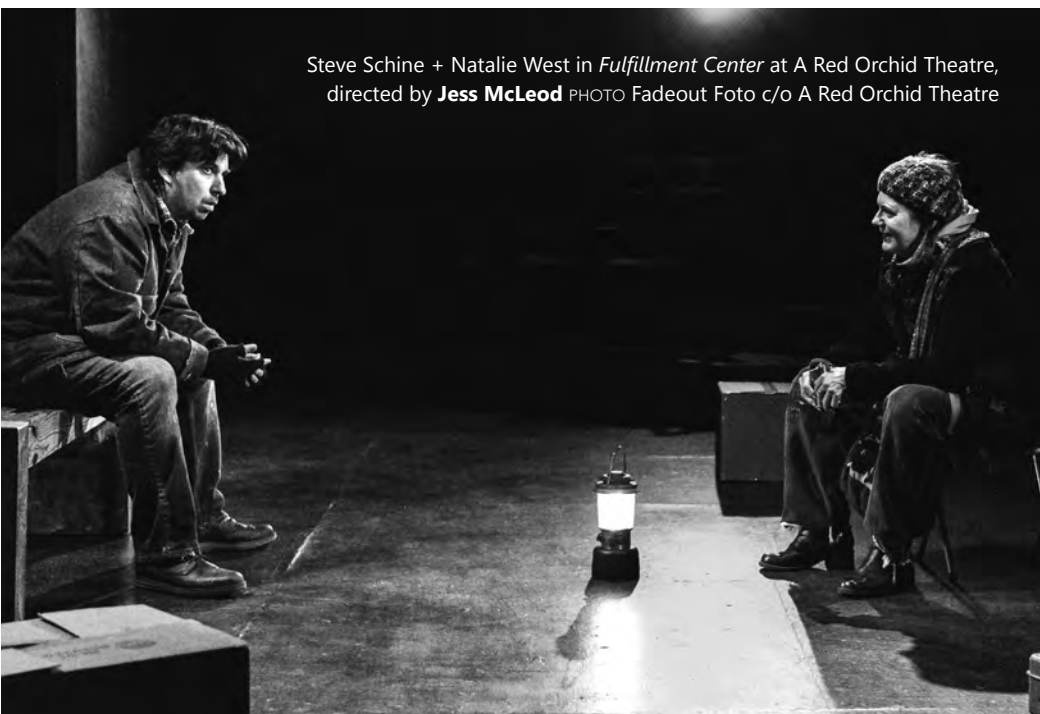
Setting up rules and then breaking them.

**A new play?**

Protecting and animating the vision and crazy ideas of an artist I wholeheartedly believe in.

**Describe a specific tool or approach you learned as a resident, associate, or assistant director that you have carried into your own work as a director.**

Time functions differently as a resident, especially on *Hamilton*. Directors are used to steering everyone toward opening night, but on a long-running show, there is no opening night. You end up thinking more holistically



Steve Schine + Natalie West in *Fulfillment Center* at A Red Orchid Theatre, directed by Jess McLeod PHOTO Fadeout Foto c/o A Red Orchid Theatre

about how a performer fits into a company/show, and how the show/role fits into that performer's life. It deepens your relationship and work together.

**You were a Michael Maggio Directing Fellow at the Goodman a few years ago. What did that fellowship enable you to do?**

I sat in on executive staff meetings and saw how the sausage was made—programming decisions, technical implications, the creation and evaluation of short- and long-term plans. I poked my head into the offices of [Goodman staff members] **Henry Wishcamper**, Roche Schulfer, Adam Belcuore, Willa Taylor, Peter Calibraro, Tanya Palmer, and **Steve Scott** for weekly doses of wisdom. I had breakfast with **Robert Falls** and talked shop about new musicals. Everyone came to my shows and offered invaluable feedback. It was an incredible year, both because the Goodman's staff is generous and the institution itself has a singular commitment to theatre on multiple levels—in Chicago, nationally, on Broadway, new, revisionist—and acts with real civic responsibility to provide the city with art and the power of art. And I've continued to love working there since.

**How does teaching fit into your career?**

The subjects I keep making shows about

are much bigger than me or than any one show. Teaching is an opportunity to organize a curriculum around craft or one of those bigger subjects—last fall, I taught a Playwrights of Color class at the University of Chicago to a mix of intrepid theatre and non-theatre undergraduate students. We started with Adrienne Kennedy, and our midterm was metatheatrical presentations on *The Octoroon* and *An Octoroon*. It was marvelous.

**What do you do in your free time? Do you have any?**

I run. I read (not scripts). I go to as much non-theatre art as I can, with friends in and outside the arts community. I read too much news too frequently. I bet on who's gonna win *Top Chef*.

**What's coming up for you?**

Paola Lázaro's *There's Always the Hudson* at Woolly Mammoth. Mara Nelson-Greenberg's *Do You Feel Anger?* at A Red Orchid. Kate Hamill's freaky, hilarious adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* at Long Wharf. A new children's opera called *Earth to Kenzie* at Lyric Unlimited. *American Idiot* with Michael Mahler at American Blues Theatre. I'm also developing a multi-art mega-theatre touring piece about the first 150 years of America from the POV of the conquered with Idris Goodwin and numerous other artists.

**Is there anything on your wish list to direct?**

My list would take up the whole issue! Playwrights might be faster: Jackie Sibblies Drury, Jen Silverman, Stew and Heidi Rodewald, Jennifer Haley, Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage, Branden Jacob-Jenkins, Lily Padilla, Jiehae Park. Also: *Assassins*, *The Threepenny Opera*, *Las Meninas*, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, *Enron*, *Bach at Leipzig*, *Stunning*. And *What the Constitution Means to Me*, the bravest thing I've seen on a Broadway stage—or any stage—in years.

**Do you have any advice for directors seeking or moving into associate/resident positions?**

Everybody: seek out directors whose work you admire and keep contacting them. Residents: pick shows you'll enjoy watching two to four times a week for a year (or two!) and keep your perspective sharp—don't stop reading scripts and directing or seeing other art. Learn everyone's names and thank them for their work. The occasional Sunday bagel spread can go a long way. And if you're insanely lucky, you'll end up working for the only director in America who, when he calls you to ask how the show's going, means the one you're directing, not his. **sc**

*Empower!* at Lyric Unlimited, directed by **Jess McLeod** PHOTO Todd Rosenberg

