THEATRE

Pettle knows when to fold 'em

Prolific playwright and director has put aside his old gambling habit

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COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Adam Pettle, author/director of Zadie's Shoes, had a hard gambling habit during his younger days.

These days, Adam Pettle is gambling professionally.

No, it doesn't mean that the playwright with the fondness for high-stakes poker has turned his former recreation into an occupation.

Just the opposite, in fact.

The author/co-director of the revival of *Zadie's Shoes*, which is now playing at Factory Theatre, is concentrating his energies on the even more high-risk game of chance called theatre, the world where "a full house" means 200 bums in seats, not three aces and two queens in the same hand.

Gambling comes up as a ready topic when talking to Pettle, and not only because it features importantly in the plot of *Zadie's Shoes*. In his wilder youth, the now 38-year-old playwright was known to be unduly fond of games of chance, flying off to Vegas with his brother Jordan and other Canadian playwrights, best left nameless, to have a date with Lady Luck.

"I totally had the money to gamble and I did," admits Pettle, unwinding over a coffee near Factory Theatre's digs at Adelaide and Bathurst Sts.

"But a couple of things changed. In the first place, I had a series of those 'this is so not fun anymore' moments with gambling and in the second place, all the money I have I now share with Trish (his wife, actress Patricia Fagan) and Alice (his daugher, who was 1 on April 23)."

When Pettle refers to the days he had the money to gamble, he was talking about the early years of the last decade when he had three hits in rapid succession: *Zadie's Shoes, Therac 25* and *Sunday Father*.

All of them were acclaimed and well-attended, as well as bring produced around the world. But then, after an unsuccessful work called *Mosley and Me* in 2003, things dried up for awhile.

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>
> **ADAM PETTLE,** ZADIE'S SHOES DIRECTOR

Pettle wasn't too worried about the drought. "Playwriting for me is what rushes out of you. Martin McDonagh has talked about how he wrote so many of his famous plays so quickly in his 20s. I understand that. Playwriting is a young man's game, well at least a little bit. I had a huge rush of creativity in my 20s and yes, it was all autobiographical, because that's the only place I knew how to write from back then."

But it wasn't lack of inspiration or fear of failure that's kept Pettle away from theatre in recent years. He's discovered the worlds of TV and radio, working heavily as a writer on the successful Global/ABC-TV series *Rookie Blue* and the much-admired CBC radio serial, *Afghanada*.

A lot of writers who leave theatre for episodic television think of it as a step down. But not Pettle, who firmly insists that "I'm not slumming. I find TV forces you to learn how to write plot, how to shape a story. I'm coming to realize theatre could use a lot more of that.

"I've gone through *Zadie's Shoes* this time around, shaping it, trimming it, cutting out whole scenes that didn't drive the story forward. My sense of brevity and economy has really been sharpened."

He looks up to Aaron Sorkin as an idol. "There's a guy I respect so much. His ability to write dialogue is the best, and his tight stories. And he does theatre, TV and film, too."

He admits "it's the people that brought me back to the theatre. Their constant search for truth, their unwillingness to compromise. TV is a different kind of machine. There's just not as much humanity."

While he concedes that he's reaching a much bigger audience on TV ("more people see one episode of *Rookie Blue* than have seen all my plays put together everywhere in the world") he still loves the dynamic that makes a crowd come to the theatre.

"When they decide to leave their houses and go outside to come to your play, that's choice, that's exhilarating, that's why I do it."

Pettle's brother, Jordan, besides being his closest friend, starred in the original 2001 production and is now co-directing it with his sibling.

"I kind of think of us as Jack and Bobby Kennedy, only we're Jewish and they're better-looking," quips Pettle. But he does admit to planning a modern-day version of the story of Moses and Aaron for the two of them to star in.

The biblical allusion forces the question: how important is Pettle's Jewishness to him?

He thinks about it and then grins. "I'm a husband and father first, a writer second, a centrefielder third and a Jew fourth. But they're all important."

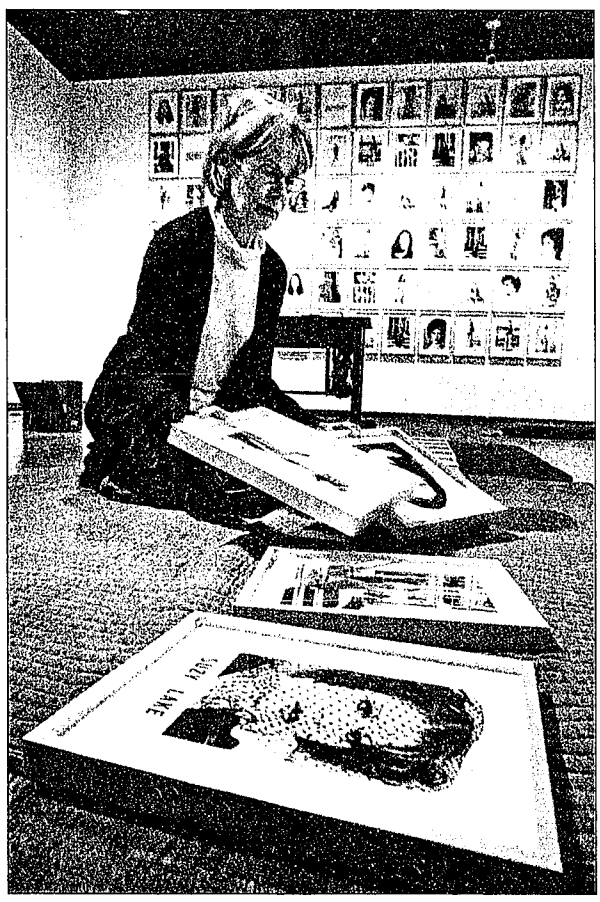
And you'll notice that "gambler" is no longer on the list.

VISUAL ARTS

Artist, in the afterglow

Suzy Lake gets big retrospective at Contact festival

MURRAY WHYTE



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

Suzy Lake works on a retrospective of her work, aptly titled "Political Poetics" in a nod to her steadfast activism, at the U of T Art Centre.

Suzy Lake stands at the podium, cocks her head and curls her lips to a wry grin. "Seminal, eh?" she says, amused.

The crowd giggles. They get it. One of the country's foremost feminist artists has just been introduced at the Contact festival in the malest of terms, and a good-natured rejoinder is only apropos.

The term is apt. Lake has for 40 years built an iconic, influential career here, one that's getting a well-deserved airing at the University of Toronto Art Centre as one of Contact's anchor exhibitions. It's called "Political Poetics" and the title is a nod to her steadfast activism, voiced most often in the most understated of ways.

Raised in Detroit in the 1950s and '60s, Lake saw more than her share of social inequity up close. "I can't even watch *Mad Men*," Lake says, with its boys-club, female-condescending dismissiveness, "because that's not anywhere near as bad as it was." She immigrated to Montreal after the 1967 Detroit riots, moved to Toronto in the mid-'80s and retired from teaching at the University of Guelph last year.

"Political Poetics," at the University of Toronto Art Centre, covers a major span of her career, from the early '70s all the way up to this year. If there's a thread that unites it all, it's Lake's conviction, understated but steadfast, that beauty isn't fleeting so much as constantly evolving.

What Lake sees as beautiful, you might not. That's part of the point: A series of photographs of her rose bushes — jagged, late-season but still blooming despite a recent frost — embody her point most succinctly.

"They really struck me: That the buds were prevailing somehow," she says.

"I wanted to show that strength. They were beautiful — it's just a different beauty."

Lake uses her own body a lot in her work — and we're getting to that — but you can hardly miss the metaphor here: a persistent, near-clichéd symbol of femininity, well past its thick-petaled prime, but still very much alive and flourishing. Lake, now 63, demurs — "well, they're tall and skinny, and so am I," she laughs — but the piece is a subtle yet clear totem of what has become a primary concern.

It began in 1993, when a survey of her work — much of it performance, some of it vigorous, all of it demanding a certain kind of body to deconstruct the societal demand for glamorized female representation — appeared at the National Gallery's Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography.

"That show made me realize I couldn't do work on stage as much as when I was young and in my prime," Lake says. "How could I address it as an older body — a body that society would see as having defects? 'Old is a problem.' And I didn't feel old was a problem."

In some ways, that conviction is the culmination of what Lake has been working on since the very beginning. "On Stage," from 1973, occupies a full room at UTAC. Lake staged it originally as a slide show, dozens of black-and-white pictures of her young, fresh-faced self posed, catalogue-model like, in an array of girly poses: A bright-eyed pirouette, a slinky curl against an ornate wall carving.

Working in the burgeoning realm of feminist art, "On Stage" was a subtle jab at the cutesy representation of women in a male-dominated mediascape. It helped, you'd think, that the 30-ish Lake could easily have been mistaken for a model herself. At the time, it actually hurt.

"The feminist work I was aware of at the same time was much more aggressive: 'Our bodies, ourselves,' burn the bra, that type of thing," she says. "And certainly, I supported those movements. But because of that, when I started doing work that addressed identity and issues of representation, it was taken as narcissistic."

Lake's ear for understatement in a fractious realm of yelling and screaming may have kept that piece below the radar at the time, but long-term, it separates her from the pack. With shifting social norms, hindsight has a way of rendering "radical" work as oddly quaint relics of a different time.

Nowhere was that more clear than with "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," a huge, omnibus exhibition mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007. Lake's early career piece "A Genuine Simulation of . . ." was featured in it, and the work, a grid of sequential self-portraits preening in the mirror, stood out among hundreds of pedantic, hysterical works for its subtle force.

Almost 40 years later, Lake still exemplifies that force. Her most recent works, a series called "Extended Breathing," shows the artist in a variety of settings — a forest, her garden, a stony courtyard at the U of T. Lake is in each, but not: Her figure blurs, ghost-like, almost evaporating, except her feet, rooted clearly to the ground.

The images are large and mounted on light-boxes, which project a warm, other-worldly glow. They're seductive, radiant and gorgeous. They are also images of an older woman, modestly dressed, doing nothing more than drawing breath. (Lake kept the camera shutter open for up to an hour at a time, standing as stock-still as she could; the blur, everywhere except her feet, is just the register of her body's minimal need to stay alive.)

It's a subtle inversion but a vital one, too. Lake's stance that feminine beauty can take forms other than the air-brushed and pneumatic is suggested in a whisper so delicate that you hardly know it's been said.

"Extended Breathing" is also deeply personal.

"The audience should realize, over time, that there's a simple thing I'm performing," she says. "For me, though, it's a question: Can I, in my 60s, still physically do this?"

"I still feel like I can do anything," she laughs. "But to celebrate not-spectacular feats — that's significant, isn't it?"

"Suzy Lake: Political Poetics" is at the University of Toronto Art Centre to June 25. "Suzy Lake," a show of new works, opens at Paul Petro Contemporary Art, 980 Queen Street W. on May 6.