**Re-turning the Page: How theatre practice must bravely return into a post-pandemic, de-colonial, anti-racist world**

HOOmalh Dr. Kevin Loring hans squesht. Kwookstayup I want to thank the Canadian Association of Theatre Research for inviting me to be the key note speaker for this year’s conference. Kwookstumx.

As I live and work in the Ottawa region, I want to begin by thanking the Algonquin Anishnabeg for their stewardship of this land. On behalf of my family, I raise my hands to you in respect and honour. Kwookstayup. We thank you for being such generous hosts and for your incredible patience and generosity with your tmixw, your beautiful ancestral lands. Kwookstayup.

Kwookstumx to the organizers of this gathering and to Dr. Lindsay Lachance for moderating the discussion. We are so lucky to have her with us for this conversation.

We have been enduring an incredibly stressful and dangerous time as we collectively navigate the COVI-19 global pandemic. When the lockdown orders hit, I had just returned from Australia to visit Western Australia as I was invited to attend the Perth Festival, to see the Indigenous work being presented there and to meet some of the industry folks down under. A week after returning home from literally travelling across the globe. Our world came to a halting shut down. The weeks that followed were chaotic and filled with dread and disbelief as the previous 2 years of work building the new Indigenous Theatre department and launching our first season came crashing down. The remainder of our season was cancelled. The months of work leading up to the imminent launch of our follow up season evaporated. Years of establishing vital international connections with Indigenous Artists around the world and across turtle Island went into hibernation. And we were left scrambling to disassemble all that we had been carefully building for over two and half years.

We then immediately and simultaneously made the pivot to digital. The cancellation of all these shows across the country hit artists hard. So, we did what we could to leverage our positions and our platforms to present artists and get money into their hands. We went from planning three years out, to planning and unplanning in three-month cycles. For most of the first year we struggled to find ways to do work in the theatre, anyway possible and at every opportunity, only to be shut down, and eventually locked down. This became exhausting and demoralizing as the pandemic raged on. This awful virus not only attacks our bodies but has laid to waste so much of normal our social structures. Pushing us into isolation and forcing us to disconnect from each other in order to protect ourselves. It has killed so many and injured more. And we’re all in this together. Because All my relations. Because if the great teacher that is the pandemic has taught us anything it's that we are all connected. All my relations! The pandemic has brought me a whole new understanding of that great Indigenous hallelujah. For those of you who don’t know all my Relations is kinda like Indigenous Hallelujah or amen.

I was taught that “All my relations works on a couple of levels. On the one hand it means on behalf of my relations, that is on behalf of my family. At the same time, it means to all of whom I am in relation with. That means you, the guy serving me coffee, everyone standing in line at the grocery store and even the crow on the telephone wire cawing at me as I walk down the street. It means, all of my relations, perceived or not perceived those whom I have an effect upon without even knowing it, and that they may be blessed to and carried in our thoughts.

It is a blessing that asks us to ultimately acknowledge all of creation in our thoughts. Because we are all related as the children of mother earth, as beings in this universe, as inter-related units of this great collective consciousness we call humanity. Because although we are related in this way, we are also mostly ignorant of each other.

That’s why we need representation; to be relieved of the ignorance of homogeneity. To have those other differing perspectives reflected into the consciousness of our communities, to counter the ever-increasing echo chambers of our daily existence as thinking empathic beings travelling together around the sun in concentric, galactic, universal circles, at this time, in this place.

It has been an absolutely devastating time for artists and arts organizations as our entire industry is built upon the hosting of mass gatherings! And now mass gatherings were not only dangerous but illegal! Not only that but of course many artists rely on the service industry to supplement their artistic careers, and with that industry also being devastated, it has only added to the challenges artists have had to endure.

I want to raise my hands at this time, in honour and respect to all the artists and arts organizations that have been trying to keep the creative fires burning through this awful absurd time. Kwookstayup for your perseverance.

I would also like to take this time to raise my hands in honour with the highest respect and regard for the frontline workers and health workers who have been battling this pandemic directly and supporting us all with their work. Kwookstayup! We thank you! We are so grateful for you.

This pandemic has been a teacher. It has taught us so much. It has shown what we are capable of and incapable of. It has revealed what we need and what we take for granted. It has put a spotlight on the inequities of our society and shown us what and who is truly essential. And in that examination of what is or isn't’ necessary, art remains an undeniably essential component of our daily lives. Art has helped us to get through. And for that we must be so grateful for art and the artists who create. What would this time have been like without art? Can you even imagine? With no books or movies, music or online play readings to help us through. When there is no one there to comfort us, art remains, to hold our hands, to inspire our spirits, while we wait out this viral storm raging around us.

Artists are a resilient and innovative bunch. And art finds a way. Artists are no strangers to struggle. And in spite of it all the need to create and the need to consume art remains, even increases the harder things are. But these times are extraordinary and what we have seen is a real need for support for artists as a working class. My job at the National arts Centre during this time has really been about getting as many resources to as many artists as possible. With the tools of the age, we have pivoted too digital. We have created work that doesn’t require a venue, that is designed to embrace physical distancing and still keeping us connected. Where possible we perform physically distanced in the outdoors or in carefully regulated and sanitized spaces. Artists have been singing from the sidewalks to household audiences standing on their porches, they dance on the land and rehearse and record in cyber-spaces. This is of course no substitute for in the flesh live reality, but when there is no other option, we have learned to make do.

We all long to be able to return to the theatre, to enjoy the brilliance of artists? To hear a concert or a play or a dance show, or get up on the dancefloor ourselves, and move to the music with a crew of our best friends. But what I think is remarkable about this is that without venues, art has been forced to return to the streets, to public spaces, to community.

The global pandemic comes at a time when we are also reconning as a society with systemic racism and colonialism. The theatre is still such a powerful medium for the expression of these subjects. Many of our most celebrated plays speak of the inequities and the struggles within our society. And yet in so many ways voices of colour have been excluded overlooked and ignored or ghettoized by many of the larger institutions since forever.

The cultural infrastructure of Canada was built on an ideological foundation of Nation Building following the second world war at a time before the doctrines of Multiculturalism and Inclusion had any influence or penetration into our daily ethos. So these institutions were created at a time when Canada was still very white. At a time when to be Indigenous meant you couldn’t even leave the reserve to come into town without a signed pass card from the local Indian agent or you would end up in jail.

It therefore might stand to reason that the tradition of theatre in this county is rooted predominately in white society. Our institutions have been built to nurture a white audience at the exclusion of most others. Marketing departments often struggle to penetrate any community other than the dominant “white” audience base that they are familiar with. because that is typically the community that those departments belong to. So when those works come to the stage, outreach for some theatres ends up entailing thrusting some poor jet lagged Indigenous playwright onto a 5 minute spot at 7:00 am on a morning show to discuss their neat new play about injustice and inequality. Not that that’s so bad. Its great to be on a morning show. It’s just. So early. In the morning.

We can do better. We can do the work of making relationships with those communities we have no relationship with but who’ve literally… always been there. By doing the work of welcoming folks to our spaces. And that’s what we need to do.

Sometimes I feel like we’ve come a long way in a short time at the NAC IT. And then I realize we didn’t even get through our first season before the apocalypse hit.

So much groundwork went into its creation and so much care. We were interrupted by the pandemic and that sucks. But people are dying. Things are serious. And we will make do. And do what we can. I have had second my shot more than two weeks ago. So my 5G is killer. And I can’t wait to be seeing art up close and personal again.

The NAC is the crown jewel of the Canadian Regional Theatre network either by default or by design depending on who you ask. Created out of recommendations following the Massey commission on National Development of the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, the NAC is a crown corporation created to celebrate Canadian performing Art and Artists.

 The Massey commission written at the height of the Residential school system around 1949-51 and out which came the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts and the building of the NAC said this about native arts:

*“Chapter 15 section 4: ...since the death of true Indian arts is inevitable, Indians should not be encouraged to prolong the existence of arts which at best must be artificial and at worst degenerate. It is argued that Indian arts emerged naturally from that combination of religious practices and economic and social customs which constituted the culture of the tribe and region. The impact of the white man with his more advanced civilization and his infinitely superior techniques resulted in the gradual destruction of the Indian way of life. The Indian arts this survive only as ghosts or shadows of a dead society. They can never it is said regain real form or substance. Indians with creative talent should therefore develop it as other Canadians do, and should receive every encouragement for this purpose, but Indian art as such cannot be revived.”*

This entire chapter of the Massey paper is directed towards Indigenous art and culture and was a foundational document of the Canadian Cultural and artistic economy. It is baldly paternalistic, racist and ignorant of Indigenous peoples.

This paper is an ideological pillar from which the creation of the Canadian Art infrastructure, the institutions from funding bodies to theatres, museums and galleries have been built from. This is the legacy that we need to examine and reimagine. Because this legacy of racism remains.

What all Arts institutions reflect is a colonial hierarchy. They are by definition corporate and bureaucratic. And so one to ask are colonial corporate Bureaucratic spaces safe for Indigenous people? So the challenge then is how do you make the space less colonial, corporate and bureaucratic. And the answer has to be through relationships.

 Coming out of the pandemic our theatre spaces not only have to be safe and sanitary, they have to be welcoming and culturally safe. To all of us. And to even begin to address this we have to examine the roles that our institutions play in maintaining white supremacy in our society.

Many if not all Institutions in this country are not safe or inviting places for Indigenous people. Theaters are among those spaces that have not been very inviting to Indigenous people. There is often little to no relationship with the Indigenous communities upon whose land our theatres occupy.

I once had an Artistic Director from a large regional theatre, when asked about whether he had done any outreach towards a native housing complex down the street from his theatre where my play about Residential School survivors was running replied,

“Oh, those people don’t come to the theatre.”

Well, if that’s the attitude, why the fuck would they?!

The way that theatre is disseminated is exclusive, and it is unnecessarily so. Financial barriers to physical barriers to cultural barriers and yes racial barriers are ensuring our theatres serve a particular clientele. Investment is needed by all of our institutions to make access to the work more democratic and embracing of people outside of the typical white affluent class that theatres disproportionately serve. I am not saying to reject the “typical” theatre audience or subscriber base all I’m saying is broaden your horizons, open your doors to other communities in your city and make them welcome! But also, as a publicly funded enterprises theatres must be obligated to or else all this talk about how sorry we are and how terrible it is that systemic racism exists is just bullshit.

Art plays such an important role in not just entertaining us but also in reflecting the social condition. Artists have always taken as their source material our value sets as a society and played into or against those values in the creation of their work. I would argue that the entire canon of Indigenous Theatre is comprised of works that engage with some form of social, political, personal and/or spiritual struggle against settler colonialism. My own work as a playwright either engages directly with those impacts or attempts to work in a way that attempts to counter those impacts.

Indigenous artists reckon with our histories every day. We are constantly reminded of it. We use it in our work because it needs to be wrestled with, understood, challenged. Our identities position us in opposition to the colonial projects of Canada, not because we want to be in opposition but because we must. Our lands are occupied and exploited while we remain impoverished, left out and neglected. Our children are in Care. Our communities struggle. As it is in our communities so too has it been in the cities. And we have so much to work through and against just to be heard. To be seen. And when we are seen it has rarely been on our terms. Western film and television industry was built on the glorification of the genocide of the Americas and the exotification and denigration of black Asian and Indigenous cultures. The tourist industry celebrates Indigenous art while security guards bully street associated Indigenous people off of the sidewalks in the tourist traps. We are told by the political class that no other relationship is more important, as the RCMP remove elders from roadblocks, punch Chiefs in parking lots, and send snipers to oversee peaceful protestors protecting their ancestral territory from pipelines and logging. We are apologized to and commiserated with in public while court cases against Residential School survivors and Child Advocates continue. And on and on and on.

Yet people keep telling me how so much is changing. But is it really? I hope, fingers crossed. When nothing has changed for so long any change feels irrevocable and definitive. Amidst all of the good will and the “Things are different now,” nods of confidence I have received having been elevated to a position of equal power to my white peers. I’m not convinced things have changed. Either for better or worse. People are beginning to see us now though, I think. I’m not sure, but I think. And they are beginning, just beginning, to allow themselves to see us not for who they would like us to be, but who we say we are. And that has taken a long, long time. It’s not much, but it is a start. Maybe even a new beginning.

And yet so many of the stories we chose to tell are: “Indigenous person encounters legacies of trauma from settler colonialism and struggles to navigate the toxic outcomes associated with it.” That is basically the logline of almost every Indigenous Play ever written. Prove me wrong!

It makes sense! That’s not a bad thing. I certainly enjoy doing it. But it’s interesting to me the difference of energy and the kind of work that comes out when I am working in my community with our rhythms and language and way of being. Outside of the black box. In the wind and the weather, in a sparce hall with my theatre and my community family together. Feeding each other culture and language and stories. One berry at a time.

I find that when I work in the theatre, and this is true of my own the work and of the work of other Indigenous playwrights, the plays are most often a reflection of the settler colonial/ Indigenous dynamic. For sure right. Who typically goes to the theatre? - White people. So we aim that work at that audience. Here maybe this will penetrate! Boom We get Dry Lips right in the face from Thomson Highway. Then Marie Clements comes along and blows our minds with Indigenous 4th dimensional dramaturgy.

But I also wonder if it's because of the space itself, the institution of the Theatre, and the very buildings we do theatre in, and perhaps our opposition to those structures was leaking out onto the stage. But things are changing here too. Artists are decolonizing their practices and not playing the regular theatre games. Many are beginning to reject the unions and associations that steward the professional theatre ecology because they have felt abused and infringed upon by the way the system of fees have negatively impacted artist of colour in particular.

One of the huge things that I’ve been party to alongside my cousin and colleague Lori Marchand managing director of Indigenous Theatre was our involvement in the new CTA and the almost 2 year long negotiations between PACT and Equity for this new agreement. Our involvement lead directly to the creation of two new clauses within the CTA. Article 14 the acknowledgement that the CTA has been a racist and discriminative document and that both parties would work to ensure that it no longer remained so. And the creation of the provision to allow artists who work in community settings, and in practical in underserved communities are not obligated to sign an equity form of contract or pay fees to the association for that work. And the definition with the CTA of community engaged practices.

Now don’t get me wrong, I love theatres, I love working in theatres. I like to think of them as instruments that we all collectively play together, like a giant guitar or a piano of ideas, held between audience and company. Each has its own special quirks and characteristics, personalities even. And in the *playing together a* theatre emerges, but without us playing together it's just an empty room. Our collective presence and attention make the theatre, not the room. Having been exiled from these fabulous dark rooms during this pandemic and having to pivot to alternative spaces to do the work has made me re-examine the role those spaces have in the way that performing arts have been shaped and disseminated.

Obviously, site specific and non-venue work is not new or innovative in and of itself, we’re been doing it since the dawn of time. But the creation of the artistic infrastructure has prioritized work in these spaces to the point where the vast majority of the resources allocated to the arts goes to supporting these structures, and not to the artists themselves. And this is a problem and one that artists have been pointing out for some time. We pay the front of house staff, marketing departments, crews, departmental heads and managers salaries or at the very least, hourly wages to maintain these temples of art. But the artists themselves are left to grind away precariously from gig to gig with often little or no support to keep their heads above water beyond project-based funding. Yet it is their existence that we rely on most. We need the artists to be supported to create the works that we love so much. Now I am not an economist, but there has to be a way to ensure artists are supported in a way that allows them to focus on their work, rather than to be stressed about survival. The job of the artists is to dream, and to take those dreams and create worlds for us to enter into. That labour is under appreciated, and because of that the safety of the artists is always at stake, placing them at the bottom of the priority hierarchy. Perhaps the pandemic has finally taught us also that these artists deserve some form of basic income support.

The pandemic has also made me think about how and where we allow ourselves to create and share. The typical proscenium structure of most theatres implies yet another hierarchy. It imposes the fourth wall along with all the other walls of the stage, and an elevated relationship between artists and audience. It also insists upon a one directional relationship between the players and the audience and demands that the relationship between players adhere along a singular, forward-facing plane of delivery. I really appreciate open spaces and “Black Box” theatres where you can configure the space to your needs. Spaces designed to easily accommodate playing in a variety of configurations beyond the missionary of proscenium are so exciting to me. Of course, they come with their own challenges but in those challenges are added dimensions of movement and relationship.

So go ahead and build some more theatres like that please and thank you. Because in my humble opinion, they are inherently decolonial, or at the very least, less colonial. Because they can accommodate a circle. Spaces like Debajamjig on Manitoolin Island. These versatile little theater spaces should be built all over the country fully funded and supported by our funding institutions. They should be artist and community centric and run by small administrative team guided by Indigenous artists That would be a radical rethinking of the regional Theatre model. Indigenous Culture exists within circles. And Indigenous Artists must be given the tools they need to create in the way that they work and in spaces that make it easy for Indigenous Audiences to be engaged. This constellation of Small venues in regions across the country from coast to coast to coast could become cultural hubs for their regions. Where new work can be encouraged and developed and the forms of expression most favored by the communities can be nurtured and disseminated.

When I do theatre work in my community, I work in circles. When we work in theatres we do blocking. When we are in a circular relationship, we find ourselves contained within an infinite curve. Where all the directions meet. In a circle we are equals. Where no one point has a hierarchy over another.

Sometime it feels like Indigenous Theatre artists are trying to fit circles into squares. And the institutions are reflexively always trying to square the circles we are building. And what we need to do is find alignment. Or we need to have our own spaces, to create and share our work.

One of the things the pandemic interrupted for me was my community project: Aasht eehtlm ah timxw- The Songs of the Land project, the work I am creating with my community based on Spetakwl Stories N’lakapamux creation or foundational stories. These stories reflect an N’lakapamux cosmology laws and values. I write short 45-minute musicals with a company comprised of N’lakapamux community members and professional Indigenous artists. Some of the songs are inspired by wax cylinder recordings made over a hundred years ago of N’lakapamux singing their greatest and oldest hits. The stories themselves are thousands of years old. We put our spin on them as all storytellers do. With a shoestring aesthetic we build and rehearse the plays over the course of a month and present it once or twice for the community for free. The narratives are N’lakapamux. They reference an N’lakapamux cosmology. And they are entirely compelling, accessible and universal. It might not be “professional” but certainly professionals are involved but our audiences are moved to laugh and cry, and that is all we can hope for.

This work is founded on a value set that places a connection to community at the centre of the process not outside of it to be drawn in through the magic of marketing. It’s a process that includes the land and our history on it. The animals who live upon it with us are seen as relational. We talk about the land in the room, the fish the animals and our relationship with those beings, the changing seasons and the places on our lands where these stories come from. The land is imbedded in the dramaturgy of the work not as a self-conscious concept that we are forcing into the process, but because it just is. And that awareness of place, of land, of relationship roots the work and finds its expression in rhythm and movement, language, pace, and tone. We take care of each other, feed each other, share and teach each other without hierarchy so much as guidance. It is an Indigenous process, imbedded with N’lakapamux values reflecting an N’lakapamux world view to a Kaleidoscopic Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience, but an audience that is familiar with the place and the people. It is from the community for the community. It is culturally specific and yet entirely universal. And COULD be staged on any of our finest theatres across the country.

But this project was primarily meant to engage the community and is therefore not so focused on product as one might find in a commercial setting. The emphasis is on engagement, learning and sharing rather than product and sales,. The product is compelling none the less compelling theatre because it is authentic and relatable. These thousand year old stories are as epic as anything Shakespeare invented or that the Greeks staged. And that a self-inflating comment about my own clumsy writing but about the stories themselves. They are brilliant. And very very ancient. In my 20 plus years of being a theatre practitioner, this project is the purest theatre I have done. It doesn’t take place in a venue, but it could. We do it with card board costumes. And a will to have fun and take care of each other while we do it. I have been in many rehearsal halls as a professional, where nowhere near as much openness, bravery, safety and generosity were present in room.

I believe that connection to the communities we serve is the work Theatres need to take more seriously coming out of this pandemic. Theatres must build relationships with the broader community beyond their usual subscriber base. They need to create relationships with a broader range of audiences than has traditionally been prioritized. And of course, the work on the stage needs to reflect that pivot.

Perhaps it's my artistic up bringing, coming of age as an artist in Vancouver in the 2000’s when a lack of spaces for emerging companies forced us to get inventive with space and our relationship with audience and community. But just as we’ve become innovative with navigating the pandemic with zoom readings and videos, the return to the stage should be accompanied by a return to the communities our stages serve. We need to turn our institutions inside out and upside down. We need to make them accessible financially as well as physically, make them safe and inviting to people from all cultures and not exclusive entrenched bastions of white elitism. We must insist that they are welcoming spaces for Black, Indigenous and other people of colour and safe spaces for LGBTQ2+ folx in this country. And we need to make the accessible for people of all economic means. We’re subsidized to the ceilings! We should be making these public spaces, public! And that means representation on the stage and within the halls of the institution. We need to break down the barriers that have been so carefully constructed to reflect a white world to a kaleidoscopic community and you do that by bringing those kaleidoscopic perspectives into the institutions themselves. It is not enough to just have representation on the stage it requires there to be representation in artistic leadership of the institutions that present the work.

That involves an honest examination of the realities our institutions reflect in the first place? If we are truly serious about addressing these issues and not just reflexively making hollow gestures fueled by guilt and remorse at watching black men being murdered by cops on the news, or by the steadily increasing body count of Indigenous children buried in mass graves on old Residential School grounds, we need to do the hard work of reshaping our intuitions, from the foundations on up. Or from the top down if necessary. Or from the inside out. Or from up side down and around corner. You know? By any mean necessary!

 The social issues we are engaged with today are issues that we have been yelling and screaming, litigating, investigating, singing and making art about since the beginning of Canada. But it takes the brutal reality of a knee on the neck, the horror show of a video of the heckling by the nursing staff of a dying Indigenous mother in a hospital. It takes the physical proof of all the stories we have been telling about mass graves on Residential School grounds to finally and forensically prove the extent of the state sponsored atrocities against Indigenous children and for people to finally see the reality of white supremacy in our society. It is alive and well here and now, and not in some long-ago time removed from our collective responsibility or somewhere south of the 49th parallel. And it has been imbedded into all of our intuitions, from their inception whose function has been to uphold and protect it.

That work, I hope, is beginning. At the very least the conversations are being had, within the Canada Council, at the National Arts Centre, and the National Gallery. But what is needed is for all publicly funded institutions to do the deep work of identifying their role in upholding systemic racism and white supremacy and identifying what they are doing to uproot it. And to do that you gotta get your root digging stick. Because what is needed is an examination of the roots of our institutions. And if it needs be uprooted then we have to dig it up and replant something else.

The way we fund art and which art gets funded has played a role. The lack of representation within the institutions that disseminate art plays a role. How those institutions are staffed, plays a role. How they are built physically plays a role. Who they are and aren’t serving at all, also plays a role.

We need to leave our hallowed castles and step onto the land. We need to reach out to the communities we are mandated to serve. No theatre company in Canada has the mandate to tell stories only about and for white people yet that is what many theatres have been getting away with doing for decades. The bureaucracies and structures within buildings resist change and are fundamentally preoccupied with their authority and continued relevance. The structures themselves reflect their origins so to do the organizations housed within them.

The NAC is the crown jewel of the Canadian Regional Theatre network either by default or by design depending on who you ask. Created out of recommendations following the Massey commission on National Development of the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, the NAC is a crown corporation created to celebrate Canadian performing Art and Artists. Interesting in that much of the early work the NAC presented or produced initially was either of British or American origin as Canadian artists weren’t considered very good at the time and for years Canadian artists were told how they just couldn’t match their American and British counterparts. I can’t even tell you how many times have I heard this same statement from Canadians about Indigenous artists... Funny how once you start getting stage time and experience that your skills improve...

 The Massey commission written at the height of the Residential school system in in 1949-51. As I said earlier this era was the height Residential School system. Out of the MAssey papers came the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts and the building of the NAC and much of the national cultural infrastructure we take for granted today, This is some of what was said in the papers about native arts:

“Chapter 15 section 4: ...since the death of true Indian arts is inevitable, Indians should not be encouraged to prolong the existence of arts which at best must be artificial and at worst degenerate. It is argued that Indian arts emerged naturally from that combination of religious practices and economic and social customs which constituted the culture of the tribe and region. The impact of the white man with his more advanced civilization and his infinitely superior techniques resulted in the gradual destruction of the Indian way of life. The Indian arts this survive only as ghosts or shadows of a dead society. They can never it is said regain real form or substance. Indians with creative talent should therefore develop it as other Canadians do, and should receive every encouragement for this purpose, but Indian art as such cannot be revived.”

this entire chapter of the Massey paper is directed towards Indigenous art and culture and was a foundational document of the Canadian Cultural and artistic economy. It is baldly paternalistic, racist and ignorant of Indigenous peoples. This, like the Indian Act is a founding document of our present culture and reality.

This paper is an ideological pillar from which the creation of the Canadian Art infrastructure, the institutions from funding bodies to theatres, museums and galleries has been built from. This is the legacy that we need to examine and reimagine. We need to look at how our institutions came to exist in the first place or order to reset them towards a more inclusive future.

Coming out of this pandemic and with all the energy of trying to re-emerge into a more just and inclusive society, our theatre spaces not only have to be physically safe and sanitary, they have to be welcoming and culturally safe yet still be able to get into the mud artistically and that is a real tough balancing act init!?

Many spaces in this country are not safe or inviting places for Indigenous people and other people of colour. If you’re an Indigenous you can get yourself and your 12 year old granddaughter put in hand cuffs for trying to open a Bank account. If you’re an Indigenous composer sitting in the theatre watching your own rehearsal, you can be asked to leave by an usher, because you don’t look like you belong. So yes, theaters certainly are one those types of spaces where Indigenous people often are made to feel like they don’t belong. And that is what all theatres must work to change.

Racial barriers, financial barriers to physical barriers and cultural barriers are ensuring our theatres serve a particular clientele. Investment is needed by all of our institutions to make access to the work more democratic and embracing of “Those people (that) don’t come to the theatre.” And for those who simply can’t because the space is unaccommodating to their physical needs. This is an expensive problem and one I know theatres are struggling to address.

We need to undo that harm; we need to reach back to the origin story of the Canadian Cultural Economy and the institutions that serve it. This is where the work needs to begin, with a reimaging of the foundational principles of our arts infrastructure. The inclusion of Indigenous Theatre at the NAC is a beginning as are other initiatives in other institutions, such as the appointment of the Indigenous curator at the National Gallery. And some of the restructuring happening at the Canada Council for the Arts like, Creating Knowing and Sharing, which is the separate stream of funding for Indigenous work.

It is always so Ironic to me that the seminal Canadian play is The Ecstasy of Rita Joe. George Ryga’s revolutionary play for its time, featuring a largely Indigenous cast. Except of course for the lead role. It premiered at the opening of the National Arts Centre 1969 with Francis Hyland a white actress as the title role of Rita Joe. Telling the tragic story of the very systemic racism expressed towards Indigenous people in the Massey paper. You all know the story, this is after all the Canadian Association of Theatre Researchers so you must also know that it took another 22 years after the premiere of Rita Joe for the first ever Indigenous authored play, Dry Lips Oughta move to Kapuskasing by Thomson Highway to play at the National Arts Centre in 1991 and another 15 years after that for Marie Clements Copper Thunderbird in 2006 to play there, the first play written by an Indigenous woman to grace the “National Stage.” The first play directed by an Indigenous person ever to grace the stages of the NAC was the 40th anniversary production of the Ecstasy of Rita Joe in 2009, directed by Yvette Nolan. It took 40 years for the NAC to stage its first ever play directed by an Indigenous Artist... EVER!

Peter Hinton must be acknowledged for making it a priority to include an Indigenous play in every season of his tenure as artistic director of English theatre at the NAC, with more Indigenous plays presented on the national stage during his 6-year tenure than the entire previous 36 years before. It is without a doubt his decision to make Indigenous work a priority that led to the creation of the department that I now run. A decision that came with some push-back. But ultimately his artistic and moral bravery lead to his predecessor, my colleague Jillian Keilley to also be compelled to address the lack of representation of Indigenous stories on the “national stage”. Also the work that was done on “The Northern Scene” and “The Indigenous Scene” festivals brought so much exposure to a new generation of Indigenous Artists. English Theatre held *The Summit*, a gathering in Banff to discuss issues around Indigenous representation in the Theatre, and *The Study* a three-week retreat held by English Theatre where Indigenous Theatre Artists from all across the country gathered on Manitoulin Island to discuss and examine the Indigenous Canon. Out of The Study came the conclusion and a proposal that Indigenous Theatre was a neglected body of work that deserved its own department at the National Arts Centre, led by Indigenous Artists to present Indigenous works on the National Stage as an integral part of the Crown corporation’s annual operations. This ultimately resulted in my appointment here and our inaugural season in 2019-20.

Indigenous Theatre history of course also exists in relationship to important cultural, social and political inciting events and contexts within Global and National events and their impact on Indigenous relations. In 1991 the year Dry Lips was on stage at the NAC there was the Oka crisis with two of the actors Graham Greene and Gary Farmer who are Mohawk. In 2003 when Marie Clements Burning Vision played at the NAC as part of the inaugural Magnetic North Theater festival, we had the first SARs global pandemic which of course is another corona virus. In 2009 when my play Where the Blood Mixes opened at Magnetic North Theatre festival held in Vancouver, Steven Harper made the historic apology for the atrocities of the Residential School system in the House of Commons on the very same day. The Truth and Reconciliation commission and the calls to action also contributed directly to ethos around the creation of the Indigenous Theatre department at the NAC. The social movements Idle No More spurred an awakening of Indigenous art and activism, today Black Lives Matter challenges institutions and authority to uphold racial justice, and right now as the body count of Indigenous Children buried on Residential School grounds in mass graves grows with every passing week, the Every Child Matters movement calls us all to embrace Indigenous children in particular and children of all races and ethnicities to be cared for and protected by the institutions and authorities charged with their care, and to remember and honour the struggles of the Residential and Day school survivors. The Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls comes 30 years after Thomson bravely grappled with the issues of misogynistic violence against indigenous women and girls with Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing when it first premiered at Pas Muraille in 1989. The work of the LGBTQ2s+ community has always had a home in the Theatre world, which has arguably been a relatively safe place for queer artists and expression but even here transphobia and gender violence can exist and we must always be vigilant to ensure the safety of everyone no matter their pronouns or gender identities. Our culture is Kaleidoscopic not monolithic and our institutions have to not just reflect but protect that beautiful rainbow of diversity.

If our audience is mostly or all white, its’ not because “*those (other) people don’t go to the theatre”.* It's because, they have no reason to. It’s because, the theatre hasn’t been a safe place for them. It’s because, we haven’t welcomed them in. It's because, it's not art and culture. Art is culture and the audience is community, And we haven’t done a very good job for ither artists or audiences because we didn’t find ways to embrace a broader range of people within the communities we are serving. And that requires establishing relationships. And that’s hard work.

Theatres exist within communities; physically occupying spaces in cities and towns. But Theatre exists in a liminal space somewhere between audiences and actors, playwrights and directors, stage managers and producers, and in the professional world also between marketers, bloggers, funders and donors.

To be anti-racist, to be gender inclusive, to be truly accessible, theatre must think outside the theatre. Theatre needs to break through not just the fourth wall but all the walls. A living theatre must live in the community. Must be a vital part of that community. Something to be celebrated and taken for granted. To be a common part of the culture of the community. Audiences don’t' come to the theatre to be ushered in, to worship the proscenium, and then ushered out, they come to be moved. They come to be shaken and transformed, challenged, to be taken for a ride, on a journey, an investigation, to have their minds blown and their hearts opened up. And yes, to be entertained. To enjoy themselves, to enjoy the artists and the stories told. That’s part of it too. But they come also to be in the same space together. To laugh together. To cry together. To recognize something of themselves in the work, even if it is just how much they disagree with it! And it is our responsibility to make sure that the theatre is a safe place for people to experience dangerous and delightful stories. Ultimately, audiences come to experience empathy, and connection and to travel down paths they never would have be capable of on their own. We come to the theatre to breath with each other. And now, we all know how very vital, and precious, and dangerous, that can be. I hope we can all find ourselves there again, in a good way.

Kwookstamx shnookshnookwa7s

Thank you, Friends

HOOmalh.