

SHARING SPACE



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EDITOR'S WELCOME

A few years ago I was working with a group of Indigenous performers preparing to premiere a new theatre piece. We were renting the space so we had somewhat limited interaction with the theatre staff. Maybe a brief “hello” or a nod of the head but that was about it.

On the opening night of the show, myself and the other performers gathered together to smudge as was our practice. We stood in a circle, each taking a turn to hold the abalone shell filled with smoldering sage in front of one another. We used this time to connect with each other, the creator, the ancestors, and to the earth. Smudging was important to this ensemble, as it is to many Indigenous performers it is as essential as stretching, running lines, or breath work. It is grounding and cleansing.

It was in this serene moment that someone from the theatre’s staff busted backstage and yelled, “You can’t do that here!” I’d like to say we were shocked, but that wouldn’t be true. Being told that we, Indigenous people, could not smudge was something and is something that still happens. Smudging is a constitutionally protected right within Canada and yet it happens all the time, all over the country. We tried to explain this to the staff member but eventually knew it was a battle we wouldn’t win. Especially right before we opened. For the rest of our time in that space we would smudge covertly, in the dressing room taping the cracks around the dressing room door to keep the smoke in, hiding.

This isn’t an uncommon story. It happens all the time. I’ve traveled all over the country speaking to performers about this. They have, in turn, told me of being sent outside, of being asked if they were smoking pot and being lectured on fire codes. And time and time again Indigenous artists take time to patiently educate to try and explain the practice of smudging — to share the knowledge and open the space within which we all work. And don’t get me wrong; there are many companies across the country that fully embrace the practice of smudging. There are a few that welcome it, even request it.

I’d like to think things are changing, maybe not fast enough, but changing. If we can continue to keep our minds open, continue to listen, we might start to really get somewhere. Remember where you stand.

Nia:wen,

Falen Johnson

Executive Director and Editor

ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS: CREATING SPACES FOR SHARING

EMILIE MONNET

When I was asked to write an article on the theme of Sharing Space right away I started to think about artistic collaborations, of what happens when individuals come together in a shared space – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual – to meet creatively, share skills, ideas and visions, explore the infinite space of imagination and make discoveries, all with a common goal: to create art together.

For me, artistic collaborations are about relationships. We enter the realm of artistic collaboration with egos, sets of values and personal experiences, we have expectations and ways of doing things that can be different from the others collaborators. Sometimes worldviews clash, conflicts erupt. I've been in situations like that where I wanted to walk out of collaborations, but these situations became opportunities for clarification and resolution. I've always felt it was worth while to push through the discomfort of the experience and see what was behind the wall. With time I've learnt that collaborations are entities of their own, that move and evolve as projects unfold and individuals transform. Artistic collaborations nourish, inspire and help push boundaries further. They allow space for growth, for new knowledge to be acquired and for new friendships to be born. They can bring people together to collectively envision a different world. The t-shirt I'm wearing right now says: 'Art is a Weapon'. A good reminder that we, as artists, have a special role to play in fostering

spaces for more shifts of consciousness to happen, and ultimately bring change to the societies we live in.

When I think of the actual spaces available for Aboriginal artists in Quebec, and most specifically in Montreal, which I have been calling home for the last seven years, I think of the almost non-existent resources available for Aboriginal artists in Quebec to create and present work. I think of the ongoing disconnection between the French and English Aboriginal arts community. I think of the rare occasions we have to meet as a community of Aboriginal artists and how good that feels every time it happens. I think of the efforts and initiatives, burgeoning here and there, to create a sense of community. Of the growing number of artistic collaborations and interesting work presented in the last few years.

I also remembered the struggle it was to finally have the Quebec Arts Council (CALQ) create a grant program specifically for Aboriginal artists. When discussions began in 2008 we were told that there were not enough Aboriginal artists in Quebec to justify the creation of such a program. It took three years of perseverance and lobbying to finally have the Grant program for Montreal Aboriginal Professional Artists and Writers launched in June 2011. This grant program certainly helped artists/colleges develop and produce work – its existence is absolutely necessary! – but the program also has many limitations:

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- Only Aboriginal artists living on the island of Montreal can apply to it, and that excludes all Aboriginal artists living outside of the island, among which the Mohawk artists living in Kahnawake and Kahnasatake, whose traditional territory IS Montreal;
- No funding program exists for Aboriginal artists living in other regions of the province (except for the region of Nunavik);
- Only artists from one of the eleven Quebec Aboriginal nations may apply which excludes all artists of any other nation, however long they have settled in Montreal;
- Applicants also have to provide a photocopy of their status card in order to be eligible.

I also recalled that a few years back when Anishnabe (Algonquin) hip hop artist Samian released his song “Les nomades” (“The Nomads”), a collaboration between himself and reggae Innu musician Shauit. Composed in Algonquin, Innu and French, the song did not play on mainstream radio because of the CRTC’s norms that 65% of content had to be in French. The song was classified World Music, sang in foreign languages even though Innu and Algonquin are only spoken in Canada.

Clearly governmental policies do not favour the celebration of art created by Aboriginal artists. And if Aboriginal artists continue to be invisible

from Quebec mainstream theatres, stages and festivals, how can there be space in society’s minds and hearts to imagine something different from the stereotypical-cliché-tokenish image portrayed in the media? How possible is it to have more space for Aboriginal artists’ voices to be heard?

When I founded the arts-organization ONISHKA, it was with the intention of fostering spaces for unique artistic collaborations to take place, in order to celebrate the diversity, richness and resilience of indigenous peoples worldwide. I wanted to create spaces for artistic creation that is performance-based yet that crosses disciplines and cultures. I wanted to explore how artistic expression can be a catalyst for social transformation, and how it can challenge and transform how indigenous peoples realities and struggles are understood.

Of the projects developed by Onishka, I would like to share about a collaboration with Inga artist Waira Nina from the Amazon, Colombia. The collaboration started in 2009 after I visited Waira in her community, and there the seed was planted to create a project that would bridge indigenous women’s experiences and teachings from both Colombia and Canada. We presented work-in-progress of our collaboration during a two-month artistic residency in Bogota in November 2011, and Waira will be coming to Canada in February 2013 to be part of a six-week artistic residency. With

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this artistic collaboration, we wish to create more space for exchanges between Indigenous peoples from the North and the South. We also want to voice the messages of our elders, North and South, while exploring innovative artistic ways to do so. The taitas (medicine people in the Amazon) I met over the course of my visits in Colombia all spoke of the importance for indigenous peoples to stay connected to the land and traditional ways, and most importantly to ancestral spiritual practices in order to stay strong and united as a people. By exchanging and sharing with other indigenous peoples, we strengthen our own identity and spirit.

Through artistic creation we create a space (in the framework of a project) for sharing - true sharing- to take place. With this project, we are weaving narratives inspired by our personal lives and our encounter as two women from opposite territories, by bird songs and sounds of the land, by teachings received by elders and stories shared by the women in our communities, all to create a unique story. When I asked Waira if she would like to share some of her thoughts about what sharing space means in the context of our artistic collaboration for this article, she reminded me that there is always a time and place for everything: “To share has a lot to do with the Sun and the Moon, the Night and the Day, as invisible forces and spirits orient the way. Sharing takes place in the ‘ukus’, which are the spaces of our ceremonies, our festivals, when we meet at the

river, when we prepare the medicines, when we harvest the field together, when we go fishing, hunting, when the taitas speak late into the night. Sharing space is about transmitting knowledge, is about transmitting good energy, is about telling stories and recreating new ones.”

It reminded me of the mornings back in the Amazon, at dawn, when we would all wake up to the rooster’s call and walk to the river to drink yoko, one of the Inga traditional root medicine. One by one, we all drank the bitter yellow tincture. We waited on the rocks as the medicine made its way in our bodies. We waited together in the discomfort of nausea as the sun rose and the forest became alive with sounds. That’s when the elders told stories. We listened to them. These stories are sacred and could only be shared in this specific time and place, in the specific context of taking yoko. Just like back home: some stories are only told at certain times of the year, certain songs can only be taught or sang in specific contexts. Time and place align. Sacred space is created.

I personally feel that when sacred space is shared, we are better able to share in a meaningful and profound way. Perhaps because we are reminded of the Life forces around us and are brought to feel gratefulness and humility. Perhaps because in that instant our egos get tamed and we are better able to speak and do things with intention. To share with an open heart. When sacred space is shared, we set strong foundations for

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artistic collaborations to unfold in all of its potency. We build trust. Ultimately, I think sharing space comes down to finding the infinite space within, the space where creativity and imagination spark, the space where interconnectedness of all is truly felt. This is the state of openness and presence I seek in my artistic collaborations to be able to truly share who I am.

Emilie Monnet is an interdisciplinary artist with Anishnabe and French heritage. A graduate of Ondinnok's First Nations Theatre training program - in partnership with The National Theatre School of Canada (Montreal, 2007) - Emilie is the founder and Artistic Director of ONISHKA, an arts organization that fosters artistic collaborations between indigenous peoples worldwide while honoring their richness, diversity and resilience (www.onishka.org). Emilie's artistic engagement is inspired by years of social activism with indigenous organizations in Canada and Latin America, and community art projects with incarcerated women and Aboriginal youth. She maintains balance by spending quality time with her loved ones and creating her home in Montreal.

I didn't know there were natives in Newfoundland. I thought they all died out.

I have heard this statement many times, and I bring it up to talk about my ancestor's history of sharing on the island of my birth. "Died out"? No, you must be talking about the Beothuk, the more famous First Nation of Newfoundland. It's a common mistake. The Mi'kmaq and the Beothuk have been mistaken for each other since settlers had first arrived. Yes, even before the Viking hit L'Ance aux Meadows, both nations were sharing resources. It didn't always go well. There were skirmishes between nations. But they both fished, and hunted on the land, and while they may not have always been together, they did so next to each other in relative peace.

With French and English Settlement, things didn't go well for the Indigenous populations. The Beothuk fought against the settlers, but lost. They were forced to retreat inland, and were cut off from their ways of life. They lived in harsh conditions, with European illnesses, which caused them to disappear.

The Mi'kmaq fared badly as well. With their assimilation, came their demonization. The "Micmac mercenary myth" is the idea that Mi'kmaq were brought to Newfoundland from Nova Scotia by English settlers to hunt down and kill the Beothuk. Never mind that at that time, the Mi'kmaq had almost never allied with the English (the

French, yes). The myth took root, and not only did it make my ancestors look like hired guns, it did much worse. It made us settlers. We were no longer Indigenous to our own land in the eyes of the world. We weren't from our own lands. The myth persisted, and over time, the Mi'kmaq of Newfoundland became all but forgotten.

So as a Mi'kmaq Newfoundlander, I come from a long line of people who fight for recognition, acknowledgement and understanding. It can be hard to show your roots when early anthropologists, finding native artifacts, automatically labelled them Beothuk, without further study. After all, the Beothuk were the only original First Nation in Newfoundland. They couldn't tell us otherwise, because they all 'died'.

It might have been this desire for recognition and understanding that led me to theatre. Well, really, it was the stories. I've lived among a great many good storytellers, and read and heard many more in books, film and television. That's what I wanted to do: be seen, to communicate ideas, be understood. I had joined a theatre club in high school, and in very little time, I fell in love with it. After high school, I pursued my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College's School of Fine Arts.

It was an exciting and scary time. I was barely mature enough to know what I was getting myself into. University can potentially be a stifling place.

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A department head saying “this is the way! The only way to do theatre! Anyone other than myself is wrong.” Teachers, not so much giving tools and inspiration, instead breaking down and rebuilding an army of disciples to spread their “word.”

Thankfully, that was not the case for me. I had a great university experience, for a number of reasons. First, I realized it was a place for me to learn, a place to fall on my face and make mistakes. I knew that I knew very little, and I wanted more. Second, the English minor I was doing introduced me to the likes of Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekov (to name a few), and the deeper I dove into those writers, the more I explored, the more I came to learn about myself, and the more inspired I became. Third, and probably most valuable to me, was the master class aspect of the university. Every year, a guest artist would come to the university for a term; writers, directors, and actors would teach a course in any number of subjects. The type of teaching ran the spectrum, from collective theatre, to European clowning, to “left brain/right brain approaches to acting.” With a guest artist, you saw a variety of different aspects of theatre, and saw a beginning to the many different avenues you could pursue. This was very liberating. There was so much potential, so many ways to share. Seeing the various avenues to learning, I began to develop, and build my own “style.” Taking the tools I liked, leaving the tools I didn’t (but not forgetting them - I may not yet understand “left brain/right brain approaches”

completely, but I’ll tap into it if I have to).

There was, however, very little in the way of exploring my native heritage. I was a minority, and while I was proud of my ancestry, I did very little in the way of expressing it. I played a number of characters, Mexican, Italian, Spanish, to the point where I started calling myself ‘ethnic boy’. I was not insulted. I was drawing a great deal out of the English canon. But I wasn’t sharing my own stories. I was still finding a voice. Not unlike my ancestors, I was losing myself in the shuffle. I was exploring other people’s stories, and was happy to. Gradually, however, I was beginning to see my reflection. I was beginning to see Native performers and writers. There was Tomson Highway, Chief Dan George, Daniel David Moses, Drew Hayden Taylor, Graham Greene, Billy Merasty, Gary Farmer, Gordon Tootoosis and August Schellenberg. They were out there, and I wanted to be among them.

Over the years now, I have been acting in the professional world. I have explored new and old works, in many places across the country. Everywhere I go, every show I do, I find out something more about myself. But I always carry my story. I’m a Mi’kmaq from Newfoundland, I say. I open the door to the comment, “but I thought there were no natives in Newfoundland,” so that I can smile and say, “not quite.”

Over the years I have been working with more and more native artists. I have performed in the plays

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of Highway and Taylor. I have worked with talents like Yvette Nolan, Lorne Cardinal, Tara Beagan, Michelle St. John, Renelitta Arluk, Waawaate Fobister, and Falen Johnson, to name a few. They represent nations from across the nations with wonderful new rhythms to their speech, new worlds and histories to tell me about, new songs, new pictures, new stories. They have shared so much with me in this industry, and I have taken from them as much as I could.

I have lived in Halifax now for many years. When I first started visiting, there was a booming television and film industry, and I had worked with a number of people from the theatre community. I had made a number of good friends. Years later, the industry and work is no longer “booming,” but the community is still there. There are so many talented, generous, and friendly people with whom to be scrounging for work. A few years ago, a call went out on the Equity emailing list from Neptune Theatre for auditions for their season. One of the shows in the season was “Peter Pan”. One of the calls was for “Indian/Pirates”. Now, I personally have grown up calling myself an “Indian,” as I like taking away the derogatory power of words, but I have full understanding of the negative weight of using this term. Natives aren’t “Indians.” The word was used to keep us trapped, used when we were in schools, used to keep us down, keep us from ourselves. And here it was, going out in a national email right next to “pirates.”

To be fair, Neptune was very quick to realize their error and apologized. I felt they handled their mistake in a timely fashion, and with respect. Not everyone realizes the weight of the term “Indian,” just like Canadians don’t realize that “newfie” is a derogatory term to some. No, I bring it up because I have had many conversations since that email, from friends and others, who felt they had to argue about it: “but we have to be pure to the playwright’s vision. We can’t just change the writer’s words.” I agree, but the writer wrote it at the turn of the last century, and times have changed. If the “playwright’s vision” was to teach about native culture, get his facts straight. Start with the name. And no one would ever see a call for auditions for *To Kill a Mockingbird* for “Nigger Jim”. That’s what I had to talk to people about, again and again. “Indian? Offensive? Really? In this age? I disagree.” You don’t have to agree, or disagree... it just is. To many, “Indian” is an offensive term, and at the very least, the liberal, intellectual, cultured theatre community should be aware of that.

In April and May of 2012, I was given the opportunity to work at the National Arts Centre English Theatre Company in Ottawa, on an Aboriginal production of “King Lear”. This production was a dream of August Schellenberg, something he had wanted to do for forty years. The cast was a blend of talent I’d been a fan of for years, and talent that I hadn’t known: August Schellenberg, Tantoo Cardinal, Jani Lauzon, Lorne Cardinal, Kevin Loring, Monique Mojica, Billy Merasty, Craig Lauzon,

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Ryan Cunningham, Meegwin Fairbrother, Keith Barker, and Jeremy Proulx. And me, playing Edger.

To me, this play, this opportunity, was all about honour. It was an honor to be on a national stage. It was an honor to get the opportunity to speak Shakespeare again. The words are so dense and deep with meaning you can dive into them for months and still keep finding things. I wanted to honour those beautiful, powerful words. And the role, a man so lost in grief with the loss of his father's love that he loses himself in the madness of poor Tom. The role was a huge challenge, and I wanted to do it justice.

It was an honour to be in that ROOM, with all that wonderful talent. People I have been fans of for years, good souls who worked so hard and were so generous. I feel as though I fought a war with them. It was an honour to be working with Peter Hinton. I had met him two years before, at a general audition. From that, he took a chance on me and gave me the role. In my phone conversation with him, I said, stunned, "Are you sure?" The year before "Lear", we got to know one another working with the NAC's Ark program, "Ibsen on Fogo Island", where we worked on a number of Ibsen plays in a three week intensive. He constantly challenged, inspired and supported me. Throughout the process of Lear, he pushed me and I can't thank him enough for it. He had given me a tremendous opportunity. This was his final production as Artistic Director of the NAC, so I

wanted to do him proud.

And, of course, I wanted to honour August. To do an all aboriginal cast of "Lear" has been a dream of his for forty years. He wanted us to show everyone, "see, Native actors can do their best, be the best." He led by example. He worked so hard, and was still so generous. He would share stories of working with the greats, asking Chief Dan George in the 1960's to do "Lear" and him responding "No. Too many lines!" Auggie is a fighter, was a boxer, and he attacked this role as though it was a twenty round match. He was exhausted, but he kept fighting. At seventy-five, he was living out a dream. The entire building, the whole of the NAC, was working for Auggie's dream. And I was a part of it. It was more than an honour to meet this man, who in his fifty plus year career has carved a path so that a short Native guy like me could see an opportunity.

There's one more thing I would like to mention. I talked about the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq a little, the "mercenary myth," the Beothuk "disappearing" and the Mi'kmaq being mistaken and forgotten. It has to be said, while it is true that there were fights between nations, there were also marriages. So in fact, there are some people of Beothuk descent in Newfoundland. They are still here. In some cases, they have originally mistaken themselves as Mi'kmaq. The shared identity continues.

But we're still here. On a beautiful island, on the end of the east, we're still here.

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Gordon is a member of the Qualibu Mi' kmaq First Nation, born in Flat Bay, Newfoundland. As an actor, Gordon has worked with various companies in the Atlantic Provinces, as well as The Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa ("An Acre of Time"), Native Earth in Toronto ("A Very Polite Genocide") and Magnus Theatre in Thunder Bay ("Dead White Writer on the Floor"). Other credits include Clov in "Endgame" (Theatre NFLD and Labrador); "The Velveteen Rabbit" (Theatre New Brunswick); Puck in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (Stephenville Theatre Festival); Hawk in "Corvette Crossing" (Eastern Front Theatre), Titus in "The Devil's Disciple" (Neptune Theatre), "Merlin" (Halifax Theatre for Young People), Kemp in "Vigil" (Live Bait Theatre), and appeared as twins Edger and Ledger in "Ivor Johnson's Neighbours" (Ship's Company Theatre). Most recently, Gordon appeared as Edger in "King Lear" at the National Arts Centre, with August Schellenberg, directed by Peter Hinton. TV and film credits include "Black Harbour", "Blackfly", "New Waterford Girls", "Gracie's Choice", "Haven"; "Trudeau II"; "Rollertown"; "Charlie Zone" and "Picnicface".

ARTISTIC SOVEREIGNTY

LISA C. RAVENSBERGEN

I self-identify as an Indigenous person with mixed blood ancestry; my mother immigrated to Thunder Bay, Ontario with her English/ Irish parents when she was 5-years old and seven years later she met my father, an Ojibwe/ Swampy Cree from Berens River, Manitoba and northern Ontario. My father is now an Elder in the city where they live. He still speaks much of his language, and they have both always taught me to hold my Teachings and be proud of my mixed culture.

So, when we speak of sharing performative space with the Other/ Non/ Them, I look to the Non-Indigenous person and mainstream society, but I also look in the mirror and see my lineage reflected in my bone structure. The conversation we are about to have is with myself as an Indigenous theatre artist as much as it is with you... and Them.

Sharing Space with Other – is it for Us or Them?

It's likely we all have at least one story where we had THAT conversation with someone Other, where we enabled and gave permission, educated, fought for legitimacy, demanded equal voice in the room, shared and ultimately affirmed when (an)Other desperately wanted to engage in this conversation of sharing space. Sometimes we have invited, sometimes we RSVP'd and whenever this has happened to me, I cannot think of a time when I was not being called upon to represent in some way. The question for me is not if we should

share space. We do - from the moment that first ship landed, we've been sharing and all trends point towards a continuation of the same. In some ways, even asking how we share space with Other is overly familiar to the point that it actually feels moot.

The question of how we share space with Other lives in my own practice and exists every time I step on stage; when I put word to paper, audition for work outside the enclave of Aboriginal theatre, and share ideas or vent after a show. This question was birthed from the first moment my mother held me in her English/Irish arms and it grew with each piece of pow wow regalia she sewed for me. This question has existed from the moment a kid on the playground informed me that my dad was a dirty Indian. It existed before the moment my grade three teacher told the class that Indians didn't really exist anymore, and throughout all the years I proudly helped my father when he came to the elementary school to teach them about Indians. And it continues each time I drive my car to do ceremony. It continues as I raise my child whose Dutch blood mixes with mine; my son who proudly tells you what his Indian name means, and won't let anyone cut his blonde hair because he knows it keeps his spirit strong.

Some days, I breathe this question so deeply, it's all there is.

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The complexity of asking what it is to share performative space with the Non looms even larger when I program festivals, teach, cast a non-Aboriginal performer, do assessments and sit on each and every funding jury; it becomes impossible to ignore the reality that We are not Them, and each choice I make either aligns or distances me from Team Us or Team Them.

I was once asked if anyone external to our community can really understand the work for what it is since They don't come from Our place. Of course, this speaks to the monumental political, cultural, spiritual, and educational context of Indigenous peoples' right - Our Right - to self-determination. Whether we realize it or not, our existence as Indigenous people is political and by extension, our work as artists enacts ancient ideology. I wholly believe that our artistic work embodies land, lineage, and language... Identity. And in this, we not only project perceptions of Self but also the way we are perceived. Which then raises the question: for whom are we doing the work? Is it for Us or Them? And who decides that? After all, the work does different things for Us and Them regardless of intention. For instance, a politically explicit performance created within a specific framework in order to "disrupt a colonized view of history"¹ is interpreted by Them to be an act of reconciliation even though that is actually the farthest thing from the artist's intention.

In some ways, asking all these questions is

essentially making inquiry into the value of our work as determined by anyone who isn't Us. And when we ask such questions, we situate the gaze of the Non to witness us, to observe and assess us, and by extension, we then view and assess ourselves through Their eyes. (Yes, yet another gift of colonization.) This ultimately asks Indigenous artists to look - and work - for the Other's approval, which can blur the line of who is determining Self.

Are we then asking the wrong question? Is it less about how or why or should we share space and more about the ways in which we don't want to be responsible for how we use the word "Other" to define and divide within ourselves? I mean, without Them who else can we blame for all the things that go bad in the room?

Memory is strong but this instant is stronger.²

I once performed a lead role in a show that had an extremely large Aboriginal cast that was mixed with Non-aboriginal performers. One rainy, grey day, some of us were working in a room adjacent to the main rehearsal room. I decided to work on the script with another cast mate who was Non. At the other end of the room, two actors began to discuss their 'full blood' and 'wondered' aloud about things like:

Why is it that half-breeds get all the lead roles?

Who do They (meaning me, Lisa, the half breed) think they are?

ARTISTIC SOVEREIGNTY

Besides the obvious lesson (that the oppressed make the best oppressors), the bigger question here is who do we think we are? Because even when we are alone in the room, the lessons of the Other, the Non are with us. When we invite that gaze into the room, into our own spirits, it seems inevitable to wonder if we are good enough, even if we are brown enough. This duality is confusing; this double-gaze disorients what we are actually assessing and what has brought us to this place. At what point in our individual journey have we abandoned our own Teachings in favour of what has been given to us by the colonizer? And then, in what ways do we share space with our own self-depreciation? Without this personal reckoning, how can we expect anyone to take responsibility for what is actually in the rehearsal room or performance space?

I have cast non-Aboriginal performers in roles because they possessed the training and skills to do what I needed them to do, to do what the work required of all of us. But when these Non colleagues fretted about being Other, the angst in the room was palpable and at times, it got in the way because their doubt became ours; we turned that gaze of the Other onto ourselves and in turn, wondered if we were good enough. For a time, this was not an artistic investigation; it was a personal plunging of worth. I didn't quite know how to take responsibility for all the perspectives we'd invited into the room, and I stopped trusting my impulses as a creator. My default response

was fear; I wondered if we were dishonouring the story that was sourcing from within me and my collaborators - a story that was wholly rooted in our Indigenous selves and family stories.

This is ourselves.³

It may be in my nature to consider every offer from 'both sides' as is often true for anyone born of two cultures. After all, my father's culture, just like my mother's, frames and influences who I am but that's all it ever is: frames and influences. It's vital to claim artistic sovereignty; with it, we are able to govern our individual impulses and still have the freedom to enact even contradictory communal perspectives. This is after all, part of all our work as creators and interpreters – to engage the questions as we wrestle with the answers. Because bottom line: nothing is definitive if you are an artist.

As we work in the grievous shadow of generations of euro-views and performance structures, we find ourselves here again: between old and new, re-naming the space but with what? Our bodies, our words and voices, sure, but it's more than this.

So much of our work is contained within a very specific discourse of hybridity between culture and performance forms. In these days of reparation and reclamation, we are renaming things like power and identity - often through land - I wonder if it's worth reframing the studio and the stage as being as integral to us as our land is?

ARTISTIC SOVEREIGNTY

Can the sacredness of our Indigenous traditions and teachings share the space as a living entity, worthy of a mutual, embodied respect?

When I auditioned for theatre school at SFU⁴ (for the second time), my teachers acknowledged that they couldn't offer me what I was looking for; I would be the first Aboriginal student to graduate from their program since its inception and there weren't any Aboriginal faculty nor did they employ any culturally specific pedagogy or methodology. My response was to strike a deal: if they could pass on Their knowledge while ensuring me the space to ask My questions, I would commit to learning what they had to teach with the express purpose of reinterpreting it until it made sense to me. Nearly twelve years later, I am still negotiating that deal, trying to make sense of it all, and I am still reinterpreting, even desperately at times, trying to look at Our work through my own eyes, doing my best to appropriate Their language so that it serves my own questions, and my own practice.

I am not interested in challenging the legitimacy of anyone's work. I can only hope that I have time left to me in my career to attempt to address this for myself. I can only strive less to be similar or as good as the Non and just be who I am. I can do my best to mindfully own my choices as demonstrated through a solid body of high-calibre work. I can view each project as a contribution to this larger discussion of how I fit into an even

broader idea of Us. I can accept that artistic and cultural self-involvement to the exclusion of others requires a kind of rigour that produces work that simply doesn't engage me. I can recognize that the measure of my worth is not determined by what I see when gazing at myself through the eyes of (an)Other; and indeed, artistic sovereignty is best enacted through the relationship I have to my own self-identity.

I know I am only one voice in a diverse community of strong, proud Indigenous artists and that same voice speaks regardless of who's in the room. I don't believe we create or evolve as people in isolation, which makes it vital to remain open to artists who can share space not just because they want to, but because they recognize and own up to their unique perspective, methodology, criticisms, and biases; in this way, individual responsibility and collective awareness meets in the room and ultimately, in performance - in the work. So, for me, I will continue to pursue artistic relationships with peers who, regardless of colour or creed, think like me and also don't.

I can hold on to what (an)Other thinks I should do or be or I can choose for myself to focus on the work, without exception and without limitation. I am not interested in the proverbial bucket nor am I interested in perpetuating the idea that success comes at the cost of culture and integrity. I've come to see that part of my work as an artist who is One and the Other is to dismantle everything I

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'know' and make it up new with my collaborators as I go - as we all do. And the diversity of how we do this is what makes Us, our community of Aboriginal artists, so powerful and unique.

Ultimately, I want my practice, my work, and my career to be an ongoing discovery of what might be because without this value, I just might miss an answer. And those sweet moments - when answers finally arrive - feel just like finding a feather at my feet; a seemingly random gift that empowers Us to create and interpret who We are while remaining responsible to Something greater (and often mysterious) outside ourselves.

Endnotes:

1 Dylan Robinson, September 24, 2012

2 Kate Newman, September 20, 2012

3 Queen, "Under Pressure" (Mercury, Taylor, Deacon, May, Bowie).

4 Simon Fraser University offers a BFA program in Contemporary Performing Arts. It is located in Burnaby, BC.

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A Tawny mix of Ojibwe/Swampy Cree and English/Irish, Lisa is a multi-hyphenated, interdisciplinary artist based in Vancouver. She supplements her somewhat eclectic practice of theatre, dance, and community collaborations with the challenges of self-produced works and dramaturgical curiosities. A Jessie nominated performer, Lisa is also a recent Dramaturg in Residence at Playwrights Theatre Centre (PTC), an Associate Artist with Full Circle: First Nations Performance, an Associate Playwright at PTC, and a member of LMDA. She is a graduate of TWU and SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts. Works in development: "The Seventh Fire" with PTC; "The World Is The World" with BLAM Collective's Michael Greyeyes and Billy Marchenski; and "The Art of Peace" with Pounds per Square Inch.

LAKE ONTARIO STANDS IN FOR THE PRAIRIES

FALEN JOHNSON

I met Justin Many Fingers back in October of 2008. The ImagineNative Film Festival was hosting its closing party at the bar that I worked at. It wasn't exactly the glamorous life that I had expected my arts training to get me, my job was cleaning up at the party I wished I was attending; the job kept me fed and clothed. I was clearing a table when Waawaate Fobister introduced me to Justin. He said, "this is Justin, he's in the CIT (Centre for Indigenous Theatre) program. He just moved here from Alberta." Justin waved and said a quick and quiet, "hi." I couldn't help but worry about him immediately. He was young, new to Toronto, and in an intensive training program. It wasn't too long ago that I was in his place and I remembered not knowing if I would make it through.

Fast forward to today. I sit in a café on Queen West in the heart of downtown Toronto and as Justin and I face each other across a table, he couldn't look more at ease. He has grown up. He has trained well, not at one institution but at two. After finishing up at The Centre for Indigenous Theatre in 2010. Justin auditioned for the Soul Pepper Academy, where he was accepted as one of eight artists chosen from across the country to train in the Academy. I spoke to Justin about training, living in the big smoke and what's next.

So how did you get started in theatre?

After high school I wanted to go into business management, but I didn't graduate with a high school diploma so I couldn't do that. I decided to take a year off and figure some stuff out. It was really rough. I didn't know what I was gonna do with my life. I was just floating. I heard that CIT was doing their summer program at the University of Lethbridge. And I thought, "arts? Theatre? No! I don't wanna do that." I was twenty years old and I had started falling into the wrong Reserve crowd. There was lots of drinking, and lots of crazy stuff. And I just had enough. I thought "there has gotta be something more I can do." And it was around that time that I got a call from Troy Emery Twigg, a Blackfoot dancer who was helping to run the summer program, he told me there was an extra spot at the summer program. And I thought okay, well its theatre, so I'll go there and I'll learn about theatre lighting and then I can apply that to concert lighting. Maybe I could do that. So I said yes.

I got dropped off at nine o'clock in the morning, and I didn't know anyone in the room. We started by introducing ourselves, talking about what we were interested in and what we expected from the program. And so on the break I went up to Troy and asked him, "When do we get to a lighting grid?" And he was like, "Lighting? This is all performance. This is all theatre. Performance." I thought, what am I doing here? I've never been on stage before, and I was stuck there until nine

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in the evening. After about an hour and a half we get on our feet, and begin playing theatre games. I didn't know that there were theatre games then. And I was so bored. But then I started to get into it and it was interesting and fun and something happened in that day. Everything I've done in my life I've never finished, I was a fancy dancer, a figure skater, but everything got cut off before I ever let myself excel. Everything. But something happened that day; I don't know what it was, but I was able to connect to everything I was doing. And it was fun. And so at the end of the day I thought, well I'm not doing anything else with the rest of my summer and the intensive is only another two weeks. I'll stay. By the end of the second week Rose Stella, (CIT's Artistic Director and Principal) came up to me and said that she thought I would be good for the training program. She told me to think about it. And I told her I didn't have any funds to pay for the training, and she said that she would look in to it. So the program ended and a few days go by when Rose calls my house during dinner, and she said, "I managed to get you funding. Do you wanna come to CIT?" And I said yes. And I hung up the phone and went back to dinner. After a while my mom asked me who it was on the phone and what was going on, and I said, "So I think I know what I am doing for September, I'm moving to Toronto." Dead silence. "I'm moving to Toronto in a week and a half from now. I got into a school. The Centre for Indigenous Theatre." And no one said anything for the rest of the night. And here I am, in Toronto.

And you had never been outside of Alberta?

I once went to Costa Rica on a school trip, and to Universal Studios in Florida but nowhere in Canada. And now I've been here for four year, and my life hasn't stopped since.

How much of a shock was moving to Toronto?

Oh it was a big shock. Toronto was humid and it stunk. It really stunk. That was my first impression of it.

So how was the first year of CIT?

I was calling home often and telling my parents to send me a ticket "I'm leaving today". It was really tough, it was a big culture shock, being in the city where everything is so fast. People talk fast, people walk fast. Things are just fast. So fast. And it is non-stop. And it's crowded. I'm used to prairies. When I get lonesome I go to the Toronto Islands and I walk to the boardwalk, and look out at the flat water and pretend it's the prairies. That's where I go when I just need to breath.

How else do you connect to home and your culture?

I never really learned about my culture because we just lived it. Things were done the way they were done and we never needed an explanation. It's just what you did. But when I came to Toronto and began talking to other Native people and to other communities they would ask: "hey we do this, do you do this?" And I would say yes we

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do that. And they would ask why and I wouldn't know. As much as I am in my culture I didn't know a single thing about it. And then I had so many questions and the more questions I had the more distant I felt from home. So every time I would go home I'd swamp people with questions. And my family doesn't know the answer to my questions, because they've never asked themselves.

I guess that's because they haven't gone through the process you have of leaving to come home. What made you stay in Toronto?

I was in my second year, and I wasn't adjusting to the city. I was out partying and missing school and I thought they couldn't kick me out. But then I got called into the office one day, and the staff said my behaviour was really bad and I wasn't working and that I was no longer a student at CIT, and so I was being terminated from the program. It took a while for it to sink in, and when it did I had this thought: I will die if I go back home. I knew that my soul would die or I would physically die. So I had to fight for my life which I did that day. And everything changed from that day on. That is when I first committed to the arts.

Do you have a favourite moment of artist creation or expression at CIT?

In my third year I was working with Murriel Migual and we were working on a story weaving project, where you create work out of personal stories. I was trying to think about what I wanted to do.

When I thought, I want to do something that I think I'll never be able to do on the stage, something that I don't think I'll be able to do as a person.

My whole life there was one thing that had been hushed, tucked away or just not talked about, and it is my left hand. This was never talked about. It kind of controlled my life. I thought this is it, this is what I am going to talk about. I'm going to talk about my hand. And I did. And it was the hardest thing I have ever done. But I had a lot of support. And that was my fuck you, I'm still gonna work even if I have a different hand.

Will you tell me how it happened with your hand?

I was born like this. It's called symbrachydactyly. It's not genetic, early in my development a part of the womb wrapped around my hand and cut off the blood flow and it stops the growth of the hand.

I actually googled it for the first time when I was creating my story weaving piece, I had never even looked it up, I didn't allow myself to be curious about it. I just hid my hand and didn't talk about it. And if a person did bring it up, someone in my family would either beat them up or change the subject. I was always protected. It was a rule that was never spoken. We don't talk about Justin's hand.

When I was at CIT we had a piano in the studio and I resisted touching it. I had never touched a piano, because you have to have all fingers to play the piano. But one day I said yes and I learned a

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song and I played with both hands. I recorded it and I showed my Mom. That was a pretty amazing moment.

That must have been really overwhelming for your Mom.

Yeah. She cried. It was so amazing.

So you come to the end of your training at CIT, what did you have planned?

I auditioned for two training programs. There was the Soul Pepper Academy and then there was the TDT's (Toronto Dance Theatre). I had already been accepted at TDT's three-year training program while I was still at CIT, so I thought I was going to be dancing for three-years after I graduated.

After you auditioned and got accepted to TDT you then auditioned for The Soul Pepper Academy. That must have been pretty intense process.

Well I had no idea who they were, I had never heard of Soul Pepper. But they had seen me at the Theatre Ontario Showcase and they asked me to come in for an audition. And I was petrified. I had to start my audition piece three times! After I was done I said, "Thank you very much" and left. As soon as the door closed I thought I didn't get it.

So I just went back to life, back to school, back to CIT, and then I get an email saying that they wanted to see me again. So I went back in for the call back and it was a three-day call back. Twenty-eight of us from across the country playing all

weekend. I felt so honoured to just be there, to be in that room.

How did you find out you had been accepted?

I was in my last week of CIT and we were working on the year-end show. While we were working I had missed a call and the display said Soul Pepper, and I thought great it's probably my rejection. So I phoned back and Albert Schultz picks up and he says, "Thanks for coming in. We really enjoyed having you come in." And I totally thought it was the you-didn't-get-in speech. And then he said, "I just wanted to tell you that we would like you to be one of eight that we invite to participate in the Academy." And I was, "What?" And he said, "We'd like you to be apart of the Academy." And I said, "Fuck off." Then I apologized and he laughed and he said, "Would you like to do it?" And I said yes and I ran into the rehearsal hall and told my class that I had gotten in.

And so you had to choose where you wanted to train and in what medium dance or theatre?

Yeah. I had been accepted into both so I had to make a choice and it was hard because I love dance I love the form but theatre just called to me. I still want to go to TDT. I still would really like to go someday.

How was the first day of training at Soul Pepper?

I was intimidated. I really felt like I didn't belong. Again I wanted to quit all the time. But I

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remembered the artists who didn't make it in to the Academy and I knew I couldn't just quit. And I wanted to be there to prove that a Native person could do it, to prove that someone from CIT could be there.

It was strange because I never thought I would do classical theatre. I didn't see myself getting work in classical theatre. I wanted to do the Native canon. Those works interested me.

And did you have any artistic epiphanies while you were at Soul Pepper?

Totally. We had a theatre history class where we sat around and just talked about theatre. We would read a lot and then would talk about it. And I learned about different forms and ways of working. It was so interesting to learn about more experimental ways of working. I started to see the way that I could work within these different forms and how I could use them in my work. I don't have to try to make things Indigenous, if it comes from me it will be Indigenous no matter what it is I create.

So what does your family think now about you running away to join the theatre?

My mother knows I'm not moving back anytime soon, at least not in my twenties. It has been a hard four years. But I'm here now.

So what's next?

I'm going to continue to develop my dance theatre

piece titled 509.

Can you tell me a little about it?

509 looks at my Blackfoot upbringing as a child of our stories, singing, and dancing. This is my first piece. It was created under the dramaturgy of Michael Greyeyes. 509 is set in the middle place, the unknown part of the spirit world, life or death, real not real. The story is a combination of personal experience and a Blackfoot story told as a child. It was first created at CIT as my third year solo piece, then I further developed it through Native Earth Performing Arts Animikiig writers' program and it had a showing at Native Earth's Weesageechak Begins to Dance Festival. I got some grant money to develop it further so I'm working on that now.

I'm also working with Troy Emery Twigg on a piece called The Making of Treaty 7. We'll be doing some work on that this January and February at Banff. Then I'm going to Japan with my partner Waawaate Fobister to do research for an upcoming project.

So you're not busy at all then are you?

(He laughs.) No not at all.

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Justin Many Fingers is a actor and dancer from Lavern Kainai Blackfoot reserve located in southern Alberta. Justin is a graduate of the Centre for Indigenous Theatre Summer training program as well as the three-year acting conservatory.

Justin has trained in numerous dance styles with Troy Emery Twigg, Jock Sotto (American Ballet), Neil Leremia (Black Grace), Santee Smith (Kahawi), as well as Bill Coleman, Penny Couchie, Alejandra Ronceria Carlos Rivera and Amanda Chaboyer. He has also attended the Banff Centre's Indigenous Dance Residence, Toronto Dance Theatre's Summer Intensive and Kahawi Dance Theatre's training program. Justin has currently finished up his studies at the prestigious Soulpepper Actors Academy and their 2012 season. While he was in the Academy, he had the honor to work with Albert Schultz, Laszlo Marton, Daniel Brooks, Guillermo Verdecchia, Nancy Palk, and Joseph Ziegler.