

Contemporary Social Justice Theatre: Finding, Sharing, Healing¹

by Naila Keleta Mae

This article's sub-title, "Finding, Sharing, Healing," is taken from a passage in bell hook's essay, "Healing Darkness," in which she writes, "Though many of us recognize the depth of our pain and hurt, we do not usually collectively organize in an ongoing manner to find and share ways to heal ourselves" (4). This article draws on examples from Canada, the United States and South Africa to explore how Canadian playwrights might push boundaries of "personal/accepted experience" by adopting philosophies of revolutionary theatre, symbolic reversal and the Sarungano. It is my hope that these philosophies will offer playwrights more tools to assist in transforming our complex global realities into tangible dramatic stories that function as key points of collective discovery, of reconciliation, of healing and thus of an aspect of contemporary social justice. It is my hope that this article supports all those involved in the creation and dissemination of such plays – playwrights, actors, directors, administrators, producers, granting officials, board members, professors, teachers, critics, volunteers, audiences and others.

In his provocative 1965 essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," acclaimed playwright and poet Imamu Amiri Baraka argued for a revolutionary theatre that would "force change," "be change" and "expose." These are clear assertions that challenge playwrights to grapple with difficult questions, including, in all likelihood, What is change in theatre? Is it aesthetic? Structural? Environmental? Thematic? How do we *force* change? Is it interrogating effects of cultures of domination on our frameworks of analysis? How do we *be* change? How do we expose? What needs to be exposed? Is it our own stuff? Is it our complicity with first world privilege?

When asked about the role of artists in times of war, during a 2006 interview with Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now*, distinguished writer and activist Arundhati Roy responded,

[T]he problem is that artists are not a homogenous lot of people and some of them are as right-wing and establishment as they can get ... The role of the artist is not different than any human being: you pick your side and then you fight. In a country like India, I'm not seeing that many radical positions taken by writers or poets or artists, it's all the seduction of the market that has shut them up like a good medieval beheading never could. ("Arundhati Roy")

Have we shut ourselves up? Have we acquiesced in what we perceive as our audiences' intolerance of change? Are we engaged in rigorous interrogation? Are we fighting? Do we have a strategy? Have we picked our sides? Have we couched comfortably in assumptions that we as artists are inherently liberal and thus progressive? Despite our immense and far-reaching privilege, do we create, program, teach and practise theatre as though we were in a time of war? Because we are. This is a time of war.

Despite our immense and far-reaching privilege, do we create, program, teach and practise theatre as though we were in a time of war?

No we are not homogenous. We have not melted into a pot. Nor tossed a richly textured, colourful garden salad, despite our Canadian multicultural rhetoric. Our Canadian theatre industry, much like our other national industries and institutions, is a complexly built fortress that houses the illustrious "old boys' club" as well as the elusive "old girls' club." A glass ceiling, some have whispered, exists in Canadian theatre, a ceiling that white women, Aboriginal people and people "of colour" have struggled for decades to crack – I long for only a ceiling because it implies that I am within the existing structure. Instead, I see an elaborate, firmly founded, windowless fortress, with thick cement ceilings and thick cement walls that few Aboriginal



Naila Keleta Mae
Photo by Elizabeth Stevens

or "of colour" theatre practitioners have been seen as "qualified" to permeate. It is a sophisticated fortress of Canadian whiteness that, over the past few decades, has assessed and invited in handfuls of Aboriginal and "of colour" theatre practitioners, and I count myself a hopeful among those vying for future entrance – as disgusting as that admission tastes in my mouth.

[Theatre] is a sophisticated fortress of whiteness that, at present, is seemingly assessing a handful of "new" practitioners "of colour" for future entry, and I count myself a hopeful among those vying for entrance – as disgusting as that admission tastes in my mouth.

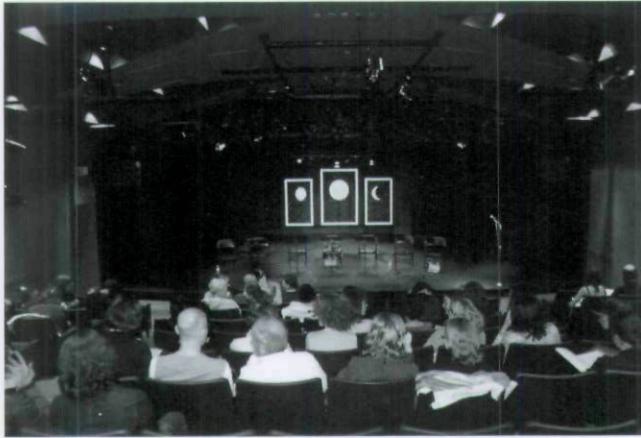
Please note, I loathe the term "of colour" because it further marginalizes systematically marginalized people and further privileges those who are not required to use suffixes or hyphens to contextualize their existences. I am not particularly enchanted with the word "woman" either. No matter how many phonetic, dialectic or spelled variations I read or construct, it remains for me a prefix to man. However, despite my frustration, I use "of colour" and "woman" out of a desire to communicate efficiently and to navigate the precarious precipice of choosing which battles to fight, how and when.

And Aboriginal people and people of colour in Canada are not inherently exempt from hierarchical misogynist and misandrist structures centred around power. Safety can also be illusive there. For a myriad of equally complex, painful reasons we, too, turn away from one another, step on each other, co-opt one another's work, engage in rivalries, and exhibit alpha female and alpha male behaviour. Perhaps the scraps of power scattered outside the fortress have been so viciously fought for and "earned" that any perceived threat is cut down at the root, pulled up by the root, ostracized or devalued – further marginalized.

Symbolic reversal challenges us as playwrights to locate our sociopolitical frameworks, investigate their effects on our creation, dissemination and teaching processes and consciously develop plays, seasons, curricula and working/learning environments that "disentangle the assumptions projected by dominant culture" (Harrison 2).

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Inevitably, as playmakers, we situate our sociopolitical frameworks in our work consciously and/or subconsciously. Often, for playwrights, the dramaturgical, workshop and production processes draw out elements of personal lived experiences and of those experiences entrusted to them by their communities as they pertain to the world of the play. From the perspective of a playwright, the philosophy of symbolic reversal is an opportunity to occupy a sociopolitical position intentionally and write/create/explore the play from that perspective. And as we enter our dramaturgical, workshop and/or production processes, symbolic reversal suggests that we rigorously investigate the effects of our chosen



The empty stage of the Robert Gill Theatre (University of Toronto): are the stages of Canada the sites for social change?

Stage Photo by Elizabeth Stevens

perspectives and ensure that our characters, actions, themes, images, movements, plots, arcs, rehearsal halls, production teams, marketing and audience outreach consciously deconstruct stereotypical notions of complex human beings.

I think of South African playwright Muthal Naidoo, who wrote plays including *Of No Account*, *We Three Kings* and *Oh God!* and said, in interviews, during 1996 and 1997,

I decided to take their [women's] lives and do something with them, and chose to do it from a feminist point of view. Just take all the women out and let them explore who they are and what they want to be, rather than just producing heroes for the Mahabarath because that was their function in the epic simply to be the mothers of this great hero and that great hero. (113)

I think of South African playwright Fatima Dike, who wrote plays including *The Sacrifice of Kreli*, *The First South African* and *SoWhat's New?* and said, in a 1997 interview, "What I managed to do after the protest period was over and we'[d] gotten freedom in our country, was to start writing specifically for women. And that's what I'm doing. I'm not writing plays about men anymore" (23).

I think of Canadian playwright Djanet Sears, who wrote about an exchange with an audience member during a question and answer session after a performance of her play *Harlem Duet*,

As she was about to finish speaking, she added, speaking from her own perspective as a white woman / woman of European descent "This is not a Black play. This is an extraordinary human play!" The audience, half made up of people of colour, applauded enthusiastically. My response was kind, but immediate. "All Black plays are human plays! What part of the Black experience is not part of the human experience?" Most likely to the discomfort of the woman who spoke, I elaborated further. I wanted her and everyone else to understand that as a society our general perception of humanity is still astonishingly narrow. (iii)

Opportunities for symbolic reversal or "disentangle[ing] the assumptions projected by dominant culture" exist within various spheres of the Canadian theatre industry (Harrison 2). For example, York University's MFA Theatre program includes a required exam, based on 100 plays determined by the department to be a "reasonably standard body of works from the dramatic canon" (Program Requirements.) In 2003, roughly 13 per cent of the playwrights featured in York's canon were women and about 3 per cent were women of colour.

As of 2006, roughly 5 per cent of the general managers in Canadian theatre were identified as people of colour.

Presently, small Canadian theatre companies that serve Aboriginal communities and communities of colour seem to be expected to create and administer extensive arts education and mentorship programs that will attract and cultivate practitioners from those communities. Meanwhile our multi-million-dollar theatre companies, with extensive human and financial resources, appear exempt from specifically developing Aboriginal practitioners or practitioners of colour. Furthermore, the small, culturally specific companies seem to be charged with finding donors, sponsors, board members and audiences from the same communities that for decades have been systematically alienated from theatre by the multi-million-dollar companies and our academic institutions.

Presently, small theatre companies that serve communities of colour seem to be expected to create and administer extensive arts education and mentorship programs that will attract and cultivate diverse young practitioners.

Margaret Hollingsworth, in an essay published in the *Canadian Theatre Review* in 1985, wrote,

Special programs should be set up to train women directors; they may not be well-attended at first, they may even seem unnecessary, but someone at the top must have

the tenacity and vision to see what the long-term results could be. Women must be canvassed to apply for jobs and for grants; their lack of training and experience must not be held against them for this merely promotes the vicious circle that already exists: if no one will give a woman the chance to gain experience, she will never be "qualified" and she'll never have any "quality" work behind her. (367)

I trust the parallels are clear.

We have a serious situation. Once again, we have lost and are losing valuable potential artists, administrators, producers, granting officials, board members, professors, teachers, critics, volunteers, audiences and others. As Canadian playmakers and stakeholders, we need to exhibit more courage in our efforts to identify and break down cement walls and cement ceilings, as we envision and build a new sustainable theatre infrastructure, one that nurtures our interdependence in an equitable manner.

In Shona storytelling, the Sarungano was someone, usually a woman, who resurrected the ethical principles of her community and, through her stories, became the moral conscience of her community. Contemporary social justice theatre asks playmakers to function as the Sarungano and embrace local and global definitions of community. Despite the institutionalized marginalization of art, discourse and efforts committed to social justice, it is imperative that we, as playmakers and stakeholders, dare to contextualize our microcosmic experiences within our disturbing collective environment.

In her essay "One Precious Moment," Margaret Randall asks, "Could we have imagined a world more rife with horror, more submerged in chaos, more blighted by injustice of all types, than the one we inhabit at this beginning of the twenty-first century?" (157). As a child, I never imagined that dozens of Aboriginal reserves in Canada would have substandard water, that land claims dating back to 1832 would remain unresolved; never imagined that Exxon Mobile would post a quarterly profit of 8.4 billion dollars or that children would be smuggled in dashboards of cars to cross US borders. I never imagined that patent laws would prohibit the distribution of HIV/AIDS medications or that knives would be forced into women's vaginas and guns fired between their legs in the Republic of Congo. I also never anticipated my visceral anger at my complicity in the precarious state of our world or my palpable fury with the painstakingly slow pace of change within our world.

I would argue that we should all be furious. We need to be furious. We need to dramatize, produce and teach our fury so that our anger may help lead us out of this time of war.

We have not arrived.
We are not safe.
We are in crisis.
We are losing integral voices.

Notes

- 1 This article was presented at the Canadian Women Playmakers: Tributes and Tribulations conference; Toronto; May, 2006.

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