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## A Multicultural Stage

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Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 163, Summer 2015, pp. 25-29 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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# A Multicultural Stage

by Mumbi Tindyebwa

*I want stories from racialized communities to no longer be ghettoized within the larger theatre community, and instead for stories from these communities to be seen as truly universal.*

If I were to create a vision for Canadian theatre in the next fifteen years, I would make it truly culturally diverse.

I want Canadian theatre to be a reflection of the global stage. It is time that our Canadian stages start to reflect the diversity of our multicultural nation. My hope is that we would see not only more visual representation of people of colour on stage but also a greater representation of stories and content in our largest institutions from non-European and non-Western traditions.

I want the leadership to change in theatre institutions across the country to include more people of colour.

I want academic and training institutions themselves to change, to teach and train actors in more diverse forms of storytelling. Not just British or Western classical traditions.

I want stories from racialized communities to no longer be ghettoized within the larger theatre community, and instead for stories from these communities to be seen as truly universal.

I remember reading an article a while back about famous British actress Dame Janet Suzman, who faced controversy for calling theatre a white invention. “White people go to it. It’s in their DNA. It starts with Shakespeare,” Suzman said. The actress was responding to a call by Asian actor and writer Meera Syal appealing to the theatre industry to do more to cater to Asian audiences. Suzman further commented that black people did not come to the theatre because “they are not interested. It’s not in their culture, that’s why. Just as their stuff is not in white culture.” Many were outraged by the comments. Syal said, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard any single race or culture claim theatre as their invention before.” Acclaimed African dramatist Ben Okri dismissed Suzman’s comments, saying, “She’s ill informed about the very old traditions of African and Indian cultures which go back thousands of years” (qtd. in Alberge and Brown).

However, the truth is that Western theatre, as it exists today, as we know it, is still a white, European tradition. Theatre in our largest institutions presents a form of entertainment that appeals

mostly to upper-class, older, white audiences who have the money and the time to see and appreciate this dominant art form. This indeed seems to have been Suzman’s point. In response to the criticism of her comments, she said that “she was simply noting the lack of racial diversity on the West End stage” (Ellis-Petersen). Even the formalized indoor-venue setting with everyone sitting down quietly, observing a theatrical presentation, is very much an inheritance of the European traditional form of storytelling. Likewise, Canadian drama is still paying homage to the European style of theatremaking, adhering to a literary, text-based form of storytelling that is a direct inheritance from Shakespeare.

While the level of cultural representation within the professional Canadian theatre establishment has increased in the last twenty years, it is certainly not where it should be. Companies such as Obsidian Theatre, Cahoots Theatre Company, Fu-Gen Asian Canadian Theatre, and Aluna Theatre are all producing consistently excellent work with a culturally diverse mandate. However, none of these companies own their own venues, and they often have to look for space to present their stories within the larger white institutions that have their own season programming and established audiences. These companies are also fairly small, in operating capital and outreach. Given the rich multicultural nature of our country, it is now time that all large mainstream institutions also transition to having diversity at the core of the stories that are being told, to reflect the wider population at large.

We are living at a time when prominent theatre artists of colour have begun to master the formalized British literary structures of storytelling. These Western classically trained actors, playwrights, and directors of colour are now slowly finding employment in the larger institutions.

The problem with classical training is that it is there to meet the demands of an industry that is looking to continue to create work that fits into these safe, inherited traditional British forms. If the theatre industry were to begin programming work that is more

stylistically diverse, then perhaps the training modules would also adjust to meet the new needs of the industry in the next fifteen years.

In the next fifteen years, I hope that writers and directors of colour are given the support and resources to expand their styles of storytelling and find new ways and new structures that originate in other classics from around the world to present their stories onstage. Right now, the fear of creating work that does not fit into these structures is that it will not be seen as commercial or marketable to a mainstream audience.

For Canadian theatre to be truly culturally diverse in the next fifteen years, we would definitely need to change how we tell our stories, and who we are telling our stories to.

In contemporary Canadian society, there is a hunger to change how we are telling our stories. This has been noticeable in the independent theatre scene in Toronto with the rising influence of German experimental theatre on our stages from prolific companies such as Volcano Theatre and Canadian Stage as well as work presented by the Harbourfront World Stage series. This work

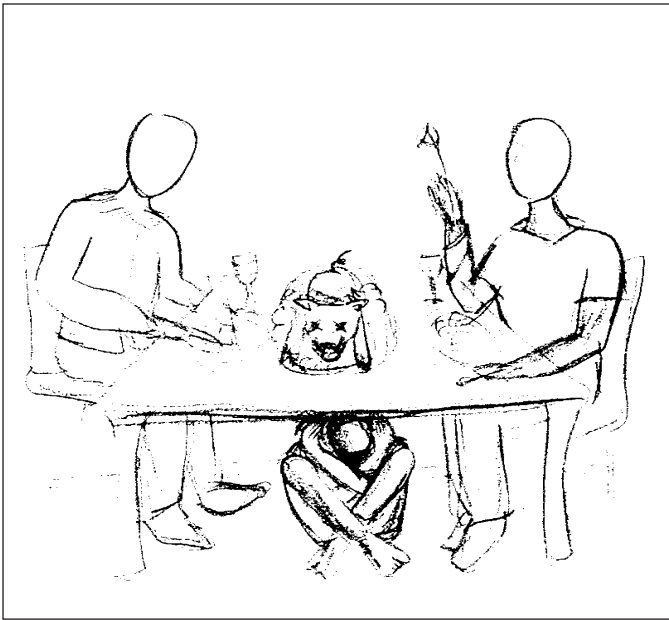
moves away from static, text-based literary forms to combine a variety of artistic forms like dance, opera, theatre, and video to tell stories live onstage. This blended theatre style has been successful in drawing in younger audiences, including myself. Memorable productions include the Harbourfront World Stage production of *She She Pop and Their Fathers: Testament*. This production was an irreverent adaptation of *King Lear* featuring the real-life fathers of the collective onstage. This was a production that was not concerned with what the rules of literary drama-making were but was interested in using whatever means necessary, including video and technology, to tell the most powerful story they could onstage.

While I am excited about the influence of the German aesthetic on the work on other Canadian stages, I am more excited about what would happen if this hunger for a new aesthetic were to lead Canadian theatremakers to search beyond European influences and to embrace the theatrical traditions of the former European colonies in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

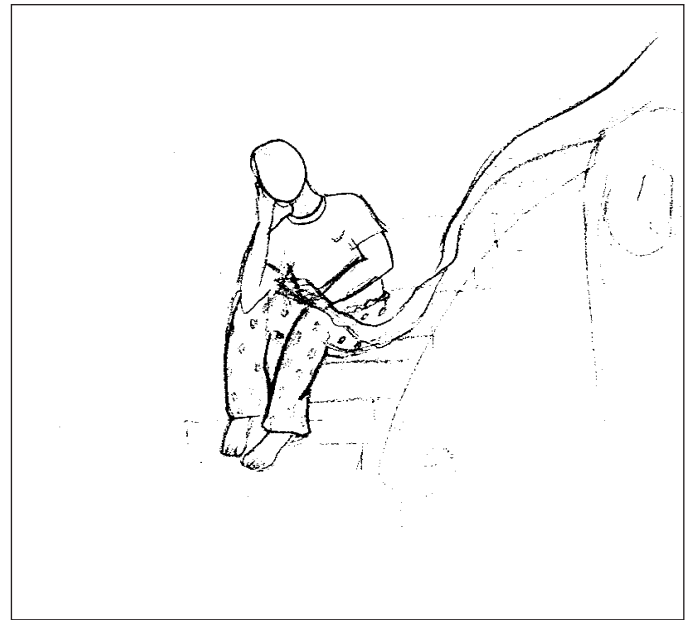
There is a new generation of Canadian theatremakers who are born of immigrant parents or who themselves are immigrants.



*Nightmare Dream* press photo. (l-r): Neema Bickersteth, Pulga Muchochoma, and Peter Bailey, taken at the historic Campbell House museum.  
Photo by Mariuxi Zambrano



*Nightmare Dream* concept storybook, installation 4: Black Judas.  
Sketch by Olga Petrik, [about.me/olgapetrik](http://about.me/olgapetrik)



*Nightmare Dream* concept storybook, installation 1: Searching.  
Sketch by Olga Petrik, [about.me/olgapetrik](http://about.me/olgapetrik)

Members of this generation find their artistic identity rooted in more than one culture. This is also the generation that is going to make up the majority of the Canadian population in the next few decades. I belong to this generation. I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to parents from two different African countries. I was raised in Victoria, British Columbia, and am now based in Toronto. I have been fortunate enough to receive training as a theatre director from both major and independent institutions in Ontario, including the Stratford Festival, Canadian Stage, Obsidian Theatre, DVxT Theatre, Volcano Theatre, Luminato, and AfriCan Theatre Ensemble.

During my training, I felt myself mostly drawn to the experimental work of Volcano Theatre and Luminato. I was also heavily drawn to the content of the work created by Obsidian Theatre and AfriCan Theatre Ensemble. Within the experimental form, I still longed to see and express my own cultural identity. This has led me in the last couple of years to investigate African theatrical traditions. My artistic style and aesthetic are now a hybrid of all of these forms. Traditional and experimental. Western and African. The forms I am fighting against and the forms I am drawn to.

In 2011, I started an independent theatre company called IFT (It's a Freedom Thing) Theatre. IFT Theatre is a home for artists of diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds. We believe in the freedom to dream further, wider, and deeper about what a theatrical experience can be for us. Our work is interdisciplinary and/or formally experimental with an interest in creating an immersive theatrical experience for all our audiences. We have created four original devised productions so far including *Dancing to a White Boy Song*, *Nightmare Dream*, *Motherland*, and *Big Booty Girl*. The latter two are still in development.

In 2013, IFT Theatre co-organized the Kendu Hearth International Theatre Conference in Kampala, Uganda, on innova-

tion and hybridity in international performance. The conference brought leading Canadian and American theatremakers together with East African multidisciplinary art practitioners to exchange and share ideas on form, content, and practice. The Canadian participants and partners included Ross Manson, Gord Rand, Jennifer Brewin, and Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, among others.

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The African storyteller historically and traditionally weaves epic poetry, dance, storytelling, music, ritual, and the creation of masks and puppets into one performance. The separation of one discipline from another feels forced and unnatural to the storyteller. This is a very different approach from that of the Western performer, who is trained to separate dance from drama from music from puppetry and who classifies interdisciplinary work as a form of experimental contemporary work.

Some memorable performances at the conference included a presentation of a hybrid of Indian classical dance and contemporary dance performance by Indian-Canadian performer Nova Bhattacharya, a poetry musical performance about the issue of land inheritance for Ugandan women set inside a bar, and a presentation of the farcical play *Crazy Storms* by Ugandan playwright Philip Luswata, set inside a refugee camp. All these presentations generated intriguing conversations about borders and cultural rep-



Kristy Kennedy in *Motherland* workshop presentation at the St. Lawrence Hall (under the former working title, *Because I Love You*).  
Lighting design by Jenny Jimenez.  
Photo by Eric Faulknor, [ericfaulknor.com](http://ericfaulknor.com)

resentation on the global stage. Overall, my participation in and experience at the conference not only helped me to understand the roots of my own artistic sensibility but also made me realize how necessary it was that Canada open up its theatrical borders to styles and processes from outside the Western world to enrich, reinvent, and remake our theatrical experience into something more culturally diverse.

Some of the most popular and boundary-pushing young theatre makers are artists who are starting to work in non-traditional venues including indie companies such as Outside the March (OTM) and Litmus Theatre. In the next fifteen years, it is easy to see how more companies like this will continue to emerge and grow. My hope is that we also start to see more culturally diverse work happen in non-traditional venues. Currently, IFT Theatre is the only company in Toronto that I am aware of that has a culturally diverse mandate focused on creating work in non-conventional spaces. For many culturally diverse communities, the theatre experience has often been a part of a more immersive communal experience that was not tied to a formal theatre space.

IFT Theatre is currently creating a trilogy of work called *The Nightmare Dream Series*. This is a series of experimental theatre projects exploring the African encounter with the “other.” These projects are director-driven in concept, co-created by myself and

black Canadian poet and playwright Motion, with a team of other core creative artists. Each work of this trilogy is set inside a historical Western building and is told from the African perspective, creating an exciting tension and relationship between the space and the story being told.

The first in the series was *Nightmare Dream*, a project that explored the issue of home and identity and was set inside the Campbell House museum. Using the Campbell House museum, a historical Georgian-style building in downtown Toronto, this unique theatre project featured performances incorporating sound, song, movement, text, and visual art in different rooms in the house. Audience members entered the nightmare dream experience of the title character, Simon Dubé, an African-Canadian immigrant haunted by his disconnection from his traditional culture on the eve of returning to the country of his birth to perform the burial rites for his father’s funeral. *Nightmare Dream* had a sold-out workshop production in January 2013 and premiered the following year to rave reviews from audience members and media critics. The show drew a diverse audience, including and especially people from immigrant and black communities in Toronto. Many not only felt that they connected to the story but were attracted to the idea of the show not being set in a conventional place. The multidisciplinary and immersive form of the show also drew artists and audiences who did not particularly consider themselves to be theatregoers.

The next show in the series is tentatively titled *Motherland*. The show explores the African mother’s encounter through time



Esie Mensah in *Motherland* workshop presentation at the St. Lawrence Hall (under the former working title, *Because I Love You*).  
Photo by Eric Faulknor, [ericfaulknor.com](http://ericfaulknor.com)

with the “other,” from the horrors of slavery as it pertained to motherhood to the modern phenomenon of international adoption. The play is set inside the St. Lawrence Hall. The hall is a major historical landmark in Toronto. It is a grand, opulent Western ballroom that served as a key meeting place for the Canadian elite to discuss the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. In February 2014, we presented a workshop of this piece to an overwhelmingly sold-out house. In fact, we had to turn many away as we simply could not accommodate everyone. The excellent audience turnout and the vibrant talkback session following the presentation further spoke to the desire in the city for more diverse content onstage as well as experimental forms of storytelling.

As a final thought, I will insist that the vision of a culturally diverse future for Canadian theatre, in just fifteen short years, is not simply about a fight for equal representation. It is not simply about making the existing institutions more “colourful.” Radical diversity in content and performance styles is an absolute necessity for theatre in this country to survive at all.

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## About the Author

Mumbi Tindyebwa is a Toronto-based theatre director and creator who was born and raised in Kenya, East Africa, and Victoria, British Columbia. She is the artistic director of the Dora-nominated IFT (It’s a Freedom Thing) Theatre. She won the 2015 Pauline McGibbon Award, the John Hirsch Director’s Award, and is the recipient of a Harold Award and a Mallory Gilbert Leadership Protégé Award. Recent directing credits include *Nightmare Dream* (Dora nomination), *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (Outstanding Direction, Outstanding Design, Outstanding Performance Nominations, My Entertainment World), and *Eating Pomegranates Naked* (Outstanding Production, Outstanding Ensemble, *NOW Magazine*).