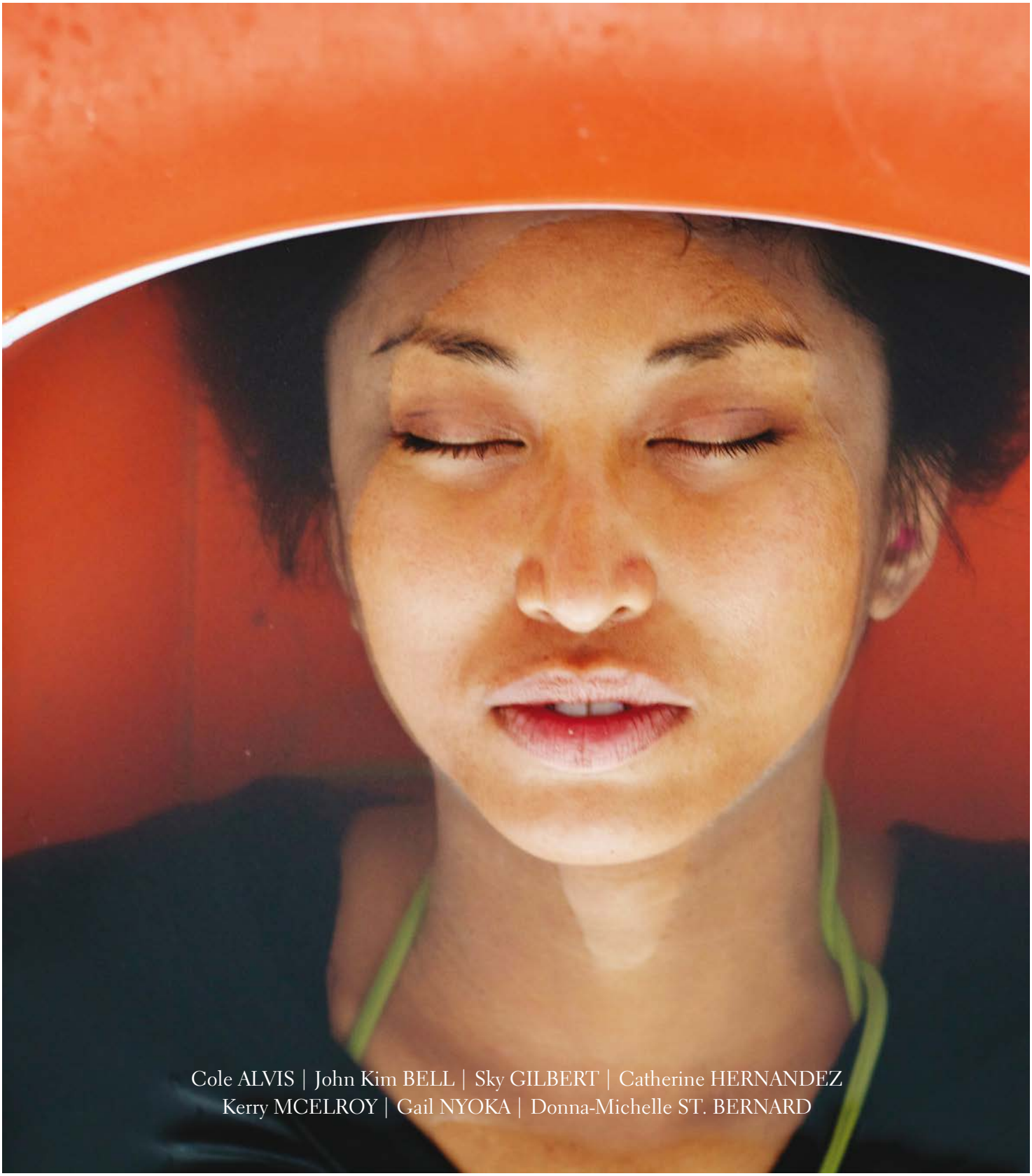
alt. theatre
cultural diversity and the stage

VOL. 13 NO. 1 | $8 |



Cole ALVIS | John Kim BELL | Sky GILBERT | Catherine HERNANDEZ
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alt theatre
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Vol. 13 No. 1

alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage.

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Founded in 1998, ***alt.theatre*** is published quarterly by Teesri Duniya Theatre – an intercultural theatre company with a mandate to produce socially engaged theatre that reflects Canada's social and cultural diversity. ***alt.theatre*** is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography.

Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales Du Québéc/Library and Archives Canada ISSN 1481-0506

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alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage is published quarterly by

Teesri Duniya THEATRE

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Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 157 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.

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© Paul Lampert. Aldrin Bundoc, performer in *Body Politic*, photographed for his performance in Lampert's project *In The Wings*.

Editorial

REALITY CHECKS AND BALANCES

BY MICHELLE MACARTHUR

In late January 2016, Toronto's Canadian Stage Company announced its 2016-17 season, which the company's press release touted as featuring "heart-stopping storytelling and genre-bending performances by Canadian favourites." While the season does indeed feature many innovative artists such as Jordan Tannahill, Marie Chiounard, and Robert Lepage, what it does not feature—as many were quick to note— are any people of colour in the roles of director, playwright, choreographer, or translator in any of its thirteen Canadian productions. On the heels of the #OscarsSoWhite controversy, this glaring omission inevitably drew widespread criticism across social media and in the mainstream press. As *Globe and Mail* theatre critic J. Kelly Nestruck put it, "What came next was entirely predictable – and, in my view, understandable. On came the online outrage, out came the hashtag #CanStageSoWhite."

#CanStageSoWhite—both the trending hashtag and the inequity it described—offered a reality check on several levels. Canadian Stage's lack of diversity in its recent programming reflects an urgent and broader issue in the national arts landscape, where people of colour and Indigenous peoples are vastly underrepresented in key creative roles in the theatre. While there is a significant need for research to measure exactly how much they are underrepresented, a quick look at other theatre companies of comparable size and funding shows that Canadian Stage is not alone in turning a blind eye to equity and diversity. For example, as Nestruck points out, Toronto's Tarragon Theatre employed no directors or playwrights of colour in its 2015-16 season. Soulpepper, another Toronto theatre company of comparable size, fared *slightly* better in 2015 (read: not well at all). According to my count, one of its eleven mainstage shows was directed by a person of colour, and another one of the eleven was written by a woman of colour—*Happy Place* by Pamela Sinha, who was one of two women playwrights to have her work presented on the mainstage that season.

What is not inconsequential about these three companies is the lack of diversity in their leadership. While not all white male artistic directors program such homogenous seasons, it is possible to trace a relationship between diversity in this top job and diversity in other creative positions. Research on gender equity in theatre, which has been undertaken more extensively, can shed some light on this relationship. For example, in my 2015 national study for the Equity in Theatre initiative, I reported that women artistic directors in Canada were more likely to hire women directors and slightly more likely to program women playwrights in their seasons than men artistic directors (19, 24). Research in England has also found that women playwrights tend to write more roles for women (25). What this suggests is that diversity at the top of a theatre company will have a trickle-down effect, increasing the opportunities for minoritized and marginalized individuals to work as directors, playwrights, actors, and designers. While we need more data to quantify this equation, it is illustrated in many Canadian theatre companies with diverse leadership. For example, Factory Theatre's 2015-16 season, programmed by Artistic Director Nina Lee Aquino, stands in stark contrast to its Toronto counterparts cited above. Half of the six "Canadian classics reimagined" comprising Factory's most recent season were directed by people of colour, half were directed by women, and half were written by people of colour.

Interestingly, however, when it comes to addressing equity and diversity in theatre, the burden of responsibility often falls on artistic directors like Aquino for whom these issues are not a problem, while those whose seasons perpetuate inequity point to accomplishments elsewhere or opt out of the conversation altogether. This was the case with Jocelyn's response to criticisms of Canadian Stage's season. When initially questioned about his programming choices, Jocelyn pointed to examples of diversity in past seasons and in the current season's casting, the latter being a strategy that, as Djanet Sears writes in a blog post about the controversy, is often used as a way to address diversity concerns. While non-traditional casting is an important step towards inclusivity, as Sears points out, "diversity is also about embracing culture-specific or gender-specific voices." Those voices—the voices of diverse playwrights and directors—she asserts, can widen audiences' perspectives of the world and attract new audiences (and revenue!) to theatres.

As the #CanStageSoWhite hashtag multiplied, Jocelyn's response became more evasive. Nestruck reports difficulties contacting him for an interview in his *Globe* column: after multiple attempts from Nestruck, Canadian Stage eventually sent him a statement with no further comment and posted an apology from Jocelyn on its Facebook page. Jocelyn's promise in his statement to Nestruck—to "open our theatre in the coming months for a more substantive discussion around the representation of Canada's diverse voices in the theatre today"— materialized when Canadian Stage hosted a workshop facilitated by the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion in May, which was held in camera and closed to the media. While this kind of workshop is important and the choice to keep a closed session was purportedly made to create a safe space for participants, we might ask whether this was a sufficient response to the company's programming oversights.

I've focused on the example of #CanStageSoWhite not because I love a catchy hashtag (though I do love a catchy hashtag) and not to single out one theatre company or artistic director, but to illuminate some of the issues I have been thinking about as I transitioned into my role as the new Editor-in-Chief of *alt.theatre* this spring. Indeed, questions of diversity and equity are not new to *alt* or its readers: for nearly twenty years, *alt.theatre* has been a leader in facilitating conversations around the intersections of art, politics, cultural diversity, and activism; spotlighting marginalized artists and companies that do not always get coverage in other media or scholarly outlets; and advocating for positive change in artistic and socio-political arenas. What I've been thinking about over these last few months is how and to what degree these conversations have changed in the last two decades, and how we can move beyond naming the problems that many of us are already aware of to actually solving them. #CanStageSoWhite shed light on the shortcomings of a theatre whose very name suggests it represents a country, and mobilized artists and audience members to speak out about inequities in the Canadian theatre community more broadly. How can we maintain the momentum of hashtags and movements like this one? Are these conversations merely preaching to the converted, or are they reaching new ears and changing minds? How can we get artistic directors like Jocelyn engaged in this work so that it doesn't just fall on those who are already overburdened by it? The renewed energy propelling the current conversations around equity and diversity in the arts is exciting and promising, and like many others, I want to know how we can translate it into meaningful and sustainable action.

I realize there are no easy answers to these questions, but I look forward to exploring them in the pages of *alt* along with the rest of the editorial team and our many contributors. The articles featured in 13.1 reflect *alt*'s mission of mapping meeting points between art and activism; a key question across the issue is how theatre and performance (and our understanding of these terms) must change in order to support equity and diversity, on stage and off. To that end, we are proud to be kicking off a new special series of short articles that will run across all four issues of Volume 13. Curated by Donna-Michelle St. Bernard on behalf of ADHOC (Artists Driving Holistic Organizational Change), the Principles Office gathers artists from across the country to engage in a nuanced analysis of contemporary issues in the performance community. Our first two articles of the series, by Cole Alvis and Catherine Hernandez, issue several important challenges to audiences and artists regarding our responsibilities in actively working towards change. Hernandez's closing question—"Ask yourself: Are you just a cog in this machine, or are you ready for actual change"—is one that resonates throughout the issue.

This issue also marks some other transitions at *alt* that I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge. I am thrilled to be working with Aaron Franks and Sarah Waisvisz, who joined the *alt* team this summer as our new associate editors. As Features Editor, Aaron will be commissioning articles and working with writers and artists to prepare their work for publication. As Reviews Editor, Sarah will be on the look-out for books and performances to cover in *alt* and will work closely with reviewers; she is also heading-up a new online reviews section that we will detail in our next issue. This summer we also welcomed Lesley Bramhill to the team as Community Manager, who, with our intern Mikaela Clark-Gardner, has enlivened *alt*'s web and social media presence (among many other accomplishments). And last but certainly not least, I want to acknowledge the amazing work that Crystal Chan has done in leading the project to revamp *alt*'s website, which I encourage you to visit at www.alttheatre.ca. Crystal has been the backbone of *alt* since she came on as Manager in 2015, and 13.1 marks the end of her work with us. I wish her the very best as she moves on to other projects and hope that we can share her writing in the pages of *alt* in the near future.

What has always excited me about *alt.theatre*, as a reader and contributor, is its ability to foster a unique space where diverse and sometimes diverging voices can come together to exchange ideas; debate urgent political, social, and artistic issues; and provoke action. As *alt*'s new editor, I am honoured and delighted to help curate this space.

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AN OPEN LETTER FROM "QUEER FUTURES" (IFTR) IN RESPONSE TO THE ORLANDO SHOOTINGS AT THE PULSE NIGHTCLUB

From June 13 to 17, 2016, Stockholm University hosted the annual conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), which united more than 800 theatre scholars and practitioners from all over the world. For many participants, the tragic shooting in an LGBTQI nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, which cost 49 queer people of colour their lives, overshadowed the proceedings. To deal with the many questions raised in the aftermath of this event and the simplified answers offered by mass media and repeated by some politicians, members of the working group "Queer Futures" spontaneously decided to organize an informal round table and collectively formulate an open letter, which was read during the closing ceremony. The letter is reproduced here.

////////////////////

We are deeply saddened by the murders at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, that occurred when hosting a Latino LGBTQI event. We extend our deeply felt condolences to all those affected. We recognise that for many LGBTQI people who face oppression, hatred and violence, nightlife venues represent a rare space in which they feel safe and able to be themselves. The devastating impact of an attack on such a space is felt acutely and painfully by queer people around the world.

We are a diverse group of scholars attending the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) conference in Stockholm. We speak together under the umbrella of the Queer Futures working group. We see that there is strength in diversity: diversity of people, diversity in the way we grieve, and diversity in the way we make sense of this tragedy. Queer scholarship is attached to embodied lives and we employ our academic practice as a tool for meaningful engagement with the wider world. We believe IFTR must be relevant to people's lives, consciously embracing diversity and speaking out against oppression, strengthening connections between the academy and the wider world. This letter is symbolic of our collective efforts to engage with the multiplicity of issues surrounding this violent attack.

Our desire is to carry forward the complexity of the tragedy in Orlando rather than accept simplistic definitive narratives emerging from media hyperbole. Our narrative recognises the diversity and intersectionality of issues that surround this tragedy and we hope this recognition will galvanise us to raise consciousness, resist Islamophobia, xenophobia and homophobia. We resist the dangerous "othering" of the terrorist, which blinds us to state-controlled, structured oppression that creates violence. We will continue to create, affirm and celebrate safe spaces just as we will remain committed to keeping our borders open. We are aware that a need for a Latino night in itself speaks loudly about the inclusivity, or lack thereof, within LGBTQI spaces. It is imperative that we work in solidarity and compassion with a commitment to diversity and openness as we deal with all the questions that the Orlando tragedy poses to us.

We stand in solidarity with the victims of the Orlando shootings and their families. //

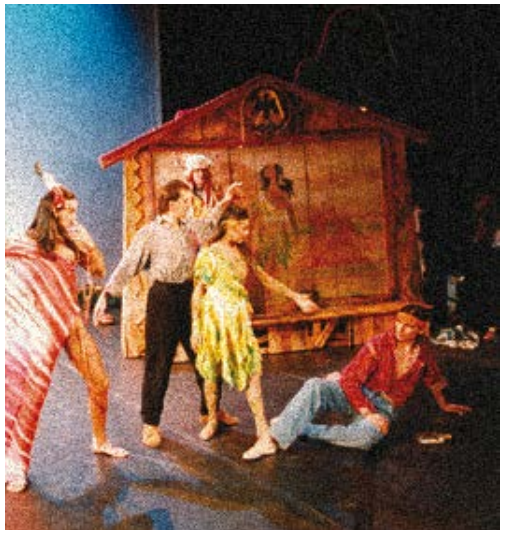
UNDER – STANDING RECON – CILIATION

AN OPEN LETTER[1]

BY
JOHN KIM BELL

Martha Schabas's article "The Truth Hurts," from the January 30, 2016, *Globe and Mail* arts section, contains some perspectives concerning the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's (RWB) production of *Going Home Star* with which I don't agree. Partially sponsored by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Going Home Star* concerns the legacy of the residential school system. The ballet was created in 2014 through the collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, including novelist Joseph Boyden, choreographer Mark Godden, and Inuit throat-singer Tanya Tagaq, and toured across Canada in the winter and spring of 2016. Schabas's statement that the "RWB was totally committed to this project in the true sense of reconciliation" made me question what constitutes an act of reconciliation and just what reconciliation means.

I, John Kim Bell, am an internationally well-known First Nations conductor, composer, and producer, as well as a First Nations cultural activist. Over the last thirty years, I have been on the fore-front of Aboriginal activism through my work in establishing and building the Canadian Native Arts Foundation (CNAF), the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation (NAAF), and the significant cultural breakthrough that was the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards (NAAA) (today known as *Indspire*). I also produced, co-composed, and directed the first and only major Aboriginal ballet mounted by and with First Nations participating at all levels of production, entitled *In the Land of Spirits*. At a cost of approximately $1 million, the ballet featured classically trained Aboriginal ballet dancers and enjoyed a highly successful national tour in 1992.



© John Kim Bell. Dancers in *In the Land of Spirits*, produced by John Kim Bell.

I thought it would be instructive to provide my perspective on an aspect of reconciliation that may not be so obvious to Canadians, or even our own people, and to provide a deeper context for Schabas's article.

Much of the current discourse on the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canadians stems from the TRC's Final Report and the highly politicized Inquiry on Murdered and Missing Aboriginal Women, which are top of mind in the media. We have suddenly entered into the age of reconciliation, an already overused term, and I'm uncertain if many have a clear understanding of what reconciliation means and how it should and will unfold. According to various definitions, the act of reconciling is when former enemies agree to an amicable truce, or it is the process of making consistent or compatible.

While there has always been a prevailing belief that First Nations lack the capacity to mount a ballet (or anything else) and that the number of professionally trained ballet dancers of Aboriginal heritage is not sufficient to compose a major company, I always believed that given the opportunity and resources, we could equal anything the mainstream community can do. We just have never been given these opportunities.

I wonder daily how our relationship with Canada can be repaired and reconciled given that our ancestors were starved and confined to camps (reserves) and that over the past 150 years we were impoverished by design and legislation, considered less than human. We are governed by a different law than the Canadians who are settlers to these lands: *The Indian Act* (1867) makes us wards of the government and less than full citizens and presumes that we were (and still are) incapable of making any decisions for ourselves. The inflicted poverty that ensued from this Act was and remains government policy and has manifested itself through a variety of social ills, including high suicide rates, poor health and a shorter life span, rampant mental health issues, and premature deaths by violence.

This is apartheid, plain and simple. Until recently, no one in polite society would ever recognize our situation as apartheid. It simply wasn't discussed. But today, journalists, mainstream community leaders, and even our Chief Justice of the Supreme Court openly recognize the existence and injustice of Canada's shameful apartheid and even go a step further, asserting "cultural genocide." While the residential school system and TRC Report, along with the missing and murdered Aboriginal women, are leading topics of discussion across Canada, these two issues represent only one head of the dreaded Hydra of evil perpetrated on Aboriginal peoples.

My main objection to the TRC's sponsorship of the RWB's ballet production can be illustrated through countless examples in Canada's history. Over the last century, the oppression and cultural, social, and economic confinement, marginalization, and almost entire exclusion of Indigenous peoples represent a shameful history and policy. This situation has spawned an industry of non-Aboriginal consultants, lawyers, and organizations (known as the Aboriginal industry) all wanting to assist Indigenous people and communities for substantial compensation. This industry does things for us on the assumption that, for the most part, we can't seem to undertake the same work for ourselves.

In the past several months, I have been contacted by many non-Aboriginal arts and youth organizations all wanting to develop reconciliation projects. Arts organizations, charities, and non-profit organizations always struggle to raise money, and especially so in our current challenging economy. The federal government's impending reconciliation efforts will be a source of new money for these struggling organizations. All express their commitment to reconciliation to me. While I'm grateful that this seems to be a positive trend, I am at the same time mindful of the deep racism that Aboriginal people have experienced and continue to experience today. Some organizations, without really having a deep understanding of our history and just what reconciliation means, will simply be applying for much-needed funds.

Schabas states in her article that there is a dearth of First Nations ballet dancers and the RWB hopes to address this by establishing "a flexible training bursary for pre-professional aboriginal dancers." Schabas goes on to provide the history of Aboriginal-themed ballet productions by citing the RWB's 1971 production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, an adaptation of George Ryga's 1967 play of the same name.[2] If the RWB was producing an Aboriginal-themed production in the 1970s, they would have known that there were even fewer Aboriginal ballet dancers in that era. It's laudable that Aboriginal themes were promoted; however, I wish Aboriginal artists and other professionals had also been promoted.

What we are taught as being traditional (whatever that is) in our pursuits, beliefs, and lifestyle conflicts with the sensibilities of dominant mainstream culture. My being a half-breed exacerbated this feeling of cultural conflict, causing me internal conflict and pain. I was neither an Indian nor a white man; accepted by neither Indians nor white people.

Schabas's research on Aboriginal ballets doesn't provide a complete picture, overlooking the San Francisco Ballet's production of *Song for Dead Warriors* in the 1980s as well as *In the Land of Spirits (Spirits)*, mentioned above. As the largest and most well-known Aboriginal ballet at the time, *Spirits*, which premiered in 1988 and had a national tour in 1992, represented a significant cultural breakthrough for the Aboriginal community. In producing it, I uncovered professionally trained Aboriginal ballet dancers in several American ballet companies and briefly created my own Aboriginal dance company in 1988.

Spirits was dramatically different from *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* or *Going Home Star*. While there has always been a prevailing belief that First Nations lack the capacity to mount a ballet (or anything else) and that the number of professionally trained ballet dancers of Aboriginal heritage is not sufficient to compose a major company, I always believed that, given the opportunity and resources, we could equal anything the mainstream community can do. We just have never been given these opportunities.

Spirits, unlike the RWB's Aboriginal ballets, was uniquely an Aboriginal production, produced by the CNAF, an Aboriginal organization. I was the producer and co-composer of *Spirits*, Sioux artist Maxine Noel served as the co-designer, and ninety percent of the dancers were professionally trained ballet dancers of Aboriginal heritage. Here, Indigenous peoples took the means of representation into our hands, unlike the Italians playing Indians in old movie westerns or Al Jolson singing in black face while Black Americans were excluded from the stage. History has consistently shown that non-Aboriginal people and organizations "do it for us"—enjoying the economic benefit of the work—while Aboriginal people and organizations sit idly by, prevented from participating.

In 1984, I permanently returned to Canada from New York City, where I had served (among other activities) as conductor for the Dance Theater of Harlem, to establish what would become the NAAF. I had wondered why our people were so underrepresented in the arts, business, medicine, sciences, and education. I was aware of the history of oppression and marginalization, but, having grown up in an all-white middle-class neighbourhood in Columbus, Ohio, I had not actually experienced that history as other Aboriginal people did. My brother and I were the only *Indians* in town. Some kids thought that was neat. Others would bully us. Overall, the experience helped to shape me as I was growing up.

By the time I became an adult, I had been well trained as a pianist, violinist, and conductor. I had conducted Broadway musicals in New York since the age of nineteen. I was the first-ever conductor of Indigenous heritage appointed Apprentice Conductor to the Toronto Symphony in 1980, and went on to conduct a number of orchestras in Canada, the US, and the UK. I composed music for film and television, and also had extensive experience working in ballet, conducting for various companies, including the internationally renowned Dance Theatre of Harlem, The National Ballet of Canada, The Eglevsky Ballet, and the Soviet Ballet Duo, The Panovs, in a tour across America.

In the early 1980s, I was invited to various First Nations communities to speak about my career as an Aboriginal

symphonic conductor. Witnessing their extreme poverty for the first time, and being young and naïve, I decided to make a contribution by establishing an educational foundation for Aboriginal youth. Apart from simply providing educational scholarships to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit college and university students, I was seized with the idea of Aboriginal self-determination. Why didn't Indigenous people have their own institutions, such as a national arts gallery or a national dance company?

I started toying with the idea of producing an original ballet with classically trained Aboriginal dancers and Aboriginal artists and administrators. My idea was to demonstrate that, if given an opportunity, the Aboriginal community could equal anything presented by mainstream dance companies—a notion that at the time (and still today) was considered absurd. The overwhelming consensus in 1984 was that no professionally trained ballet dancers of Aboriginal heritage existed, and that it would be impossible for my fledgling Canadian Native Arts Foundation, without any prior experience, to produce a major ballet in Canada's largest theatres.

After all, how could there be an Aboriginal production? I wasn't a fundraiser and had never raised $1 million before. I was not a recognized ballet impresario, and my small staff of three had no prior production experience. What could a native ballet be? Would anybody attend? Everyone opined that we would not be able to mount anything of substance, especially with a cast of Aboriginal classical dancers, because there were none.

I discovered a Hungarian composer, Miklos Massey, who had written a symphonic score and a loosely drawn idea for an Aboriginal ballet. Massey's original idea was to show Aboriginal culture at the dawn of time in innocent paradise—a culture that was whole and thriving. I began to develop the idea and the story and to take steps to understand how to produce a full-scale production complete with sets, costumes, over forty dancers, and a full symphony orchestra. When I announced my intentions to pursue this, my closest friends and family expressed concern that it was unrealistic and that I was living in a fantasy world.

However, at the time I had recently produced and conducted a Toronto Symphony Pops Concert featuring Broadway star Bernadette Peters, the then-unknown Shania Twain (who claimed to be Ojibway at the time[3]), and Mi'kmaq guitarist Don Ross. The overwhelming financial and artistic success of this concert was a significant cultural breakthrough for a skin and bones Aboriginal organization, and it branded me as a determined individual who had the ability to organize a concert on a large scale and succeed against the odds. Despite the naysayers, I ventured forward, determined to prove them all wrong.

I refined Massey's story, shaping the main character as a broken down alcoholic First Nations man (the stereotypical view of us at the time) on a reserve who is visited by the spirit of Winona (Sky Woman), the first (Ojibway-Anishnabe) woman. The Lord of the Underworld captures Winona and brings her to the land of spirits. Fighting to save Winona, our broken hero faces his fears and enters the underworld to rescue her even though he knows he can never return to earth. This act restores him from alcoholism, and the Creator rewards him for his courage by returning him to earth where he is healed and able to live an abundant life. Transformed by the experience, the hero dances jubilantly as he embraces life with courage, strength, and nobility.

Having an alcoholic "Indian" as the hero of my ballet and aspiring to present this onstage was highly controversial in the 1980s (and still is). It is an understatement to say that potential public and private sponsors were extremely nervous about the content, never mind the seeming impossible challenge of producing a major Aboriginal production by Aboriginal people themselves.

I took out ads in dance magazines in New York and Toronto and I started calling universities and dance companies from San Francisco to Baltimore Maryland and from Florida to Quebec City to find classically trained Aboriginal dancers. After a long search, I located approximately thirty candidates, with the majority employed in American ballet or modern dance companies. I discovered Marc Antonio Lopez, an Apache, who was a soloist with the San Francisco Ballet and had been featured as the lead male dancer in *A Song for Dead Warriors*, which premiered in 1984. I cast him as the hero. I found Yvonne Racz, a First Nations woman and principal soloist at the Baltimore Maryland Ballet Company to play Winona. Modern dancer and well-known actor Raoul Trujillo rounded out the cast as Lord of the Underworld. Sioux artist Maxine Noel and co-founder of my foundation provided the artistic designs that would be interpreted by theatrical designer Mary Kerr.

As I sought sponsorship for the ballet, my critics were quick to point out that First Nations people engaging in balletic dance represented assimilation, and that *Spirits* would be repudiated and shunned by the Aboriginal community in Canada. My response was that if it's okay for an Aboriginal person to be a lawyer or a hockey player, it should be okay for an Aboriginal person to be a ballet dancer. Who should decide what is right and wrong except the individuals pursuing their own dreams and aspirations?

Like many young First Nations people, I have grown up with conflict regarding my identity. What we are taught as being traditional (whatever that is) in our pursuits, beliefs, and lifestyle conflicts with the sensibilities of dominant mainstream culture. My being a half-breed exacerbated this feeling of cultural conflict, causing me internal conflict and pain. I was neither an Indian nor a white man; accepted by neither Indians nor white people.

My maternal Caucasian grandmother could never reconcile the fact that her precious daughter, a radio and television journalist, eloped with a Mohawk from Caughnawaga, Canada. After two years, the marriage fell apart and my mother returned to Ohio, a heartbroken woman with two young sons. She never recovered from the experience, and my grandmother used the failed marriage to direct her hatred of my father and by association all Indians. All of this fed my internal conflict.

Who was I? An Indian? No, not really. A white man? No, not really. I observed that I was not alone. The majority of First Nations people are products of intermarriage and biculturalism to a greater or lesser extent. I was not the only individual suffering from this cognitive and cultural dissonance. But it was only as I began to study the history of Indigenous peoples that I realized the genocidal strategy enacted through *The Indian Act* (1867) and the reserve system, and I, like many, became angry. We were not meant to succeed, and the poverty and lack of opportunity flowing from the isolation, lack of education, lack of ability to own land, to vote, or even be considered a person fuelled in me a passion to succeed. I had nothing really but determination to try to make a difference and to contribute something positively. I could not live a life of poverty, failure, and a total lack of being able to express.

My Mohawk cousins would criticize me for wanting to be a conductor. But then I noticed that I was not the only one—anybody who had any aspiration was criticized and sometimes ostracized. This was a rampant sociological condition playing out across First Nations communities everywhere in Canada. We were attempting to constrain ourselves within an imaginary set of cultural drivers that were no longer valid. I instinctively knew that our limiting ourselves in a modern world was the result of oppression, and it was wrong. I embraced the view that a healthy Indigenous world needed to welcome the diversity of aspirations and expressions, that we should have no limitations or self-imposed cultural attributes. Yes, we were Indigenous, but that was the starting point for our existence. We were free and should be free from criticism in a world that had tried and continues to try to suppress us in every manner.

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This became my thesis, my reason for establishing the CNAF and evolving it into the NAAF, and for creating the ballet and the NAAA on CBC Television. When I began work on *Spirits*, I had not contemplated how difficult it would be to raise $1 million nor the myriad reasons both native and non-native people alike would give me why a native ballet should not be produced. But the more opposition I faced, the more determined I became.

An integral component was to secure a major theatre. I approached the National Arts Centre (NAC) to ask if— in accord with its mandate to present Canadian works of performing art without cost to the proponent—they would present the ballet without cost to CNAF. The NAC declined to present *Spirits*, so I had no alternative but to suffer increased costs, and I simply wrote a fat cheque to the NAC to rent The Opera, their largest theatre space. I also had to raise additional money to pay for the hotels, food, and living expenses of dancers coming from across the US and Canada for a six-week rehearsal period in Toronto.

I approached the Canada Council Dance Section for financial support. But when I met with the Council's Dance Officer, she questioned why I thought I could or should try to mount an Aboriginal ballet, implying that only real dance companies were worthy of financial support. The meeting was short and my request declined. As it turns out, none of the arts councils at the time supported this work. I did not give up, however. Northern Telecom had sponsored my first Bernadette Peters concert, and its CEO, David Vice, listened to my plea. Impressed by my determination in overcoming the same obstacles in producing the Toronto Symphony concert, he agreed to an unprecedented sponsorship of $250,000 for *Spirits*. I then lobbied various departments of the federal government with great difficulty. The short version is that I would not take no for an answer, and I eventually raised more money but not quite enough to pay for the entire production. In order to cover the shortfall of cash for *Spirits*, I personally borrowed $200,000 to complete my mission, putting myself in a position of facing potential personal bankruptcy.

I scoured the country for a choreographer. Everyone declined except Winnipeg's Jacques Lemay, who only agreed to choreograph if the composer would make substantial changes to the musical score. The composer would not change the score. I contacted every composer I could think of to make the changes required, but none would agree to take on the job. Finally, it dawned on me that the only way I would ever mount the production and avoid bankruptcy was to compose the music myself. At the time, I had not written any professional musical composition (The movie scores and television shows came later). But necessity being the mother of invention meant that after the long days of raising money, dealing with contracts and unions, and doing all that was required to mount the production, I had to compose a score for a full symphony orchestra at very short notice. I was driven, on the one hand, by fear and passion, knowing that if the ballet failed or didn't occur I faced financial ruin; and, on the other hand, by the knowledge that I had never been so close to mounting such a significant cultural breakthrough. Since I was constantly shaping and re-writing the narrative, I wrote the music to fit the story, and Mr. Lemay choreographed to the story and music.

Approximately six weeks prior to the ballet's premiere at the NAC, the NAC's chairman, Robert Landry, invited me to lunch in Ottawa. At lunch he asked me to cancel the ballet and avoid the embarrassment to both the NAC and myself. At this point, I had been working day and night for about a year and fully believed I could deliver a $1 million production of substance and with a professional quality and finish. I had also already spent considerable money on the sets, costumes, artistic personnel, venue rental, and the dancers' fees. I