

## The Future of Storytelling

Wow not only do I have to build a National Indigenous Theatre department from scratch now I'm charged with defining the "Future of Storytelling". – Great. Awesome. No pressure.

I can't talk about the future of storytelling. I don't know what the future of storytelling is. The easy answer, generic thinking would be some as yet untapped digital thing to fool the youth that we were doing something relevant to them. Or some new way to entice more 65 year old retirees into your theatre. A new algorithm that will write a show for me that could be retain my subscribers, ( aka 65 year old retirees) and simultaneously engage millennials. That would be baller. Get on that.

I can't predict cultural trends. I barely Insta.

But for me, the future of storytelling is the origin of storytelling.

nkshAytkn. The N'lakap'amux word for community, it means those around you.

Now I'm going to talk primarily from where I come from. That is from an Indigenous perspective, so if you were looking for something more broad In this keynote, this talk will fail you. I don't believe in colour blind casting. You wanted me to speak, these are the things I talk about.

One of the teaching's I received early in life was that you can't really know where you're going unless you know where you're coming from, and where you've been. So to try to imagine or project a future for storytelling in this country we have to reflect on what brought us here.

It has taken 50 years for Canadian Theatre ecology to reach the state that it's in today. 50 years of hard work, vision, trial and error, failures, disasters, triumphs heroes and villains. Craftspeople, artists, geniuses and hopeful artistic fools like ourselves, who've dedicated their lives to the telling stories. This is a culture, supported, resourced and loved. A culture that sometimes gives rise to great artists. And great art. Sometimes.

We've built theatres from sea to sea, and told Canadian stories to Canadians. Reinforcing the Canadian identity, and celebrated works from abroad. Works from far and wide have toured our stages. All with the spirit of celebrating our diversity. Sometimes.

And we did so knowing it was because we were Canadian. And that's what Canadians do, embrace people and cultures from away.

But what about the people who aren't from away. And I don't mean you folks who are 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> or even 5<sup>th</sup> generation Canadian. I mean the ones who are from right here? Forever always. Do you embrace them as well? Do you reach out to the people whose land you occupy? How deep is the engagement?

How many people here know the name of the First Nations upon whose traditional lands you occupy in your own community? How many are unsure? How many don't care? How many do care but don't know where to find information on them or are too scared to ask? I encourage you all to look up Native-Lands.ca it'll tell you where you are. Each and every one of the communities you reside in exists on an Indigenous Nations traditional lands and in 2018 acknowledging that fact needs to be as Canadian as saying I'm sorry.

All my relations:

The blessing: "All my relations" is something I learned when I was just a kid, it is what we say when we are finished praying in the "Indian way". When I was a teenager it was reinforced during ceremony. When we exited the sweat lodge, to send our prayers into the four directions we would say: "To all my relations." And the firekeeper or the door man would open the sweat lodge door and we'd escape into the cool breeze, usually under a full moon, because those were typically the nights when we would sweat. After dousing ourselves with ice cold creek water, we'd stand by the fire steam rolling off of our shoulder like morning mist on the mountains, and reflect on the prayers we had just made to our community. The thoughtful good thoughts we would direct towards our mothers our fathers our sisters and brothers uncles and aunties, cousins, and neighbours, and the people that we meet when we're walking down the street. And finally we would send good thoughts to ourselves.

This blessing reminds us of the responsibility that we all share as part of our communities. And to all the beings we encountered that day and have yet to encounter and also to the land the water the air. And the spirits of all who have passed and all who are yet to be.

All of my relations. It's a blessing to all the beings and entities of the universe. From this being outward to all beings in recognition of our linkages as aspects of this reality, and our individual perspectives of this shared consciousness. That's really broad. Right?

But isn't this the mission of what we do as Theatre artists. And if it's not, why do we do it?

From an Indigenous perspective, our community includes the people we share this place with but also the animals, the plants, the water, the air and the lands and all the beings that inhabit those realms. They are also included in this blessing. When we invoke this thought, those other beings also become a part of our conscious awareness.

For me, when I incorporate the land into my consciousness it roots the work that I'm doing in a way that goes beyond setting, or costumes, or stage magic, or venue. It connects me. It grounds me. To where we are doing the work. It roots it in place. Architects tell us that we are always in relationship to the buildings we are in consciously or unconsciously. But we are also in relationship to the lands that these buildings occupy. To the history of that place. And what I think is often ignored in that exchange is that we are also consciously or unconsciously confronted with the erasure of those landscapes and the people who belong to them. By acknowledging the land and the people of the land we are reconnecting to them and reinforcing their linkage to the land.

That's the power of the land acknowledgement. And that acknowledgement terrifies many of your subscribers. It probably terrifies some of you.

Locality.

So we're here at the National Arts Centre of Canada, in Ottawa. Ontario. The Nation's capital. That exists on the Unceded Territory of the Algonquin nation. Ottawa is the only city I've been to where *everywhere* I go I can use my status card to buy goods exempt of sales tax. Usually in other cities it's just on the Rezzy part of town, but it seems in the nations capital everyplace is rezzy. Metaphor?

Whether that land has been treaty-d away or not. Your community takes up space on an Indigenous Nation's ancestral lands. Inclusive of the board members you have to appease and the patrons who keep you afloat, and the advertisers who contribute and the funders you rely on. The First Nation upon whose ancestral lands your apartment, house, city, organization, venue occupies land on- is also very much your community. And you are theirs. If you don't know anyone from those nations, you have to ask yourself why? "Those people don't come to the theatre." Why is that? Because their stories are not reflected there. Their presence is made uncomfortable there. Make them feel comfortable in your spaces, welcome them to your events, just as they are so gracious to welcome you to their homelands. It is your duty to introduce yourself to them and to find a way to incorporate them into the work you do. Acknowledging that you are on their lands is just polite. Many of you already do this work. I just want to acknowledge that. Many of you don't. I want you to acknowledge that.

It doesn't cost you much to do it. It is no less and no more than a nod to the realities that have brought us to this time and place and our shared part in that story.

What is community?

The age old playwrights question is who is your audience. But beyond that as theatre creators we must vigilantly ask ourselves are we serving our public? Who is our public? Who are we talking to? Who are we telling our stories to? Whose story are we telling? How are we telling them? Many of us here have cornered the market for 65 and older women and then men they drag along with them. How do break this dead-lock. With courage Pooh, with courage.

There is a controversial push to teach Indigenous plays in schools instead of Shakespeare. I think that's brilliant. Some of you are probably horrified at the thought. The Bard!? You want to stop teaching the Bard?! In high school Fuck yes! There is no better way to get into the indigenous perspective. To teach about the real immediate issues we face as a nation. Because moving beyond the repetitive reiteration of colonial narratives is the future of storytelling!

50 years of the new Canadian play creation paradigm has resulted in two regimes which in general govern how we develop and produce and present work, these regimes are reflected by the UDA agreements and the CTA. Or essentially the French model and the English model. Can an Indigenous Theatre exist within these regimes when they reflect so deeply colonial values of artistic commodification and trade?

What is an Indigenous Theatre model?

I would argue that an indigenous model of Theatre, involves some level of responsibility to community. It requires meaningful community outreach and consultation. It might involve copious amounts of smudging during the process to make sure we're not carrying around too much baggage from the work or from our lives and injecting it inadvertently into the work and our lives. It may necessitate the dissemination of the work in ad hoc venues, community halls, school gymnasiums, community arbours as our lack of cultural infrastructure is reflective of our lack of actual municipal infrastructure in Indigenous communities. It will probably involve the presence of elders, offerings of tobacco, and the need to feast together with the community we are working with. So those'll be line items in the budget. Once everyone has assembled to begin working, rather than jumping in and getting right at it. We might take our time to arrive as a company. And then we might take more time for our spirits to arrive as well. That is for the our mental and spiritual and emotional selves to be "in the room" with our physical

selves. There may be a seat left empty for the ancestors to witness the work. And offerings might be made for the spirits invoked to help guide us. On the first day we might not even get to reading the play, as all the other business of arriving and being present for the work may have to be addressed first. If you think of the weight of history where our elders weren't allowed to gather in groups greater than 4 for fear they might be plotting against the crown, it is such an amazing thing that we've even gathered at all to do this work. Now we don't live in that reality anymore, but as Indigenous artists, we feel it. It's amazing that we have survived and thrived, and we need to enjoy the moment of our arrival and gathering to honour that journey. As Indigenous artists we still feel the settler gaze on us. The pressure from all of this. The pressure from our communities. From all of you. To educate. To be patient. To be Indigenous. And when we're together it is as if we are finally able to be ourselves. Actually. It's not your fault. But it is a reality of our story on this land. The act of our gathering is an event and an accomplishment in and of itself and something to be celebrated and be acknowledged. As Indigenous artist many of us are packing around a law degrees worth of information about our identities and culture and the history that has shaped us. None of you have had to do the deep dive into our colonial history that Indigenous artist are called upon to do everyday all the time. And that burden has a toll. And sometimes that needs to be addressed in the room somehow.

So maybe at the end of the day we finally are ready to read the play we are about to enter into. Maybe it's not until the next day. What matters is that we've arrived and have prepared the space and ourselves and our community and our company to be present in a sufficient way to begin.

Once we begin, we may want to employ a new lens through which we explore and create the work. One that draws upon ancient Indigenous values. One that uses element of our particular Indigenous heritage as creative source, or as a dramaturgical lens through which we discuss and shape the work. It would be impossible at this point to completely separate settler methodologies from our practice but we could pick and choose those methodologies that work best for us. I call that Injun-uity. Just kidding.

The goal of working in this way is to root our work in an authentic process of reclamation of our voice. Reclamation of our story making/ story telling practice. And even though we may draw from ancient ideas and tried and true western methodologies, it's all new. Because we're doing it our way.

What is our community?

I walk in cities. I go home to my village. I walk on the land when I can, in the mountains and along the riverbanks. On the Rez, in theatres and on sports fields. I browse the internet, disconnect from here and

connect online. In parent teacher nights and opening nights, in the bar, and these days in Boardrooms. All of these places are aspects of my community. Many overlap each other, and yet paradoxically are completely segregated, with their own languages, short hand, expectations, protocols and etiquette. And what about the communities I am a part of but ignore, or who ignore me. Like the folks in the Equity office, sending me my late fee payment notifications. Or the homeless man I walked past on the street today. Or The older Man in the suit driving his luxury SUV who irritably honked at me and waved his hands as I crossed the street on my way to work. Are these people not also my community? We certainly share something with each other. In other contexts we might engage in conversation, share a meal, a cigarette, exchange money. But because I have an agenda and they have an agenda and those agendas aren't intersecting at this moment, we pass each other by. We try to get out or stay out of each other's way in the pursuit of our individual agendas. Nose in our phones.

We embody the his-tory or her-story of our families, race, religion, ethnicity, culture, language, skin colour, gender, or the absence of any connection to these. We associate ourselves with whichever group that makes the most sense for us to find belonging to, and sometimes we are rejected by or reject those tribes, and have to find a new story to call our own. Or at the very least our own way of telling our stories.

But when we come together to hear a play, see a dance show, listen to music. We enter into community. We sit down together stand up together, breath together, laugh together cry publicly together. That is the power and purpose of story. It is a barrier busting reaffirmation of our interconnectedness. We attach ourselves to stories to reinforce a sense of belonging. We share stories to identify, incorporate and collect our community, to share our experience of this reality, our individual perspective of this shared consciousness. We revisit stories over and over again to reinforce our sense of connection to them. The Greek Classics. The plays of Shakespeare. A Christmas Carol. To be reminded of their power. Their meaning in our world view. We find comfort in the repetitive return to these classics

When my grandmother was beginning her decline into Alzheimer's she would loop into stories over and over again. Recalling events farther and farther back in time until finally she was just a young girl again. Reliving her days as a child in London, before the war. In many ways this was tragic and painful and messy. Her children mourned how she no longer even remembered who they were. But the stories she told over and over again seemed to sooth her in her confusion, while she told them she was certain of

herself. They gave her something she could latch herself to, as her identity was slowly drowning in confusion the telling of these remembrances grounded her in a certainty that was mostly absent at this point.

When I think of this/ the repetitive return to nostalgia that makes us feel comfortable I am reminded of Colonialism. The need to reiterate the Canadian story until it begins to transform, lose shape and become in essence meaningless. We attach our value to battles we fought in foreign lands to sports we remember liking, the friendly yet stern caricatures of our constabulary. A precocious little red headed girl named Anne, living an idyllic life in a green land completely absent of brown bodies. The Greeks. The Plays of Shakespeare. A Christmas Carol. And repeat.

Surely, Anne, This is not the whole story. Yes! there are brilliant fantastic works full of colour and dynamism, diversity, pushing cultural buttons and boundaries. We really are a truly fantastic community of artists. And we have an incredible capacity to create diverse and compelling art, And an impressive body of work to show for it. Especially from our smaller and mid sized theatre companies who have been leading the way forever! But there has historically been a reluctance from our large venues to push programming boundaries. Tell me if I'm off mark here. Oh but they have their subscribers to think about, oh but they have to appease their mostly conservative board, oh but the demographics of their audience is more homogenous. Well duh! No wonder! Whose reality are you reflecting? 65 year old grandmas and their husbands. Not to say that those audience don't have the capacity to be engaged or open to new ideas and plays. But if this continues, the meteor is coming and the dinosaurs are too big and too slow to get out of the way. The only solution is to go back to the beginning to return to community.

I saw in my grandmother's journey a return to someplace that none of us, her family, had ever experienced with her, but that lived within her for all those years, imbedded in her mind all this time. We had never witnessed that girl growing up in England, and she no longer remembered who she had been. But the story of her youth, buried deep within her, was awoken as she deteriorated. And as she got closer to the end of her journey in this life she approached her own origin. She transformed mentally back to a child like state. And then to a primal origin. A place we couldn't be. The memory of her beginning.

My memory of my grandmother encompasses her being bigoted towards native people even as I her grandson stood before her, my mothers earth toned skin, beautiful almond shaped eyes, flashing in my mind as her hurtful words penetrated. But my grandmother's journey evolved.

She lead the Grand Entry to the Remembrance day pow wows in my community for 30 years. And she eventually even became an honorary elder of the Lytton First Nation. Family is complicated. Community is complicated.

The tragedy and horror of course with diseases like Alzheimer's is that one loses the stories that make them who they are. The very core of their identity matrix is destroyed. And this also reminds me of colonialism and Indigenous cultures.

What about the stories of this land?

Indigenous

In this country we have a history where the Indigenous, culture, stories, songs and dances had been outlawed, suppressed and discouraged for decades through the forced assimilation of our peoples by the church and the state. In essence the entirety of the residential school program was to inject foreign languages and stories into our people to erase the indigenous stories from our identity. It was like as if cultural Alzheimer's was inflicted upon us. The project was literally to make us forget who we were. And the more we forgot the crazier and more damaged we became. Until we deteriorated into a people, dependant on these foreign powers to sustain ourselves. Erasing the indigenous stories, and languages was intended to separate Indigenous peoples from their cultural links to the land. Ironically, and paradoxically at the same time Indigenous cultures were being suppressed, Indigenous culture was deeply coveted by other institutions. So while potlatches were outlawed and ceremonies banned, universities and museums were collecting the cultural objects of these "dying peoples" all across this continent and really, the world. Separating the people once again from their stories and incarcerating their spiritual possessions. Locking them away in vaults. Choking off their connection to the people they belong to. Until their stories are forgotten.

During this 50 year cultivation by Canada to develop a Canadian Theatre ecology, through the building of institutions like the National Arts Centre, Banff Centre for the Arts and the network of regional theatres, and legacy festivals across the country, Indigenous theatre has been quietly growing in the weeds.



But now with the creation of a separate and substantial Indigenous column at the Canada Council, and this new Indigenous Department at the NAC you can bet your ass that the future of storytelling is Indigenous.

Now there is incentive for mainstream companies to engage with Indigenous stories. However, our stories are still being poached by non-Indigenous artists and companies who feel they have the right to tell our stories without our buy in or creative involvement. Fortunately now more than ever the sensitivity around these practices are heightened and policed by the community. And rightly so.

Because The future of storytelling is facilitating Indigenous artists to tell our own stories. Not poaching our lived experience for your vanity piece!

There are ancient Ojibway stories that talk about the great fiery comet that wiped out the world and brought an unending winter. There are stories along the Pacific coast that describe a great flood. And stories about the sky people, who fell from the star nation and whose descendants today are considered royalty among the secret societies of the long houses. These are the original stories of this land the ones you haven't heard of. These are the memories within Indigenous societies that speak of a different relationship to this land than those of the settler peoples who now make up the majority population in most of our communities. These stories have been danced and sung and told around fires over long winter nights.

Amongst the Indigenous peoples there have always been people who were able to hold on to the stories. Who were told and who remembered. Who were coached on how to speak, and how to hold space. When we say we are an oral culture that means more than just we use our mouths... that means we command attention with our voices, our arguments are articulate and compelling, our language carefully curated, our posture rooted and purposeful. My great aunt Rita Haugen whose Indian name was Papaylako which means Frog Woman. The Frog was her spirit helper, she told me that that was my role as well, to be a speaker for our people. She told me that it was our responsibility as orators to convince the people to be good to each other. And that is the goal of all of us gathered here as a community of story tellers. To convince the people to be good to each other.

Our stories are medicine. The act of gathering to hear a story, share a story, discuss and compare stories is as simple and fundamental to human societies as gathering to eat, to hear music, to breath air. We do it without realizing we are doing it. We do it because we are human and crave catharsis, empathy, understanding, to share our experiences, to see our stories reflected back to us, and to be shared amongst us. The social bridge that binds communities are the stories we share. The events of the day, the funny or tragic thing that happened to you over the weekend. The hero's we hope for, the personal villains who want to ruin our day, we see ourselves reflected in them and the tragic/comic/ plots that we find themselves locked into, remind us of who we are within the social spaces we occupy. We collect around these ideas instinctively. We imagine ourselves into the narrative of others. We share experiences together, memorializing great ones. We laugh together and we mourn together. We celebrate and/or lament our shared histories together or in opposition to those points of view or in agreement with them. We suffer and we triumph together, and we just get by together. All the time. Everyday. All at once.

All we have in the end, are our stories.

As a youth I was taught that the indigenous life cycle is not linear, but a spiral. We start out in the centre radiate out into our life and then eventually we begin to make our way back to the centre to the origins of our story. Some indigenous dramaturgies follow this pattern as well, if they are truly trying to escape the pull of the Aristotelian model, that so satisfies western sensibilities and expectations for good storytelling. Indigenous storylines radiate or spiral out from a centre and eventually make their way back to the beginning.

If you ever spend any time listening to an elder speak or tell stories you may experience this as well, as you frustrate over whether they'll ever finally get to the point, of why they were telling the story in the first place, and then when finally do make it back to the original point they were making, your mind will pour out of your ears from the sheer gravity of the revelations they've just imparted on you so casually. And the appropriate response in spite of your irritation is acutally your utter appreciation that they were able to come and be in your presence at all. What is required of you is your patience, and your empathy. Your willingness to go on the journey. Winding as it may be. Because the reward of that experience will be that you will be changed forever.

The future of storytelling in Canada is acknowledging that the stories of this land are older than Canada. That there origin stories in each region of these lands we call Canada, or Turtle Island, that describe our relationships to this natural world. The history that informs our relationships in this fractured culture today are rooted in the relationships we all have or don't have, to the land. Yet, most of us ignore the land, we don't include it into our sense of community, unless we're recycling. Or riding our bikes to work. But not enough of us commune with it. Connect to it in a way that isn't extractive, or violent. We don't acknowledge it. Or the people who were there before there were cities. When we think of the History of this country, the perspective in our literature or mainstream culture eventually refers back references to a culture from elsewhere. It's relationship to this place is from a cultural identity that is not from here. But when you're Indigenous, our identity is linked to this place, inextricably. That linkage to here, and that linkage that starts with Indigenous Peoples.

We're scrambling for something to hold onto. Everywhere we're lied to, we're patronized, we're sold, we're bought, we're told, we're not. Fake news, Main Stream Media, Trolls, Pundits, Propaganda, all playing at our our sense of, need for, community. We're searching online for everything. And there is really nothing there to be had. It is all imaginary. It is a phantom community that we have built to escape into. A false anonymity, allows us to In lieu of a council fire where you have to look at each other and engage in the same space, we have chat rooms, or comments, or likes. We crave community. It is as essential as water or air.

The classic greek plays we have today were derived from pottery shards. The tragedies and comedies that scholars pour over and theatre and opera companies reinvent over and over again. Were literally pieced together from pottery shards and interpreted and then over centuries reconstituted and retold. Like the pottery shards of the greeks. Like wax cylinder recordings of our songs and stories reaching out to a new generation. Like the stories of our grandmothers. Indigenous culture is rising. And will be reconstituted into a new telling. By artist who have the full weight of history as their source and the future in their eyes. What will you do to support their work?

Kookstumx