



PACTcon 2024: Montreal

Event: Opening Event, May 29, 2024
Remarks: NTS Host Venue Welcome Address
Speakers: Alisa Palmer, Executive Artistic Director, National Theatre School

Hello and welcome to Montreal!

I'm Alisa Palmer, I'm the outgoing Executive Artistic Director of the English Section, National Theatre School of Canada – I'm outgoing in every sense of the word. Which is handy when you're in Montreal, one of the most dynamic never- sleeping cities in Canada.

Not only does Montreal never sleep, it festivates, it dances, jazzes, and pow wows. I live in the core of downtown very near to here and the streets around my home are often closed, the city taking any excuse for a celebration. Case in point around this time of year there will be a festival of the opening of the patios. And then in a few months as the weather grows colder there will be, you guessed it, a festival for the closing of the patios.

I want to thank you for inviting me to address you all today. I haven't attended a PACT meeting for many years, not since I was AD of Nightwood Theatre over twenty years ago. It's an honour to address you all and launch the important discussions you will be tackling this year, which as Nina points out are urgent and require courage and frankness.

I want to thank Iota'keratenion for his words of welcome and to thank NTS' Director of Indigenous Perspectives, Katey Wattam, for her presence and support. NTS is the only school in Canada where professional theatre craft is taught in both official languages. NTS is now also guided by an Indigenous Advisory Circle composed of Indigenous alumnae and current students. Katey has recently joined NTS in the newly created role of Director of Indigenous Perspectives, and her presence in this position along with the Circle are vital to the present and the future of NTS, its communities and its creativity.

I would like to welcome you all specifically to the Monument National.

This building serves as one of two campuses for NTS. The other campus is about 20 minutes away, on St Denis St, and it's where our studios, classrooms and our incredible library – the largest and only bilingual theatre library in North America- are located. Both of NTS' campuses are heritage buildings. The one on St Denis St. was originally a

juvenile court complete with jail cells – how it transformed into an art school is another story.

This building, the Monument National, is where over half our training takes place. Many programs begin with classes up at the St Denis campus but by the time the students are halfway through their training, they move into this building which houses multiple theatre spaces. For students in Scenography and Production programs especially, this building is their incredibly important classroom. At NTS students learn by making theatre, their training is accomplished by *doing*. NTS provides hands-on training for the most ephemeral of artistic forms.

The Monument National has always been a centre for training, education, dialogue and debate – key ingredients of theatre, and ones we need more than ever today.

On June 24, 1893, the St Jean Baptiste Association officially opened The Monument National. It was built at the historical interface of Francophone culture in the East and Anglophone culture in the west of Montreal, right in the heart of the city's Jewish and Chinese neighbourhoods. These days, what with the recent arrival of the Ministry of Immigration and Francisation next door and the accompanying influx of civil servants, the Monument finds itself at yet another kind of cultural hub.

There is *Café Cleopatre*, just down the street, which is a holdout against gentrification and a reminder of this neighbourhood's identity as a red light and jazz district up until very recently. I recall, back in the early nineties, being a young artist in training here in Montreal, and a volunteer at *Alliance pour la Sécurité des Prostitués* (ASP), and this neighbourhood was the centre of that activity.

The Monument was initially proposed as a Francophone community centre and theatre. This was at a time when the Anglophone community already had three large theatres and a multi-purpose concert hall. The name "Monument National" captures the founders' initial intention: to build a monument to the national identity of a French culture, and to symbolically block the spread of English culture farther East in the city.

However, what started as a wall of sorts ended up becoming a hub of intercultural activity. The Monument housed the largest Yiddish theatre in North America. It was home to fabulous Chinese Opera performances. High brow and low brow culture were in close proximity – there was a prominent burlesque theatre called *Starland*, and a wax museum in the basement, so many various forms of theatrical arts housed together under its one roof. Sarah Bernhardt trod these boards and, it is said, more than one ghost continues to do so.

After the 1920's, the Monument changed with the times and became a hub for experimental theatre.

It was also a centre for political activism.

Quebec feminism was born here in meetings to advance women's suffrage – which came as late as the 1940's in Quebec – as well as women's right to post-secondary education. The Monument housed meetings for the labour movement. And it was the site of the first Canadian Jewish Congress in 1919. This is a proud and diverse pedigree.

After the First World War, however, the building was neglected, and while it was officially protected by the government and saved from the wrecking ball, the government did not invest money in maintaining it. This is a dilemma – very nearly a paradox – all too familiar to many of you who are responsible for venues today. As with so many resources, both tangible and intangible, that are overlooked and neglected, the value of this building was recognized by theatre artists who saved it – and therefore saved the burgeoning artistic and culture life to which it was home.

In the 1970's The National Theatre School of Canada took over the building and led an ambitious restoration and rejuvenation of the Monument National. In that chapter, the Monument became a valued roadhouse for a variety of performing arts events from dance to stand-up comedy to performing arts festivals. More recently, within the past decade, NTS initiated a new vision for the Monument National, ending its time as a rental theatre and launching the *Centre of Art and Social Innovation*. The Monument once again became a home to activities that reflected the original spirit of the building, with community and pedagogical events focussed on community engagement and Indigenous artistic practices. With the recent separation of the *Centre* (CASI) from NTS, the next chapter of the Monument National has yet to be written. But the value of the Monument National as a spiritual and practical hub for theatre training cannot be overstated.

And it's clear that creating theatre in this site of so much intercultural artistic and political activity is a perfect fit when it comes to training artists for the theatre of tomorrow.

At NTS, the central principle of artistic pedagogy is to reveal oneself through the work. Each artist no matter the discipline, comes to NTS to learn about their unique artistic process and thus to become aware of how they do what they do. NTS provides tools and experiences to expand this awareness. We are tasked with the exquisite paradox of training artists for a theatre that we cannot yet imagine; of equipping them with the skills and honing their appetite to share vital stories that shape our future.

Training at NTS is famously known to be ultra rigorous. It demands and builds stamina. I don't mean "the show must go on" stamina, which is less and less pertinent as we all take steps to take care of ourselves as artists, and to engage in sustainable artistic practices. I am speaking here of the stamina to be seen; to share oneself; and to communicate creatively day in and day out. The stamina to "*show up*" in every sense of the word, with compassion and courage and hope. This is the true stamina of the artist.

In our training at NTS, especially now after so many hard-won lessons following 2020 – lessons which are still being learned – we hope to equip artists to make every room they

are in a better place; one where folks do not shy away from difference of opinion but instead, recognize that navigating dissent is the only way to truly create together.

Truly respecting difference of opinion means actively listening. Collaboration is not mere consultation – which too often does not include consent. Collaboration means navigating difference. And that is a profoundly creative act. It is not for the faint of heart – or the faint of anything – but it is key to meaningful artistic expression. True collaboration means engaging in the discomfort of difference, with the faith that the most powerful work will emerge from uncomfortable exchange. It takes time, it takes courage, but above all it takes imagination and love; love for the art we create, for the stories we tell, for the children we raise and the artists we guide and who in turn guide us. It is love that binds us together around the fire of creativity and allows us to bring to life something that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In the face of challenging situations both in the school and outside, at NTS we have learned that kindness is the most powerful ingredient. Kindness will equip us to navigate our increasingly divided world. To be clear: kindness is not the same as niceness. Niceness, like a teflon pan, is convenient. It makes life easy in the short term, nothing sticks to it. Under high heat, however, that non-stick coating burns off, tiny flakes enter your food and over time it is toxic. Kindness on the other hand, is a cast iron pan: heavy, it does not clean easily and needs regular care and seasoning. But under high heat, when the pressure is on, the cast iron pan is more effective than ever. It becomes stronger with use over time.

As I wrap out of NTS after graduating 12 cohorts, I am better for having been here. The biggest lessons I have learned are from the students and the artists that have helped to train them: I have learned about the power of collaboration, and that deep kindness and love are key to any meaningful creative act.

The next generation is asking for change, and this change goes beyond a change in style or artistic approach. The change that is urgently needed will come from a deeper kind of commitment on our parts.

We owe it to them to enact the stamina that we are asking of them, to model the rigour that they will need to create the theatre of the future.

We owe them excellence of artistic practice in the creation of work that moves and inspires our audiences and communities.

We owe them the stamina to show up every day, to reveal ourselves in the work we do as cultural leaders.

And above all we must champion the deep kindness that is required to navigate the dissent that makes powerful collaboration possible.

This is how we live in Montreal, where on any street corner you can hear people start a sentence in one language and complete it in another, where we learn from a unique, challenging and inspiring form of cultural intimacy across multiple languages. This building and this city will, I hope and trust, continue to nurture, support and inspire the hard work that you will be doing during these next few days as you create the path to our theatre of the future. Thank you for doing this hard work on our behalf, and I wish you all the best for a meaningful and collaborative conference.