

ARTIST STATEMENT FROM INDRIT KASAPI
Q2Q Symposium
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This is a glimpse into the journey of conceiving, developing and producing BODY POLITIC the play and the learning that took place throughout it.

BODY POLITIC was commissioned by lemonTree creations in 2011 and was subsequently developed through the Buddies in Bad Times Theatre Residency program. It premiered to sold out houses in May 2016 as a co-production between lemonTree creations and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. The play is a re-imagined telling of the creation, existence and eventual demise of Canada's first queer liberation magazine, The Body Politic.

It was very clear to us at lemonTree creations why we wanted to work on telling the story of The Body Politic. We were fascinated by our collective queer past. Personally, I knew so little about it. No one told me about it. Who would? My immigrant parents? Or my catholic school teachers? My education into the world of homosexuality came about through MSN chat rooms where I typed abbreviated texts (A/S/L age/sex/location) and took awkward pictures of my naked body. The men inside these cyber rooms were interested in only satisfying their primal sexual needs. As a teenager I latched onto anything I could find in the literary world that spoke of the same kind of love and sex that I desired. Imagine my shock that at age 27 I found out about The Body Politic. A local queer liberation magazine that had been around for years and was the pre cursor to Xtra! and Fab. What I think shocked me the most was that the writers of this paper were mostly still alive and only just an email away. A generation of teachers and elders in my community that are so close to me and also so far away. Initially I felt guilty for not knowing. How could I have missed this? This must be entirely my fault. Or is it?

Then whose responsibility is it to make sure that our history as a queer community is told to the new generation? We felt this was a responsibility that needs to be shared by all of us who consider ourselves a part of this community. It was clear, then, that as a queer company we needed to engage with this story. And so the work began. We commissioned an exciting young writer, Nick Green, to begin the research and deliver a first draft. We informed him that we were interested in the story of this paper and also particularly in hearing about the stories of the women and people of colour who were involved in the paper. It was an exciting time.

As Nick would meet with surviving members of the paper he would call me with impressions of these meetings and would share with me some of the conversations he was having. I found it exhilarating. They had so much to say about their past. About such an exciting time in our history, where sexual, societal, moral and psychological barriers were being fought so that our comprehension of who we are as humans became fuller.

Simultaneously with all of this, Eye Weekly, (A Toronto weekly magazine that had been around for years), re-invented itself with a new name The GRID TO. Their first issue featured as their

cover story the controversial article entitled DAWN OF A NEW GAY. The article written by a young white gay man, Paul Aguirre-Livingston, claimed that there is a new era of gay and went on to list a number of things that spoke mainly of white privilege with little recognition of the difficult past this community has had and continues to have outside of large metropolitan centres such as Toronto.

Here's a short excerpt of what Aguirre-Livingston wrote:

"...a new generation of twentysomething urban gays—my generation—has the freedom to live exactly the way we want. We have our university degrees, homes and careers. In Toronto, we've abandoned the Church Wellesley Village. We're tattooed and pierced and at the helm of billion-dollar industries like fashion and television. We vacation with our boyfriends in fabulously rustic country homes that belong to our parents, who don't mind us coming to stay as a couple. Hell, we even marry our boyfriends, if we choose to, on rooftops overlooking Queen West. Our sexual orientation is merely secondary to our place in society. We don't need to categorize or define ourselves as gay, and who we sleep with—mostly men and, hey, sometimes women—isn't even much of a topic of conversation anymore. The efforts of Wittman and his peers produced a whole new type of gay. Say hello to the post-modern homo. The post-mo, if you will."

This article infuriated myself and also many members of the community including our playwright. That frustration gave birth to the framework of the play. An intergenerational conversation between a surviving member of the collective and a "post-mo". It was clear, somehow, to me that unlike what Mr. Aguirre-Livingston stated, the "post-mos" did in fact care about their history, known and unknown, found and lost, written and unwritten. In fact, I sensed that there was a dire thirst for this knowledge and information. And the rage in the community that followed the publishing of the article was a clear indicator of it.

Soon after this, Sky Gilbert invited Nick Green and lemonTree creations to read for the first time ever a draft of the play BODY POLITIC as part of his genderqueer series that Mr. Gilbert curates during the Pride Festivities at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. We really didn't know what to expect. A cast was assembled. Alisa Palmer had jumped on board as the director/dramaturg. Newsletters were sent out and suddenly we had a full house with various members of the community from both the younger and older generation. To our complete shock, the audience was extremely ecstatic after the reading and jumped to their feet giving the actors and our writer a standing ovation. There were tears and laughter and a general euphoria that this story MUST be staged.

During the Q&A we had a member of the audience ask if there were people of colour involved in the paper. Fantastic question. The simple answer to that question was "No. Not really." But of course, it's a bit more complicated than that and we were soon going to find out.

It became super clear to the three of us (myself, Cole and Jonathan), three visibly passable white men, that we had chosen a white writer to basically tell the story of a group of gay white men.

And furthermore by turning it into a play we needed to be conscious of the fact that we were indirectly heroizing this paper and this group of men. White men.

The question then is how do we as producers choose to tell this story while at the same time acknowledging that this is NOT the only story. That it wasn't just these men who worked very hard for our community. That there were so many people of colour and trans people who fought just as hard for the privileges we get to enjoy today. How come they weren't involved in the paper? Did someone purposefully choose to NOT include them? These questions floated around in our heads and lingered through telephone signals into the abyss as we met into the late hours of the night, trying to answer those questions and figure out how we were going to position ourselves.

I take my work as a theatre maker seriously and I am a strong believer that I have a responsibility to the community I am telling stories to. It is my job through lemonTree that the work I'm presenting entertains but also educates. And if we're going to tell the story of this paper, how do we do both of those things while staying true to history?

Our initial impetus for this theatrical work was to encourage a conversation about our queer history and that's exactly what we were doing. Body Politic had forced us to engage in this conversation. We were digging deeper into the past and doing the best we could to unravel stories that might have been missed.

The other question that was also raised is who has got the right to unravel this past and bring it forward? In very plain words, does our white writer and us as a group of white producers have the right to tell the stories of people of colour and trans people? Who can tell these stories?

We knew that there was something important in the story of this paper that needed to be dramatized. Our worry was that we were continuing to propagate the deletion of other storylines, of voices that were there and were loud and clear and are not somehow documented or "remembered".

What we found out is that the collective of The Body Politic was in fact comprised solely of mostly white men. There were also several strong women that contributed but everyone would always point out to Chris Bearchell. I've heard so many stories about this incredible woman and it does pain me that I will never have the chance to meet her in person. Her spirit though is captured inside the character of Deb in our play, whom Diane Flacks did an incredible job portraying.

We could have chosen several ways to go about producing this show. It could have been a verbatim show, it could have been cast in a "colour blind" fashion, it could have been written from the perspective of trans people commenting on the paper's story and achievements etc. The options are limitless.

All of those options temper with the reality and the truth. It was in fact a group of mostly white men. What's interesting to me, personally, is WHY? Why were they white? Did this in fact enable them to achieve what they did? If they were a group of Asian men would they have been able to do the same? What does this say about our community or our society in that era?

We chose to engage in the production of this story, which we did feel is really important for our community to hear, respecting as much of the truth in its history as possible, while consciously and meticulously trying to provide answers to what in fact the paper did NOT accomplish.

At one point Deb asks in the play:

"I mean, do we really need more white people in the collective?"

And later on, in one of my favourite moments in the play, Deb also responds sarcastically to another character calling her out for making the bathhouse raids about her and her "hidden vagina agenda". She says:

"Right. You're right. Who the fuck do I think I am? I should have remembered to make more space for white male voices. I'm so oppressive."

It was important to us that the production had ancillary events around it that allowed for further engagement with what was being shown on stage. We organized two different Q&As. The first one was a conversation between Richard Fung (Artist, Writer, Teacher) and the actor playing the lead in the show Aldrin Bundoc, an exciting young Filipino-Canadian actor, and facilitated by Mel Hague from Buddies. We were interested in the conversation around the Gay Asian Community as it was and it is. The second one was a conversation between Susan G Cole (NOW Magazine, ARTS Editor) and our actress Diane Flacks and moderated by Evalyn Parry. This conversation shed more light into the feminist movement during the era of Body Politic specifically seen from the lense of the publication which Susan worked for called, Broadside.

Lastly, the weekend after our opening, we were thrilled to support a SYMPOSIUM in which a number of academics as well as current local activists were invited to talk about The Body Politic from a more critical lense. Most of the collective members, had been to our opening the night before where the show had received a standing ovation, and here they were now openly and quietly listening to a myriad of critiques. There were several speakers but three that really stood out for me were Syrus Marcus Ware, Rinaldo Walcott and Lali Mohamed who spoke out directly about what they called the "omission" of history and the archives. They explained how this paper did not represent them as people of colour because it did not speak of the stories of their ancestors. Ware urged us all to try and "re-remember" history.

We all walked away more enriched from that symposium. History is important, in that it teaches us about the mistakes we as humans have made so that we can empower ourselves not to repeat them. I couldn't help but question myself: What is it that I as a theatre artist and producer am doing in regards to that? How am I addressing these mistakes?

So I close this brief artist statement with this thought:

I am curious about storytelling in queer theatre that enables us all not only to connect with our past but more importantly to critically engage with it. As such, it propels us to re-examine our present; forcing us to question our choices and , thus, continuing to help our art and our community grow stronger.

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