

Whispering to Each Other and Yelling at Everyone Else
Mel Hague - July 12, 2016
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From a Eurocentric view of the form, theatre and performance in Canada is in its infancy. There are a multitude of statements and papers written about this, and the ever-evolving idea of a Canadian Identity, how this Canadian identity manifests itself in our art, theatre, and performance. And so Queerness, Queer Identity, and queerness in performance, is no exception.

I find it difficult to consider the current state of Queer theatre because as a dramaturge I am constantly looking towards the future. I see the ideas that are running through my community, my social media, my friends and family - as seeds for what will be brought to bear on stages in the coming seasons. If I looked around me I would say that overarchingly Queer theatre is now more than ever seeking acceptance in the mainstream, seeking palatability through universality – seeking understanding through explanation.

When I began my work at Obsidian Theatre Company in 2009, one of the first things that I was told by Artistic Director Philip Akin was that there is no such thing as a “Black Community.” There are Black Communities, who come from different countries and contexts and histories and experiences, that all come together under the umbrella of a “Black Canadian Experience.” And this experience again, is as diverse as the multiplicity of individuals who share in it. In my view this is equally if not specifically true of the Queer community, and by extension of Queer theatre. We are held together by the tenuous bond of a shared otherness; but divided by the ways in which that otherness may manifest in ourselves, in our lives, and in the intersectional bridges which each human straddles in a journey of self and communal understanding.

As a dramaturge, I exist steeped in narratives – the stories Queer Artists tell themselves, the ones they share with those they perceive as part of their community, and the ones they share with those they perceive as outside of their community. In considering the concepts of Queerness, Theatre and “Now,” as a holistic idea, I return to the well-trod idiom of the immediacy of theatre and the relationship that can be built with an audience. I posit that we may be one of the first generations of Queer artists creating work that can reasonably expect will be attended by individuals who do not consider themselves part of the Queer community. As a result, what I often see is Queer Theatre artists (and often POC artists as well) looking to articulate their experiences in a way that is “universally” understandable to an imagined homogenous heterocentrist audience so as to not “alienate” them from that which is Queer about the work. This connects to so many movements within our community; seeking acceptance, homonormativity – however creates disconnection from the radical sensibilities of our forebears.

As I write these words – and admittedly this reflection is coming later than intended in my trajectory towards joining my fellow panelists at the conference – I am fresh off the heels of a highly divisive moments for the Toronto Queer Community with the protest made by Black Lives Matter Toronto and subsequent fallout, both online and off. If you are unfamiliar with this particular event I heartily encourage you to google this event which occurred at the Toronto Pride parade this year. This moment provided me with a moment

of clarity of purpose in my own work and in my own dramaturgical practice. I hold no illusions about the marginality of the work that I do. It is in these margins and spaces that are purposefully away from the constraints of mainstream entertainment that Queer theatre. I both seek to facilitate, and see a growing need from Queer, Indigenous, Trans and POC Artists to speak not to the hegemonic powers that be in a way that is expository of their experience, but to each other instead.