

Decolonizing Toronto Theatre: *Kamloopa* and *Where the Blood Mixes*

This summer, two plays—Kevin Loring's *Where the Blood Mixes* and Kim Senklip Harvey's *Kamloopa: An Indigenous Matriarch Story*—co-produced by Soulpepper Theatre and Native Earth Performing Arts, signal steps towards the decolonial transformation in Anglo-Canadian theatre in Toronto. However, the necessary decolonization and inclusion in mainstream Toronto theatre is only a reflection of the change urgently needed in Canada. In 2021, during the height of COVID-19, a global pandemic particularly deleterious to marginalized communities (Canada, Public Health Agency), thousands of Indigenous children's bodies were discovered in unmarked graves at former Residential Schools (Austen). Certain Canadian Indigenous communities were a part of the marginalized groups that were disproportionately hit during the pandemic—the ongoing social factors of food shortages, unclean water, and overcrowding made COVID restrictions more challenging to comply with (Canada, Public Health Agency) and exacerbated the impact of the pandemic. The compounded effect of the inequitable conditions within Indigenous communities and reservations and the literal unearthing of trauma from Residential Schools is a reminder of the important fight for decolonization and anti-racism in Canada. The emergence of Indigenous plays this summer, specifically *Kamloopa* and *Where the Blood Mixes*, demonstrate the necessary undergoing change and transformation in Toronto theatre.

The collaboration between Native Earth Performing Arts and Soulpepper signifies the change in not only Soulpepper's artistic directorship but also their more inclusive and decolonial ethos. Although Weyni Mengesha has been the Artistic Director at Soulpepper since 2018, due to COVID, this summer was Weyni's first season that she had programmed in full. Her decision to kickstart the summer season with a collaboration with Native Earth reveals a lot about the

positive and more inclusive reformations she is implementing at Soulpepper. The associate artistic director, Luke Reece, explained that "it's not often a company the size of Soulpepper does partnerships with smaller organizations," but "this is something that Weyni has been championing." Reece describes how vital working with Native Earth was and how the work the organization has done over the years cultivating these artists and stories is invaluable (Personal Interview).

Despite the necessity of building a more inclusive and decolonial theatre environment, the impact that COVID had on these plays created a conflict between complying to COVID restrictions and wanting to support these kinds of theatre productions. With mask mandates, limited capacity seating, and the apprehensive audiences, the turnout was not what it could have been under other circumstances. Some of the actors and actresses in both productions also experienced personal challenges due to COVID. For instance, during the earlier showings of *Where the Blood Mixes*, Valerie Planche, who played June, contracted COVID; Jani Lauzon, the director, temporarily stepped into the role. Similarly, at the request of the performers, for their wellbeing and safety, there was a reinstatement of the mask mandate during the performances of *Kamloopa*. Although both shows continued, the challenges the creative teams faced illustrates the unusual circumstances they endured. Nevertheless, despite the obstacles they overcame, audience members reacted positively to both shows, further showcasing the need of having these kinds of stories represented in mainstream theatre.

Even with the social obstacles the artists and creative teams faced in producing both shows, *Kamloopa* and *Where the Blood Mixes* both showcase the uniquely vulnerable yet powerful examples of wrestling with and healing from the reverberating impacts of residential schools, systemic racism, substance abuse, and intersectional oppression. Kevin Loring's *Where*

the Blood Mixes explores the "symptoms" and lingering effects of residential schools and the cultural genocide they imposed on Indigenous communities. He explains how a majority of the Indigenous plays he had seen were based solely on the trauma of residential schools but tended to shy away from the generational trauma they inflicted. Many Indigenous plays focus on the experience and rarely talk about the aftereffects. Nobody wants to talk about intergenerational trauma; "it's sensitive, it's painful, it brings up a lot of cultural things in our community" that nobody wants to talk about (Personal Interview). Jani Lauzon, the director of the Soulpepper and Native Earth rendition of *Where the Blood Mixes*, mentions how Loring's play is unique in that it deals with the "resilience and the strength of the characters, rather than trying to navigate the trauma and the circumstances that they live in" (Personal Interview). The focus on healing rather than the actual trauma is often overlooked and not talked about. As Loring explains in the "Journey Inside *Where the Blood Mixes*," "[t]his play is meant to expose the shadows below the surface of a community, and to celebrate its survivors" (140). His play was a way of coping and healing from the trauma he witnessed in his own community, Lytton First Nation, British Columbia. Loring describes the high suicide rates and substance abuse problems as "symptoms" of an invisible beast that is literally eating [his] community from inside out" (Personal Interview).

Similar to *Where the Blood Mixes*, Kim Senklip Harvey's play, *Kamloopa*, also focuses on the inter-generational trauma and the lingering impacts of institutionalized anti-Indigenous racism. However, Harvey's writing shows the simultaneous struggle between finding one's identity and internalized racism. The conflicting internal struggle is illustrated through the sisterly relationship between Mikaya and Kilawna and their road trip to Kamloopa. While Mikaya attempts to re-discover and explore her Indigenous roots, Kilawna displays a juxtaposing

ambivalence reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois' double-consciousness. These conflicting experiences showcase how difficult it can be to reconcile one's own identity in a colonial-settler-dominated society where one's marginalized identity has been and continues to be rejected. The road trip toward the Kamloopa Powwow symbolizes the struggle to navigate one's own identity while also showcasing the character development of each woman.

Along with their Indigeneity, the women in *Kamloopa* also face with the intersectional oppression of being both Indigenous and women. This becomes particularly relevant as the actual powwow—Kamloopa 2022—had initially introduced exclusive blood-quantum and gender barriers. Although the organizers at the Kamloopa Powwow did apologize and change their language, these restrictions illustrate the unique struggle Indigenous women face because of their compounded gender, sexuality, and race.

Beyond the narratives and performances, both plays explore creative approaches to theatre that are different from what one would experience in a typical Anglo-Canadian production. Aria Evans, the choreographer and movement director for *Kamloopa*, explains how they and Harvey incorporated dance into the performance of *Kamloopa*, “which is not something a Soulepper audience is used to seeing.” Evans meshed theatrical dramaturgy with movement dramaturgy to communicate the animal bodies, elder bodies, and dream sequences to the audience. Evans explains how their work “bleeds those two disciplines together in a way that is really getting to the root of like what is a decolonial piece of theatre.” It’s a form of performance “that doesn’t silo different artistic expressions into one place. Rather, it gives space for whatever mode of storytelling needs to come forward can come forward; it just needs to be in support of the storytelling...without a sense of hierarchy...because sometimes it’s the best way to get scenes across to an audience” (Personal Interview).

Similarly, Jani Lauzon explained how, while directing *Where the Blood Mixes*, she used a method of circular communication that presented an opportunity for both the actors and the production team to collaborate and develop a more cohesive relationship between different bodies of the play. Her process begins early on with "design jams," where she gatherings the designers to discuss concepts and themes. This process is a part of the circular communication method she uses to create a more unified creative team (Personal Interview). Similar to Evans, Lauzon also is frustrated with how "in the process of creating theatre," artists are "siloeed into departments," which reproduces the "basis of colonial thinking" that places people in squares or sections (Personal Interview). These rigid placements lead to disadvantages, inequity, and exclusivity. Lauzon's circular communication is a way of remedying the disjointedness that comes from siloeed departments; early on, she tries to "instill that the actors and designers (from marketing and administration to the production and wardrobe teams) are all part of the dramaturgical process—they're part of the storytelling, and they are just as important as the actors.

Along with the creative approaches, both plays also offered resources, support, and forms of healing to the people involved at the show, as well as guests at the matinee. Lauzon explained that during first day of each of her projects, she has an elder come in and bless the project; on the first day of *Where the Blood Mixes*, Pauline Shirt came in and did a smudge ceremony, and then the team had a talking circle. Shirt continued to come to the theatre to check in on the team, on a weekly basis. This consistent relationship with Shirt was possible because of the collaboration with Native Earth (Personal Interview). Similarly, *Kamloopa* also provided the artists working on the project with support services like a wellness table in the rehearsal hall. The artists built their own wellness table that displayed comforting items from food to massage therapy balls and

fidget toys. There was additional support where everyone at Soulpepper participated in a in a workshop series called “INDIGENizeUS” which was led by Leslie McCue and Lindy Kinoshameg. At the artist’s request, during the showings of *Kamloopa*, there was a reflection room for audience members who wanted to reflect or process any emotions or thoughts. In addition to these performance-specific resources, Soulpepper provides additional support for its staff and audience members (Personal Interview). Lauzon explains how Soulpepper has certain rehearsal times mandated in their bylaws—these mandates allow for a proper amount of preparation time, which is uncommon in many theatre companies (Personal Interview). Evans also discusses how Soulpepper’s relaxed performance options and shorter workweeks are also rare in the theatre industry. The shifting work structures that are being created and supported under Weyni's leadership are undoubtedly different from those that existed in Soulpepper's past (Personal Interview).

Despite how these performances are necessary and increasingly important, we must acknowledge that this is not new—Indigenous artists have been working on expanding and transforming theatre scenes for decades. Lauzon explains how Indigenous performers have been there "from the turn of the century right through silent film right through Hollywood, right through the vaudeville circuit, the Chicago Circuit film and television in the 1950s, playwrights were emerging" (Personal Interview). Without the historical foundation and effort laid down by past Indigenous artists, collaborative shows between theatre companies like Soulpepper and Native Earth would not be possible. Yet, despite the long fight for inclusion and decolonization, there is still a long way to go to expand these platforms to create more diverse and equitable platforms in Toronto's theatre industry. Nevertheless, the increasing shift these plays both fight for and demonstrate signals hope for emerging voices that have been silenced in the past.

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