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# CONTENTS

## 11.4

### EDITORIAL

- 8 **Biculturalism and Blackface**  
By Nikki Shaffeeullah

### ARTICLES

- 10 **Perform/Transform: An Interview with Tony Hall, Trinidadian Theatre Artist and Teacher**  
Jane Heather and Tony Hall relate Trinidadian Carnival to popular theatre, decolonization, and freedom.

IMAGES BY JENNIFER WILLIAMS SHAFFEEULLAH,  
TRISTAN D. LALLA, AND MARY HALL

- 18 **“Are You Scared?”: (Re)presenting the Disabled Body/Self and the Visual Works of jes sachse**  
Allison Leadley explores how Toronto artist jes sachse’s work challenges negative preconceptions surrounding the disabled subject.

IMAGE COURTESY OF JES SACHE

- 23 **Exposing Hegemony through Fiction: Rahul Varma on Bhopal**  
Despina Artenie interviews Rahul Varma about the nature of truth and fiction in political playwriting.

IMAGES BY PHIL CARPENTER AND JULIUS ADARNA

### DISPATCHES

- 28 **Theatrical Interventions**  
Mieko Ouchi on producing powerful theatre for young people through “co-investigation.”

IMAGE BY EPIC PHOTOGRAPHY INC.

- 30 **Prismatic 2014: Growing a Culturally Diverse Festival**  
Maggie Stewart on the highs and lows of the 2014 Prismatic Arts festival.

IMAGE BY KEVIN FRASER

### BOOK REVIEW

- 32 Anne Nothof reviews *Two-Spirited Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances*, edited by Jean O’Hara.

# Biculturalism and Blackface

BY NIKKI SHAFFEULLAH

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The year 2015 began with the English-speaking media coming together to call for an end to racism in theatre.

Well, to be precise, newspapers, critics, artists, and writers across the country turned their attention to Théâtre du Rideau Vert, Quebec's oldest professional theatre company. Voices across the country condemned Rideau Vert for their baseless use of blackface in their annual satirical year-in-review of news events, where in 2014 a white actor donned black makeup to play Montreal Canadiens player P. K. Subban.

White Quebec's history and ongoing reality of anti-black racism is pervasive, and there is indeed something distinct about mainstream Quebec's ignorance of blackface, demonstrated by the readiness to perform the dehumanizing racist act again and again. Theatre reviewers were unsurprised by Rideau Vert's performance: the *Montreal Gazette's* Pat Donnelly stated she "almost didn't go" because she expected it (CBC News Montreal), and Kelly Nestruck of *The Globe and Mail* remarked that blackface controversies in Quebec seem to happen as frequently as every year or two.

Black Quebecers, including many theatre artists, spoke up against Rideau Vert's performance. As Rachel Décoste put it, "The potency of blackface does not sting a nation unfamiliar with its own checkered past, including slavery, minstrel shows and legalized anti-black racism. But the afro-Québécois — Ils se souviennent. They remember."

They remember, and they worked to remind the rest of the province that the use of blackface on stage by a white performer is never an isolated act, but always functions as part of a long racist

history of mockery and exclusion. Mike Payette, assistant artistic director of Black Theatre Workshop, describes the discomfort of attending the show, noting that he and his colleague were "the only people of colour in the 400+ seat theatre," and adding: "The theatre did not intend on including us." Montreal actor Tristan D. Lalla expressed his frustration at the lack of social progress: "Each time someone questions whether or not Blackface is even offensive in the first place, I feel like I've stepped out of a DeLorean." Comedian Eddie King describes how the public discourse that follows a blackface incident in Quebec can be as upsetting as the incident itself, when offenders and their supporters trivialize the legitimate concerns of those hurt by racism (Dunlevy).

The francophone company showed no reflexivity about their choice: Rideau Vert's artistic director Denise Filiatrault first responded to the criticism with a besides-the-point defense about why it wouldn't have made sense to hire a black actor for the one sketch, and then weeks later announced she would avoid criticism in the future by never again featuring black personalities in their annual revue.

Across English Canada, people were outraged. The performance and Rideau Vert's remarks were discussed in every major news outlet from the *National Post* to the CBC to the *Toronto Star*. Others weighed in on blogs and social media. Many called for apologies, promises, and a once-and-for-all end to the racist practice of blackface.

While signs of mainstream social progress are heartening for even the most jaded anti-racist activist, I couldn't help maintain some suspicion of the collective outrage coming from

outside the black community and outside of Quebec. White English Canada's rage at the blackface incident seemed disproportionate—not disproportionate to the offense, for the act merits anger, in particular self-determined anger from the black Quebecer community—but disproportionate to the ways (white) English Canada addresses injustice elsewhere, particularly at home. There is a gleeful paternalism in the way that English Canada calls out the racism of French Canada. Perhaps it's born in still-extant competitive colonial mentalities, simple prejudice in the English Canadian psyche that imagines their French counterparts as backward and weak.

Or maybe the apparent anti-racist indignation is a delegitimization tactic, a manifestation of an ever-swelling Canadian neoliberalism that is impatient with Quebec's popular support for low university tuition and other relatively robust social programs. Austerity defender Stephen Harper is certainly selective when it comes to defining his own parameters of cultural tolerance and sensitivity: prior to the recent federal court ruling allowing women the choice to wear niqab in court, Harper declared in typical fear-mongering Islamophobic fashion that face veils are "rooted in a culture that is anti-women" and "not the way we do things here." But even Harper's xenophobia did not preclude him in 2013 from joining in the national wave of criticism of then-Premier Pauline Marois's proposed Quebec Charter of Values, saying, without irony, that "our job is social inclusion. Our job is making all groups who come to this country, whatever their background, whatever their race, whatever their ethnicity, whatever their religion, feel at home in this country and be Canadians" ("Harper on 'Quebec Values' Plan").

I suspect English Canada is able to chastise blackface in Quebec because, frankly, it's easy. Racism manifests differently in different (post-) colonial contexts, and in English Canada, blackface is a recognizable taboo. By far and large, we know that blackface is wrong. It is a clear, basic "rule." In English Canada, not doing blackface is as about as righteous an act of anti-racism as is not joining the Klu Klux Klan. In white Quebec, however, the relationship to blackness is different. One particularly disturbing example of white Quebec's history

of anti-blackness is the use of black oppression as a metaphor for English oppression of French Canada, an appropriation that both perpetuates and renders invisible the anti-black racism of Quebec. The phrase *White Niggers of America* was popularized in the title Pierre Vallières' book on the exploitation of French Canadian workers, and resurfaces routinely, such as in 2012 when the phrase inspired white student strikers to take to the streets in blackface—a racist tool employed for a progressive cause. Without question, understanding white Quebec's relationship to blackface requires distinct analysis. French Canadian racism is hypervisible when looked at through English-Canadian eyes, but white settler English Canada must not channel their rage at Quebec if it weakens their (our) ability to recognize racism as it exists at home.

Not that English Canada has a clean record on blackface—far from it. A few years before and many kilometres away from Théâtre du Rideau Vert's 2014 revue, I performed with a different ensemble in a popular annual comedy show in the downtown of an urban centre to hundreds of paying audience members. One sketch in this show featured a white actor in blackface; and the audience and artists met it with tacit acceptance. There were some whispers amongst the cast about it being a faux pas, an unnecessary choice—but no real noise. The director of that segment, a person of social privilege and professional clout, laughed away any attempt at criticism. The actor in question quietly distanced himself from and expressed discomfort with the choice, but still performed it and said nothing publicly. The incident essentially went unchallenged.

I challenge English Canada, my fellow theatre artists in particular, to be as vocal when analyzing racism in our own communities and in our own work. Let us hold higher standards with regard to equity and representation. Let's have real conversations about race and equity in theatre, beyond the pages of *alt.theatre* and beyond "diversity" panel discussions. Another reason it is easier for those outside of Quebec to criticize Théâtre du Rideau Vert is because it is—geographically, culturally, professionally, socially—far away. The polite, conflict-avoidant mainstream culture of English Canada stifles constructive dissent, a phenomenon magnified in the world of

working artists where opportunities are scarce and withholding grievances can be a strategy of job security. For many English Canadians outside of Quebec, the province functions somewhere between an abstract concept and a scapegoat for racial insecurities, a dumping ground for matters we are unable or unwilling to address in our own communities. Let's teach ourselves to understand the more subtle and insidious ways racism manifests in our own work.

Of course, we are not just a twosolitude "us" and "them" of "English Canada" and "French Canada." We are settlers and indigenous; we are white and non-white; we are anglophones, francophones, and allophones; we are immigrant and non-immigrant; we are many intersections of these. These complexities of identities are well known to us at *alt.theatre*, a culturally diverse English-language publication based in Quebec and with a national focus. Personally, as a non-white Canadian who happens to be anglophone only because of the patterns through which my ancestors were colonized, I cannot invest in any attempt to analyze racism in Canada through a bicultural French-English frame. When incidents like Théâtre Rideau Vert's blackface performance happen, and English Canada wants to respond, we need to move beyond the easiest methods of criticism and engage in anti-racist criticism that may also implicate ourselves and our own actions. We need to centre, and amplify, the voices of those most directly impacted (in this case, black Quebecers). We must listen to the voices at the margin and remember that marginalization happens in many places and in many ways—not just those most easily recognizable to us.

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