

2016

LMDA Conference Elliott Hayes Award, 2016

Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Sarah Stanley

Stephen Colella

Introduction: Stephen Colella

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are here tonight on the territory of the Multnomah and Clackamas Nations.

I always struggle when trying to figure out how to start a speech. Once I get the beginning, the rest tends to fall in place. Finding this beginning involved quite a lot of procrastination. After seeing me read my tenth or twelfth article about NHL free agency, my wife sarcastically suggested that I might try starting with “Webster’s Dictionary defines dramaturgy as...”. After I gave her a glare, she said if that didn’t work for me, I could try an inspirational quote. Oddly enough, that clicked for me. So, here goes.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

The closing lines of that Robert Frost poem talk about making the choice to walk down the easy road or the difficult one. It’s a well-known and fairly straightforward analogy. But it only provides two options. It also leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Do I have permission to walk down these roads? Who made them? Why did they put them here? Did the people who built the roads own the wood? Did they even have the right to build them? If not, what did damage did they do in their construction?

What if you find out that the roads were never meant to be there, but that you need to get to where they lead anyway? Can you find your way without recreating those same mistakes?

Tonight’s recipient faced this predicament. Rather than starting a new trail on her own, the recipient asked and empowered others to lead. Through respect, listening and never presuming to know the path, a new way forward was created.

So what was this moment that led to this decision?

Four years ago, the incoming Artistic Director of the National Arts Centre called the recipient and asked her, as part of her new position, to head an inquiry into First Nations plays in Canada. This was a challenging proposition for the recipient as she is not Indigenous. This was something she was keenly aware of before accepting the challenge and so the first decision was to approach an Indigenous theatre artist to co-curate this investigation. Yvette Nolan was this partner and she wrote a letter of support for the recipient for this award. I’ll come back to her words at the end.

With a partner in place, a two year structure was devised to accomplish the goals of this investigation: To impact broadly on programming choices being made not just at the National Arts Centre, but at theatres across the Canada, and also to create outcomes that would offer vital

and necessary steps towards bringing Indigenous approaches and stories closer to the centre of Canada's theatrical and, by extension, national identity.

You know, small manageable goals.

The Cycle, as it came to be called, was a three-part investigation whose components included The Summit, The Study and The Repast, which aimed to engage deeply with Indigenous Theatre and the Body of Work. The Cycle started in Banff with The Summit. For three days in April of 2014, leaders of Indigenous Theatre gathered and they were joined by institutional 'Listeners' from major arts organization across Canada at The Banff Centre. The two goals of the Summit were to engage in a dialogue about understanding and to translate the notion of a 'Canon' of Indigenous theatre in Canada into acknowledgment of a 'Body' of Indigenous Work. Listeners were invited to The Summit with the understanding that except for certain times and certain sessions, they would not speak but instead listen to the Indigenous artistic leaders talk amongst themselves. By the time the sessions where the Listeners were invited to participate in the conversation arrived, they had already clocked their own tendencies, and so were less likely to try and "solve" something for the assembly. This practice has now been used at other gatherings of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Additionally, The Summit took advantage of the knowledge held by the assembly and generated a list of all the Canadian Indigenous theatre pieces that they knew to exist. Titled the Indigenous Body of Work, it is a living list, which continues to be added to, and lives on the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance website

The next two phases, The Study and The Repast, traveled to Manitoulin Island, the home of Debajehmujig Storytellers, an Indigenous theatre company that was founded in 1984. In 2009, Debajehmujig opened its Creation Centre, which hosted The Study and the Repast. One year and ten days after The Summit, The Study began on Manitoulin Island. There was a challenge and a promise in gathering in a proudly situated and strongly resourced Indigenous Space. It immediately changed the focal length on viewing, understanding and witnessing Indigenous work from a non Indigenous perspective

The Study gathered Indigenous leaders, artists and students from across the land, while The Repast brought together over 100 additional professionals from the national theatre community to share in the findings at The Cycle's conclusion.

To the work with Indigenous Artists and students at Debajehmujig lent power to the proceedings, to share it with the rest of the country, those that were there and those that sat in via live stream was to underline the centrality of these stories at our nation's heart

The goal of The Study and The Repast was to tear away the story divide and to implicate all of Canada, settlers, new Canadians, and Indigenous peoples alike in a story that we all share. The outcomes of The Study and The Repast are still unfolding, but there is at least one we know. I'm going to save that for the end.

As I promised earlier though, let's come back to the words Yvette Nolan used to describe this project and her co-curator:

“She has recognised her power and her privilege, and has used it – in this time that she holds it – to make change. Like any dramaturg worth her salt, she has kept her eye on the goal.

This is the very best kind of dramaturgy, that guides us all towards where all have expressed a desire to go. It is a dramaturgy that keeps us yearning to the thing that exists, the statue in the marble, the quiddity of the thing, the thing that is meant to be.

One of our prophets and political leaders, Louis Riel, said – shortly before he was hanged for treason, “My people will sleep for a hundred years, and when they awake, it will be the artists who give them back their spirits”. This nation is shuffling towards reconciliation, and the artists are beginning to fulfil the prophecy, but we will need allies to open doors, hold them open, and have their toes trampled in the process.

She has been that ally. She has been visionary in that she has seen what is not there and worked to make it visible, make room for it. Along the way, she has worked to educate herself, to seek out and listen to the teachings. Then she holds all that knowledge and makes it available and visible to her colleagues in the National Arts Centre and the national theatre scene. She practices a radical inclusion, which is a hard, hard path to follow.

It is too early to know how this initiative will unfold, how many obstacles lay before us, but no matter what, we are transformed, those of us who were privy to The Summit and The Study, and the reverberations from that work will continue to resonate, affecting our communities, personal and professional, local, national and global, for years to come. This is a watershed. And with her vision and her determination and her humility has been a huge part of making this moment possible, at this moment in time.”

We may not now just how The Cycle will unfold, and what its full impact will be for the theatrical landscape in Canada, or the country as a whole. But we do know that right now, in 2016, thanks in large part to this work, we are one year from knowing who will be the first Artistic Director of the brand new Indigenous Theatre section at Canada’s National Arts Centre and that a few years from now we will be seeing the inaugural season of Indigenous Theatre unfold there. The National Arts Centre turns 50 in 2019 and it is finally ready to acknowledge First People’s stories as centrally important to the cultural condition of Canada.

For shepherding along this work with vision, humility and determination, I am proud to present the 2016 Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dramaturgy to Sarah Stanley.

Unfortunately, Sarah is unable to be with us tonight. Michael Wheeler will be accepting on her behalf.

- Stephen Colella, LMDA VP Programs

Acceptance: Sarah Stanley

Stephen, Thank-you for letting me read a version of the speech you just gave. And thank-you so much for your words. I am honoured. Truly.

It is hard not to be there with all of you. I was training for the conference by watching Portlandia. I have wanted to visit Portland for some time, and while my reasons for not being there are exciting, I am sad not to be there for this very special meet-up.

But

It is amazing imagining Michael and Alison and Joel being at the conference with you all. And these words being read aloud.

Please know that all the bad grammar in the speech is theirs.

I met all three of them through my work as Associate Artistic Director for English Theatre at Canada's National Arts Centre. Without my colleague, and art boss, Jillian Keiley, having asked me to join her at the NAC none of this would be happening.

She knows this. But it is worth saying. One of the central tenets of our artistic framework for English Theatre at the NAC, is acknowledgement. And so, I acknowledge Jill for asking me to join her and pushing me to excel, and to never succumb to administrative thinking in the space where artistic expression needs to be.

I acknowledge the SpiderWebShow team who I love inventing things with, and each of whom are so f'in brilliant and in particular Michael who created the whole SpiderWebShow adventure with me. But also Alison who amid many things... partnered with me on the PerformanceWiki map that was birthed at The Study on Manitoulin Island. And Joel for working with us on #CdnStudio...an idea that came - in large part - from a conversation I had with Inuit Artist Lakkuuluk Bathory about the real challenges of performance making in the north.

Connected though... as it all is...this award is not about any of us.

This award is really an acknowledgement of the work that lies ahead. Any of us who feel we have worked our fingers to the bone are lucky enough to know - with certainty - that we are just at the beginning of the journey. And so it is with this prize.

I wanted to win the Elliot Hayes award because I have consistently been inspired by the previous winners. To learn of the work that each of the previous winners has achieved, has spurred me on. I have been moved by the scope, the vision and the stick-to-it-iveness of so many dramaturgs before me, and hoped, that at some point in my career, I would be involved in a project that would be worthy of this award.

This is important to say because truly, there are few awards that I have sought or craved. This one though, I have.

To be acknowledged for doing work that I love, believe in, and am fully challenged to the centre of my citizen corps about...is a beautiful feeling.

To be acknowledged for work that could only have happened because of the trust of so many people for whom trust has been misplaced throughout the generations of “nation building” in Canada... is humbling

The First Nations, Inuit and Métis people of Canada were - and continue to be - silenced by a national imaginary called Canada.

And so it seems that our capacity - and by ‘our’ I mean Canada, our capacity to tell true stories about our fully nuanced selves has also been completely compromised.

The Cycle, has given us, many of us, an opportunity to realign ourselves to some deeper truths.

The findings and the process of our recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission has given us, many of us, an opportunity to understand that Canada was made strong through systemic acts of cultural genocide.

It has therefore given us, many of us, the opportunity to begin to tell a fuller shared story of inhabitants on land ringed by a border called Canada. Our Story.

The work of The Cycle happened alongside the work of a nation. It could not have had the impact it has had... were it not for the collaboration of several key people, and the good vibes of many, many more. Part of my pride in being recognized for this award is being able to share the amount of material that exists to speak to this ongoing work, the artists and the stories. I hope you will visit <http://nac-cna.ca/en/cycle/indigenous>

There you will find a report on The Summit co-authored by Yvette Nolan, Corey Payette and me and a culminating document called **Power Shift: The Story** co-authored by Corey Payette and me. But you will also see videos from several of the participating artists and an archived live stream of significant scope chronicling the public **Repast** that ended the *The Cycle* at Debajhemujig Theatre, on Manitoulin island in May 2015.

The key people that must be acknowledged are Yvette Nolan, one of my dearest friends and one of Canada’s most fearless theatre leaders, Cole Alvis and the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance, who partnered with us right from the outset, The Banff Centre for their engagement with The Summit, Joseph Osawabine, AD and Ron Berti AP of Debajhemujig Storytellers for their teaching, hosting and caring throughout The Study and The Repast. To all of English Theatre and New Media at Canada’s National Arts Centre, and in particular Corey Payette who joined the project as a kid with a lot to give, and ended the project as a leader, who taught me much.

So...anyway... I got to do a little bit of that work. And I am still doing it. Doing more of it. Since the spring I have another job at the NAC, that of interim facilitator for Indigenous Theatre. Until next June I am working with a bunch of people as we move towards the hiring of

the first artistic director for Indigenous Theatre. This person will be instated in June of 2017 and preparation will then begin - for realz - for the opening of the Indigenous Theatre at the NAC in the fall of 2019.

Peter Herrndorf, CEO of Canada's National Arts Centre has taken to introducing me as someone who has developed a leadership style of working from behind. I think this is true. It came as a direct result of The Cycle. Working as we do with leaders of all kinds, dramaturgs know a thing or two about negotiating the various needs of high flyers. This training has been monumental in the extraordinary learning curve required to reframe collaboration for historically constructed non-equal partnerships. I could go on at length about the hidden privilege in collaborative models. But instead, I will say, that as a settler in Canada I have a lot to answer for and a lot to learn and now I also have access to an extraordinary body of work, and a series of cultures and nations ready to explode onto our National Stage at the NAC and onto many nation stages across the northern half of Turtle Island.

Thank-you so much for this terrific honour.

- Sarah Stanley