

Transitioning the Theatre Industry

by Sunny Drake

With the astounding creativity of trans individuals and communities, why is there a dearth of trans content and a lack of trans artists working professionally in Canadian theatre?

Trans,¹ transgender, transsexual, two spirit, and genderqueer writing, performance, music, and art spill out of backroom bar stages, hum into open mics and college LGBTQ events, proliferate on Internet blogs, percolate in living rooms, and prance at backyard clothing swaps. These thriving cultures have theatrical and creative skills embedded in their core. The most marginalized trans communities, particularly trans women² of colour, demonstrate inspiring ensemble work navigating public and private violence, genius dramaturgy in deciphering a world with warped dramatic questions, and imaginative do-it-yourself tech-geek solutions to any number of problems. As with many trans people, I should be awarded retroactively a Dora Award for my spine-chilling performance as a sporty young blond woman. I was so convincing in that role throughout my entire teenage years that when I tried to drop the act and be myself, no one believed me, and I had to battle psychologists. Having come through that, I have since lived and worked as a theatre creator, experiencing first-hand the artistic vitality of trans folks.

With the astounding creativity of trans individuals and communities, why is there a dearth of trans content and a lack of trans artists working professionally in Canadian theatre? In this article I aim to answer this question. I examine the current state of trans theatre in Canada, outline key barriers to its flourishing, and provide suggestions for and discuss the benefits of creating a trans-positive theatre industry. In exploring these topics, it is essential to remember that there is a wide array of trans communities and individuals. We differ in class, racial backgrounds, disabilities and abilities, sexualities, genders, and many other experiences. As the author of this article, it is important for me to acknowledge my particular location within both trans and theatre communities. I am a white trans man, mostly able-bodied, with a mixed class background. I have access to more resources and face less discrimination than some of my sisters who are trans women of colour. I am an Australian-born independent theatre writer, actor, and producer, residing in Toronto for the past five years. In this article I will reference my own experiences as well as those of other trans artists I have interviewed.

What is the current state of trans theatre in Canada? The good news: we are seeing a shift in trans representation in Canada and internationally. With US celebrities like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Caitlyn Jenner, trans stories are gaining more mainstream visibility in books, news media, film, TV, and, occasionally, theatre. However, I notice that many of these stories are still being told *about* us by non-trans creators, rather than *by* us, which results in narrow trans representations. During several plenary discussions at the Writing Trans Genres conference in Winnipeg in 2014, a number of trans artists commented that many non-trans creators fixate voyeuristically on certain trans experiences, such as the physical transition. With this, there is often a focus on the “before-and-after” spectacle, details of our surgeries and hormone therapies, and the “reveal” moment when the audience discovers someone is trans. These representations oversimplify and can dehumanize our experiences. While hormones and surgeries



No Strings (Attached) by Sunny Drake.
Photo by Hillary Green, stillsbyhill.com.au



Photo of Aiyana Maracle.
Photo by Stan Williams

are important to many trans people, they are not the sum total of our experiences. At a community level, trans artists are creating nuanced work about a whole array of topics including family, relationships, racism, substance use, colonialism, immigration, and technology. I do not see these priorities filtering through to professional theatre.

In addition to the thin slice of trans content represented, there is also a narrow array of trans identities that get to shine in the spotlight. I have noticed that works by white trans men tend to be more widely toured than the works of our more marginalized sisters—trans women of colour. Of the handful of full-time practising artists that I can identify as trans, all but a few are white trans men. This is reflective of power dynamics beyond trans theatre, with white men dominating the theatre industry overall (Burton; MacArthur).

Beyond the narrow array of identities and content, the works of trans theatre artists themselves are shaped by a general dearth of trans content. As I am one of the few trans artists touring nationally, my work does not get to be experienced as one thread in a tapestry of conversations; it gets interpreted as the whole tapestry. This generates pressure to make theatre that represents every angle of every trans experience, since it is likely I am making one of the first trans theatre works in Canada ever on a particular topic. For instance, in 2011 I began creative development on *X*. With so little theatre exploring addiction from trans and queer perspec-

tives, I felt pressure to make my work a creative textbook. Succumbing to this pressure could have crushed my creative impulses and created diluted or didactic work. Indeed, often the richest and

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least didactic trans work is created with trans audiences in mind. As writer, performer, and video artist Morgan M. Page³ observes:

One of the most important changes in trans cultural work over the past five years has been that trans people are less and less focused on creating work with cis [non-trans] people in mind Trans people are making work that is actually for and in conversation with each other. Work whose primary goal isn't education, but is artistic expression.

This was a key topic of discussion at the Writing Trans Genres conference in Winnipeg, with trans artists encouraging each other to make work *for* trans communities instead of *about* trans communities.



Kai Cheng Thom on stage in front of a red curtain at café l'Artère.
Photo by Võ Thiên Việt

With this burgeoning but under-represented practice, what are some of the key barriers to trans theatre flourishing in Canada? A common sentiment among the trans creatives I interviewed is this: if we want trans work in any space, we have to not only create it but also produce it, present it, and promote it. In a personal interview, longtime Haudenosaunee theatre and visual artist Aiyyana Maracle mentioned she had written about this issue years ago, and it seems that not a lot has changed. The need for self-production is particularly restrictive for the more marginalized sections of the trans community, such as trans women of colour, who tend to have limited access to resources. As writer and performer Kai Cheng Thom⁴ notes, “I found that once I am actually on stage or published, my artistic output is received with relative open-mindedness and support; however, getting onto a stage or into a publication in the first place is another matter entirely.” Less access to resources means that creative developments and self-presentations are likely to be small-scale and one-off productions, reducing their potential to go on to greater opportunities.

Another key barrier is presenters pigeonholing work by trans artists as suitable only for fringe or LGBTQ audiences. I believe Canadian presenters, like many international presenters, are more conservative and risk-averse than their audiences. I have toured work with complex trans themes to forty-five destinations in Canada and overseas in the past four years; in my experience, a wide variety of audiences will engage with trans-

themed work given the opportunity. I have come to cherish the elderly ladies in the second row covering their mouths to stifle contagious giggles. They love that my show is the naughtiest thing they have seen in ages. I witness transformations in the body language of the husband dragged along by his wife, from one foot stretched into the aisle toward the exit to whole body leaning in toward the show, escape plan abandoned. Or the thank-you email from a mom for the way my show has given her trans daughter her father back, writing that her husband could not believe he could relate to “someone like you.” Interestingly, it is often the works I have created for trans audiences that are of greatest interest to non-trans audiences, most likely because they are juicier, deeper, and more complex. The theatres that have risked presenting an outside-the-box work with trans themes have gotten to journey *with* their audiences to experience engaging and challenging work.

In addition to barriers related to presenting trans work, trans actors and creatives often face systemic obstacles to getting cast in other people’s work, such as a lack of formal training. A number of trans artists expressed difficulties with theatre training programs, which, like most productions and, indeed, institutions around us, often reinforce rigid colonial ideas of gender that do not resonate with a lot of trans people’s experiences. Accepted gender expressions and embodiments are very narrow. Kai Cheng Thom, a theatre graduate, says:

I often felt as though I was not being chosen for parts in productions because I was forced to audition for “male” roles, which relied upon me being able to perform masculine stereotypes, a very complicated and painful experience for a trans woman. When I auditioned for or performed female roles, this was usually perceived as drag, which is considered humorous and not suitable for “serious” theatre.

Challenges like these in theatre school deter many trans artists from starting or finishing training.

Beyond struggles in theatre school, the few trans artists who manage to complete training are presented with a very limited array of work opportunities. Indeed, it can be challenging for anybody to sustain a life in theatre, let alone cope with the added mountain of challenges that come with being trans. Many trans people do not “pass” as non-trans women or men, or at least not as the type of women or men who are cast in roles like the tall, blond guy or the slender, small-boned woman. Many trans women have shoulders that are too broad. Many trans men are too short. We may not have the body parts that are imagined for the characters. Overrepresentation of roles for white and able-bodied people multiplies the impact for trans people of colour and those with disabilities. In addition, on the rare occasion that there is a trans character in a show, I have seen non-trans actors cast in the roles. This leaves trans actors with few opportunities onstage, which creates a deficit cycle in which trans actors are not getting the development or profile acquired by being cast, and, thus, fewer trans actors are actively working. It is necessary to remember, particularly in regard to trans women of colour, that this is an incredibly marginalized group of people. Many trans women of colour struggle to get hired in almost any job owing to the intense multi-layered discrimination levelled against them. This does not allow for the space and resources needed to sustain supplementary work to establish oneself as a theatre artist.

With multiple layers of barriers, trans artists are faced with a choice regarding how much to emphasize or de-emphasize our trans identities. Alvis Choi a.k.a. Alvis Parsley⁵ is a Toronto-based artist, performer, and writer who explains, “For me there’s the dilemma of not wanting my trans identity to either be neglected or highlighted in a way that doesn’t feel empowering. I feel like a killjoy who’s unhappy about people taking my trans identity either lightly or heavily.” Related to this, Kai Cheng Thom says, “One never knows when one is being judged solely on the basis of gender or the quality of one’s work. In this way, trans people are effectively shut out of theatre as an aesthetic practice, relegated to the realm of ‘political’ or comic theatre.” These common sentiments are indicative of challenges for trans theatre artists in navigating reactions to our work and deciding whether and how to centre or decentre trans experiences in our work.

What can we do to address these considerable barriers? First and foremost, I believe we need to support the development of trans artists and the presentation of works created by trans artists. This might include resourcing development and incubation programs and including trans artists as a priority group in funding categories. It also means meeting trans people in their own spaces and on their own terms. Given that a lot of trans work is happening outside of theatre venues, directors and casting agents would do well to check out performers and works in cabaret and



Alien in Residence created and performed by Alvis Parsley.
Photo by Kat Rizza, katrizza.com

do-it-yourself spaces and build relationships to be invited into living rooms and to backyard events. The producers of the critically acclaimed film *Tangerine* met their two transgender stars—Mya Taylor and Kitana Kiki Rodriguez—at an LGBT Centre. Neither had any major acting experience prior to the film and following their outstanding performances, the producers have launched an Academy Award campaign for both of them (“*Tangerine*”). Some good Canadian starting places are Buddies in Bad Times Theatre’s young and emerging artist programs, Eventual Ashes’ Arise program, Central Toronto Youth Services’ Transcend program, the Cabaret Company’s Kitchen Party Nervous Breakdown, Montreal’s GENDER B(L)ENDER, and various pride-affiliated events, as well as asking local trans services for suggestions.

Beyond supporting trans artists themselves, should other artists create trans characters in their work? My opinion at this stage is probably not, unless there is substantial trans involvement. I find that very few non-trans people have a deep knowledge of trans communities and movements; most simply know a few individual trans people. When writers create *non-trans* characters, they add to a canon of theatre works with thousands of other non-trans characters. Contrast this to creating a trans character, which may literally be one among only a few handfuls of trans characters ever represented in Canadian theatre. Thus, each and every new trans character has the potential to drastically shape audiences’ understandings of trans realities. Even if well intentioned, without a deep understanding of trans movements, non-trans creators can reinforce offensive, hurtful, or boring stereotypes. Most trans people I know have at least a few stories of being annoyed, upset, or even traumatized by trans characters created by non-trans people. For example, the stereotype of trans people feeling as though they were “born in the wrong body” has been overemphasized in the mainstream media. While some trans people do relate to that experience, many do not, and yet it has inaccurately become synonymous with trans experiences. To avoid this and other problematic stereotypes, I suggest paying and appropriately crediting trans people to create or at least co-create trans characters. Engaging

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trans people who are in touch with trans movements is essential—simply being trans does not automatically mean that we will be able to create characters responsive to larger contexts.

Finally, what would the theatre industry and audiences gain by becoming trans-positive, with meaningful support for and programming of work by trans artists? We would gain writers, directors, actors, and other theatre professionals who sit at the intersection of vital and important life experiences and who could create nuanced and exceptional works. Trans women of colour's experiences facing racism, and the particular brand of sexism doled out to trans women, as well as the high rates of stranger and intimate partner violence and assault, homelessness, and poverty all have the potential to inspire distinct, outstanding, and important work that can touch audiences and leverage social change. We would have the opportunity to invigorate classic and contemporary works with more dynamic interpretations by hiring trans actors to play roles typically perceived as non-trans. Trans people are geniuses at questioning societal norms, and this same questioning process can be applied to theatrical processes and content, resulting in fresh and vibrant work. Canadian theatre would be more interesting with the significant contributions of trans voices because, frankly, trans movements and trans communities are fabulous.

Notes

- 1 Different individuals and communities feel more or less affection for and ownership of various terms. For succinctness, I am using the umbrella term *trans* to include people who do not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.

- 2 A trans woman is someone who was labeled male at birth but experiences herself as a woman. She may or may not have surgery or take hormones.
- 3 See Morgan M. Page's website at <http://odofemi.com>.
- 4 See Kai Cheng Thom's website at <http://ladysintrayda.wordpress.com>.
- 5 See Alvis Choi's website at <http://alvischoi.wordpress.com>.

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About the Author

Sunny Drake is an Australian-born writer, actor, and independent producer. Now based in Toronto, he's toured his award-winning plays extensively in Australia, the US, Europe, and Canada. He is also the author of a popular blog that weaves trans and queer politics with personal story (see sunnydrake.com).