

**CREATING MORE DIVERSITY IN CANADIAN
THEATRE: FROM THE ACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Lethbridge, 2022

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

DRAMATIC ARTS

Faculty of Fine Arts
University of Lethbridge
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

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Date of thesis defence: July 4, 2024.

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ABSTRACT

Actors in Southern Alberta, particularly in Lethbridge and Calgary, currently want more diversity and inclusion in theatre. There is an absence of research that supports the actor's perspective, with respects to diversity and inclusion in theatre in Southern Alberta. This thesis explores issues of the lack of representation, opportunities, and tokenistic casting practices that ultimately affect actors in Canadian theatre, and more specifically, Southern Alberta. This thesis contains a comprehensive literature review of Canadian theatre, interviews with four racially diverse, professional actors who live and work in Southern Alberta, and a detailed case study of a ground-breaking, Indigenous-led theatre production at the University of Lethbridge, *Yisstsiiyi*. *Yisstsiiyi* was a devised creation, staged in the University of Lethbridge's main theatre in the fall of 2023. The collaboration between Calgary's Indigenous theatre company, Making Treaty Seven, and the University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Fine Arts (Department of Drama), researched in this thesis, demonstrates that measures towards a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse landscape in Canadian theatre is achievable, but there is still a lot of progress to be made in order to de-colonize antiquated theatre practices.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Work described in this thesis received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (REB), under the project name: “De-colonizing and Diversifying: Thoughts on Theatre,” under protocol no. PRO00129954, on or around June 20, 2023, and was conducted according to standards laid out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

USE OF GENERATIVE AI

I note that I utilized an intuitive text word generator website, as a thesaurus tool for word recommendations, throughout a portion of this thesis. The website that I used is: <https://deepai.org/chat/text-generator>. I chose this specific word generating website because of its intuitive function to assist me, the writer, by providing me with words that fit with the thematic or conceptual context of any given sentence within this body of work. This tool was utilized in assisting me with my formulation of words in sentences, varied throughout, and not in reference to any authors which have been cited via in text and works cited notations. I acknowledge the work of the authors, cited within this thesis, and in the Works Cited section.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge that I currently live on, learn from, love, and respect this land. This land in Lethbridge, Alberta is a part of Treaty 7 territory. I am grateful to be a part of this land, and of this life, as an everlasting soul having a temporary, human experience. Furthermore, I recognize that we *all* share this land, and that no human is the natural creator nor owner of such.

My heartfelt thanks go out to my Supervisor, Dr. Shelley Scott, who also facilitated the making of *Yisstsiiyi* at the University of Lethbridge. Although I do speak of my experiences with *Yisstsiiyi* in this thesis, Dr. Scott is recognized as one of the countless contributors towards Indigenization at the University of Lethbridge, and our community as a whole. I recognize all of her continued efforts towards Indigenization and EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion), and her profound impact on the Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Drama, and the University of Lethbridge as a whole. I further recognize efforts made by students, faculty and staff, and anyone who strives towards practices of sharing, learning about, and celebrating Indigenous culture at the University of Lethbridge. This includes the Faculty of Fine Arts, and the Department of Drama.

As I reflect on my experience of researching and writing this thesis, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of the University of Lethbridge's Indigenization efforts, which have been a catalyst for meaningful change and growth. I am thankful for the progress made thus far, particularly in initiatives such as Indigenization, equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts led by individuals and departments across the university. These efforts have had a great impact on our city, and on our performing arts community. I acknowledge the significant strides taken to create a more inclusive and equitable environment. Some of these initiatives include the Waking Death Arts & Culture Event Series, a community symposium in Lethbridge, AB in the fall of 2023, which brought together Indigenous artists and knowledge keepers, and

people from all walks of life. I was delighted to assist the University of Lethbridge, and more specifically, Mia van Leeuwen, who initiated the Waking Death series. Mia is also one of the supervisory committee members who supported me in the process of gathering research, writing, and editing this thesis. Although I do not write about my experiences with the Waking Death symposium in this thesis, I do acknowledge that it was a powerful initiative, on behalf of the University of Lethbridge and the Faculty of Fine Arts, towards Indigenization, cultural connections, and fostering community relationships. Mia has created several opportunities for racialized actors to play diverse and dynamic characters, under her tutelage as a director, throughout her tenure as Associate Professor at the University of Lethbridge.

I am also thankful for Dr. Heather Ladd. I appreciate her knowledge and expertise, professional candour, and her unwavering support as one of my devoted supervisory committee members. Dr. Ladd is currently an English Lecturer at the University of Galway in Galway, Ireland. During her tenure at the University of Lethbridge as a Professor in the Department of English, Heather was an advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion, and she continues to do research on the subject of inclusion, with a particular focus on people with disabilities.

I also acknowledge Dr. Christopher Grignard, who served as my external reviewer. Dr. Grignard is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Languages, and Cultures at Mount Royal University in Calgary, AB. His primary teaching and research areas are in Indigenous literatures. Dr. Grignard also holds a particular interest in Indigenous theatre studies. I am grateful for his time and contributions to this thesis.

I humbly acknowledge *all* Indigenous, Métis and Blackfoot Elders from Southern Alberta, such as Amethyst First Rider, Dr. Leroy Little Bear, Joyce Healy, Shirlee Crow Shoe, and Harley Bastien, just to name a few. Their contributions to the University of Lethbridge, the Faculty of

Fine Arts, and to the production of *Yisstsiiyi* (which I speak about in Chapter Seven), have been invaluable. Thank you to the Southern Alberta Blackfoot community for the beautiful and treasured name of *Piiksinaasin*, which means “Manifesting Beauty.” *Piiksinaasin* is a new, Indigenous designation for the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge, made in 2024. The University of Lethbridge’s Blackfoot name is *Iniskim*, which means “Sacred Buffalo Stone.” I also acknowledge *all* of the contributors from Calgary’s Making Treaty 7. The list of people working towards a more promising future at the University of Lethbridge, the city of Lethbridge, and our community in general (inclusive of the various reservations in Southern Alberta), is abundant. While there is still room for growth, it is essential to recognize and build upon these existing efforts to create a more authentically inclusive community.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge and thank all of the *actors* who contributed to this research and thesis. They are who I speak about and for, and I hope I did it with respect. Without their voices and honest perspectives, this work would not have been possible. And of course, that also applies to my world: my family.

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CHAPTER ONE:

1.1 OVERVIEW

Actors in Southern Alberta currently want more diversity and inclusion in theatre. Specifically, actors want more diversity in character roles made available to them. Furthermore, actors want more creative opportunities in theatre, inclusive of creating character roles which are representative of who they are as people, which can also include but is not limited to actors of a visible race or actors from the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Although I acknowledge that the terms equity, diversity, and inclusion (“EDI”) in theatre should also include actors with disabilities, I will not be discussing that topic in this thesis, due to the limited scope of this research.

Actors are the people who play characters or indicate representations of various things, such as animals or objects, in a play or performance. Broadly defined, an actor’s main job is to tell a story, and how that story is told can be structured in a variety of ways. Traditionally, a theatre actor is hired (usually by a production company), to portray a character in a play, as per the directors’ or playwrights’ vision of how the story is told on stage. Most casting processes start with the words written by a playwright. How that playwright thinks about character inevitably shapes how bodies (actors) appear onstage. A casting director is tasked with deciding which actors get the opportunity to inhabit the bodies of the characters on stage, usually by an audition process. Actors are selected and hired, usually based upon their showcased assets of employability at an audition (Núñez, et al. pp. 7-8).

However, an actor can work in collaboration with other actors, and become the playwrights themselves. This process is known as *collective creation*. The term collective creation is also commonly known and referred to as devised theatre. These terms will be used interchangeably from here on. For Canadian directors and artists, the collective creation process is deemed as an alternative method of creating and staging plays, because it differs from the traditional norm. One of the fundamental differences between an individual carrying the vision of the play, versus a collective creation process, is the concept of private versus public. In a collective creation process, the collective (usually a group of performers) synthesizes the story into a public vision (Filewod 2). As an actor, I personally interpret these juxtaposed processes as “I perform the play” versus “I help create the play.” By comparison, in a collective creative process, an actor has more agency to define the parameters of storytelling (Koller 48). I support this theory and will attest to this through documentation of a current cross-collaborative creation process, by artists from Calgary and Lethbridge, later in this thesis.

Storytelling can be done in a variety of ways through voice, movement, and action. There is a physical, intellectual, and intuitive process involved in acting, which requires the use of an actor’s full consciousness and connection to their identity (Cole 642). The acknowledgement made on behalf of the audience’s interpretation of an actor’s identity, through the lens of social representation in character, can be attributed to the actor’s presence and desire on stage (Counsell 145). Acting in a play provides an opportunity for an actor to inhabit the life of a character on stage. The world in which the play is set can, at times, act as a window into aspects of society. The interpolation between the world of the characters and the audience can allow for a clearer picture of how society is functioning. Additionally, acting introduces audiences to cultural representations and experiences, each of which personalize the lives of the actor on stage. This

personalization ultimately impacts audiences, as we connect to characters in a story, in order to understand their lived experiences in a community better (Liechty). So, are actors in Southern Alberta playing characters in stories that represent their communities? My research indicates not as much as they desire to. I proffer that there is a lack of roles in theatre available to actors who represent racialized communities, particularly in Lethbridge and Calgary. The Indigenous demographic is of particular interest to me, in terms of further research into these matters. I will explain why shortly.

I focus on Lethbridge and Calgary because I have lived and worked as a performer, in both cities, for over four decades. Theatre is continuously developing, as is the diversity in population in these two cities, especially Calgary. According to census data for Lethbridge from 2021, the majority of people residing in the city were of visibly White ethnicity (see table 1, below)¹. In accordance with census data for the city of Calgary in 2021, the majority of visibly White people residing within Calgary is significantly less than Lethbridge (see table 2, below)². While I recognize that these two tables are not inclusive of all ethnicities in Lethbridge and Calgary, they do provide statistical insight³ into the demographics highlighted within this thesis.

Table 1

Percentages of select ethnic populations in Lethbridge, AB

White	Black	Chinese	Indigenous
88.8	3.2	1.5	3.6

¹ Approximate representation, based upon numerical values provided by Statistics Canada for Lethbridge, AB

² Approximate representations, based upon numerical values provided by Statistics Canada for Calgary, AB

³ Based upon the previous calendar year, to which the census data is collected and processed (Statistics Canada).

Table 2

Percentages of select ethnic populations in Calgary, AB

White	Black	Chinese	Indigenou s
54.0	9.2	1.1	1.9

Adapted from: Statistics Canada, 2021 (Government of Canada).

How theatre is made should include attention to race, ethnicity, gender identity, and social identity (Zarrilli 3). For example, Lethbridge is home to Alberta’s largest reservation, the Blood reserve, held by the Kainai Nation. There may be people from the Blood reserve who dream of becoming a theatre actor. What prevents them from achieving this dream might be any number of things, but the lack of appropriate representation of their culture in theatre may be a contributing factor. In an interview I conducted with a (non-binary) Blackfoot actor, they speak about their experiences with the lack of diverse roles available to First Nations actors who live on reservations located near Lethbridge.

Diversity, as a whole, is the practice of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds. Inclusion is the practice of having equal opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as members of minority groups (“The Home of Language Data”). Diversity and inclusion is a living, ongoing conversation in theatre, all over the world. I will use these terms synonymously from here on.

Theatre can refer to a wide variety of components to which a story or a performance can be staged. Although *a* theatre is a physical space, for the contexts of my research, I define theatre as performance, inclusive of several elements. These elements include language (both verbal and non-verbal), dialogue, literature, genre, lighting, sound, music, costuming, props, art, culture, and

actors (Fortier 3).

I am interested in the theatrical element of acting, particularly concerning fair and equitable representation in theatre. To serve as an example of defining fair and equitable representation in Canadian theatre, Charlie Walls-Andrews writes about representation and inclusivity in the performing arts in a journal article called “The State of Diversity Among Leadership Roles Within Canada’s Largest Arts and Cultural Institutions.” Walls-Andrews states that providing fair opportunities for all actors, regardless of their gender identification, cultural background, ethnicity, or sexual orientation is crucial in Canadian theatre (31). I agree with Walls-Andrews, and I further attest that diversity in Canadian theatre is lacking.

In an online news article about the ability for actors to make a sustainable and *reasonable* living, Michael Simkins articulates that it is imperative that actors have the chance to showcase their talents and abilities on stage, allowing for different perspectives and lived experiences to be shared with audiences. Add to that, actors face financial implications if they do not have enough sustainable work (Simkins). This is an issue for actors, because they need to make money in order to obtain the basic necessities of life, such as food.

Finally, on a personal note, I chose to research diversity in theatre, because although I am mostly of British and Irish ancestry, I am also part Cree. I am proud of my Indigenous bloodline and have recently become a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. My two daughters are also half Latina. What’s more, I have been a performer since the age of five. I attest to the fact that this research project is a personal journey of identity for me, as a performer and an individual.

For over thirty years, I have been an advocate for the performing arts in Lethbridge and Calgary. As a Métis performer, I am asking why there are limited roles available for actors of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I do not make any claims whatsoever that any persons or entities be held accountable for the lack of diversity in theatre. I am, however, attempting to showcase through a series of interviews with a wide range of diverse actors, that a focus on diverse casting and narrative choices promotes a more accurate representation of society on stage. This corrective representation also enriches the theatrical experience for audiences and brings exciting new dimensions to storytelling. Furthermore, I suggest that more research into the subject might prove to be useful. This thesis examines why there should be more diversity in theatre in Southern Alberta, according to actors.

1.2 RESEARCH METHODS

My research method is mainly qualitative. In the discovery process of researching diversity in theatre in Southern Alberta, I wanted to get a record of accounts of experiences from the perspective of the actors. I selected four candidates of varying gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. I identify them in this thesis, respectively, as ‘Actor 1,’ ‘Actor 2,’ ‘Actor 3,’ and ‘Actor 4.’

Actor 1 is a White, late-forties, heterosexual, female professional actor. Actor 2 is an Asian, mid-fifties, heterosexual, male professional actor. Actor 3 is an Indigenous professional actor, late twenties, who identifies as non-binary. Actor 4 is a Black, mid-thirties, homosexual, professional male actor. I list each actor’s additional qualifiers to highlight each of them as individuals, and to humanize them beyond their titles as actors. The variations between the actors that I chose to interview made sense to me as a researcher, given that this thesis is about diversification.

Once I reviewed and confirmed the objectives of my research with each of these four actors, I interviewed each individually, via Zoom, in the late spring/early summer of 2023. Some of the questions that I asked each candidate included: What are your opinions on diversity in theatre, as a whole, in Southern Alberta? What are your thoughts on how stories are brought to life on the stage by an actor? What are your thoughts on creating stories, by being a contributor in a collective and collaborative setting, to produce for live audiences in Southern Alberta? How do you feel, as a creative contributor to the performing arts in the Southern Alberta region, about the stories that have historically been produced in theatre?

In addition to the interviews, I have sourced information from books, Encyclopedias, peer-reviewed articles, scholarly journals, academic papers (Master's theses and Ph.D. dissertations), online interviews, news articles, websites, and podcasts. My aim is to flesh out and identify areas in which further conversations regarding diversity in theatre can be brought to the forefront, especially as they pertain to the voices of actors who live and work in theatre in Southern Alberta.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

I have formatted this portion into three distinct thematic categories, which came across most often in literature. They are as follows: Opportunities available to theatre actors from marginalized or racialized communities; representation on stage by actors of visible minority groups; and actors' experiences of tokenism/typecasting in theatre. Each area of research is labeled below as individual points of discovery.

1.3.1 Opportunities

In this section, I examine opportunities available for Southern Alberta actors to play character roles in theatre. It is pertinent to highlight this topic, as it is the starting point of conversation with respect to diversity in theatre. Without focusing on opportunities for working actors of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the following discussions of inclusive

representation on stage, and the effects of such, are moot points. To wit, if there are little to no acting opportunities available, then representation is inherently lacking.

On a broader scale, Canadian actors are currently advocating for a holistic approach in casting, in order to change the current inequities in the performing arts. These actors want all artists and affiliated organizations to put forth a concerted effort, in order to address issues related to providing opportunities in the performing arts sector to extend to all artists, not just White artists. In particular, there is a push for the fair and equitable hiring of Indigenous actors, who say the time is now, and they want to hold all performing arts organizations and artists accountable (Wong). In short, multiculturalism in theatre is important, because it allows for the opportunity for all actors to be represented and employed equally.

I located a very valuable on-line resource that lays out the landscape of multiculturalism in theatre in Canada. This article, located in the Canadian Encyclopedia, discusses the desire of immigrant communities to preserve culture in theatre. As a result of incorporating more diverse casting practices and providing opportunities for actors to represent people of their cultural backgrounds on stage, community ties can be reinforced through live theatre. This article is relevant to my research, because it defines what multiculturalism is, and provides a brief history of the integration of Black, Indigenous, and Asian theatre into Canadian history. For example, Indigenous theatre became topical in conversation in the late 1960s, with works such as George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967), Herschel Hardin's *Esker Mike and His Wife* (1969) and Len Peterson's *Almighty Voice* (1970). It is important to note that none of these playwrights are⁴ Indigenous, and while the subject matter of their plays centre around Indigenous characters, casting of Indigenous actors are not always substantiated. However, it wasn't until the mid-1970s,

⁴ Ryga and Peterson are deceased. Hardin is alive (“List of Canadian Playwrights”).

that Canadian Indigenous theatre gained serious traction. The staging of Indigenous productions, written by Indigenous playwrights, featuring Indigenous actors became increasingly popular amongst theatre companies. This was especially the case in Toronto, where the first ‘Indigenous Theatre Celebration’ was held in 1980. This celebration provided opportunities for Indigenous artists from all over the world, to network and recognize each other’s contributions to the performing arts. In 1982, Native Earth Performing Arts company was established in Toronto, under the artistic direction of playwright Tomson Highway (Berger et al.). I will utilize this resource to connect with testimonies provided by the four actors I interviewed, as they all spoke about the importance of multiculturalism in Canadian theatre at great length.

Alas, one of my main objectives is to bring these issues to light, closer to home. As I was born, raised, and have performed in Calgary, I deem it fitting to examine the place of my birth first. Calgary is a much larger city than Lethbridge, and so has a plethora of theatre companies, associations, and venues, by comparison. Vanessa Porteous, a former Artistic Director at Calgary based Alberta Theatre Projects (also known as ‘ATP’), states that “no director can ever hire enough locals to satisfy the locals” (Porteous qtd. in Van Belle). During her tenure (2009 – 2017) with ATP, her mandate was to provide as many opportunities as possible for local artists. ATP has been committed to increasing diversity for several years. Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) has been a key component in hiring, which resulted in ATP employing a diverse team of management and artists. However, they recognize that there is much more to do in order to reflect the diverse population of Calgary (Saini).

In 2017, Calgary Arts Development undertook an EDI survey of Calgary’s arts sector, as represented by over 160 non-profit arts organizations. The purpose of the survey was to provide detailed data regarding a demographic profile of Calgary’s arts sector, and to understand how

Calgary arts organizations promote equitable and diverse workplaces. Some of their key findings are as follows:

The arts sector is less ethnically diverse than the population of Calgary. Representation of visible minorities (15%) in the sector is less than half the representation of visible minorities in Calgary (36%). Indigenous peoples show extremely low rates of representation in the arts sector, but the percentage is in line with the proportion of individuals who identify as either First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) as the general Calgary population (Calgary Arts Development).

The interpretation of the combined data suggests that opportunities available to actors of visible minorities are not yet aligned with the representation of such on stage, which is further investigated in the next section, ‘Representation.’

Such is the case with locally owned and operated queer theatre company, Theatre Outré, co-founded by Jay Whitehead in 2012. One of Theatre Outré’s main mandates is to support the 2SLGBTQI+ theatre community, by creating a safe space for all actors to explore their creativity through performance (Theatre Outré). This mandate is available on Theatre Outré’s website.

In terms of opportunities provided by Theatre Outré, a production company which inhabits fair and equitable representation on stage in Lethbridge, newly appointed Artistic Director for Theatre Outré, Brett Dahl comments: “He [Whitehead] gave me an opportunity at a time when queer work, especially in Alberta, was not as popular and queer artists weren’t seen as often in theatres and on stages, so he gave me a huge platform and voice for me to gain confidence in myself as a performer, to kind of hone my artistic voice and experiment, you know, [with] new forms” (Dahl qtd. in Goulet). It is important to note that diverse representation on stage does not always come in the form of visible race, cultural differentiation, or self-identification. Audiences

can only interpret what they see from the actors on stage. An audience member may not know, for example, that an actor may identify as non-binary off stage, unless it is public knowledge or addressed in a production program.

To conclude, Southern Alberta actors are seeking a sense of identity and belonging, on stage and in their communities. And though an ample amount of literature on the topic of diversity in theatre exists, an increase on the focus on the agency of the actor to decide what roles they *want* to play, versus the roles *available* to them in Southern Alberta may be of benefit. This in turn leads to a discussion of fair, adequate, and equitable representation in Canadian theatre.

1.3.2 Representation

To serve as an example of defining fair and equitable representation in Canadian theatre, the following is an excerpt from the Canadian Theatre Agreement (CTA), on behalf of the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (CAEA):

“Acknowledging Systemic Oppression and Exclusion”

PACT⁵ and Equity⁶ acknowledge that Canadian theatre, and the Canadian Theatre Agreement, evolved from a patriarchal, Eurocentric tradition that has contributed to widespread discrimination and exclusion of a range of people and practices. PACT and Equity are committed to redressing systemic exclusion in our shared theatre ecology, and to expanding engagement opportunities for Artists who identify with historically underrepresented groups, so that the practice of theatre honours and reflects the wide diversity of performance, processes, bodies, and identities in our society. It is additionally

⁵ PACT is the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (Canadian Theatre Agreement).

⁶ Equity refers to a governing collective agreement, also known as the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (Canadian Actor's Equity Association).

acknowledged that theatre in Canada is practiced on the traditional lands of First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation, and that settler artists and institutions have benefitted from colonial structures and systemic racism to the detriment and exclusion of Indigenous artists and art practices. PACT and Equity further commit to building respectful relationships with Indigenous communities through listening, learning, collaboration, and the meaningful sharing of resources (CTA).

In accordance with the term “representation,” to address something as representational in theatre is to merely state what is obvious (Dilworth 197). In combination, both sources serve to define fair representation, with the intentions of highlighting important contributions to current literature on this contention.

Fair and equitable representation for racialized or disenfranchised actors in Canadian theatre is an important topic to spotlight because theatre is said to be still “predominantly represented by White people,” according to theatre performers (Burman). For instance, I located a video posted to social media in 2020. The video, *Black Like Me*, features a panel of eleven Black actors, who discuss the challenges and complexities they have faced at the Stratford Festival.

The Stratford Festival is an annual live theatre festival event, founded in 1952, which showcases a series of theatrical productions from April to October, in Stratford, Ontario. The panelists collectively speak about experiences of individualized racism at the festival, in conjunction with the opportunities provided by Stratford to better represent the Black community on stage. One of the actors, David Collins, indicates that Black, Indigenous, and Asian actors are “still struggling,” in terms of fair and equitable representation on stage, and in theatre in general (“Black Like Me, Past, Present and Future: Behind the Stratford Festival Curtain”). The interview exposes real challenges that Black actors face with vulnerable testimonies. I aim to connect these

actors' lived experiences with those voiced by another Black actor, via an interview conducted by myself, in conjunction with my research.

With regard to public complaints made by actors about the lack of fair and equitable representation in theatre, some conversations, like the ones held by the *Black Like Me* panelists, expose questionable employment practices. For instance, some Canadian theatre companies incorporate a common practice known as “colour-blind casting” as a part of their hiring mandates. Colour-blind casting is a practice in which directors and casting agents do not take race or ethnicity into account (Cummings). According to Martha Henry, an American Canadian film and stage actress, she states that the phrase “colour-blind casting” was a term that was coined in theatre in the late 1980s. Although the intent is positive, it refers to the principle of casting actors for their ability to play a character, rather than hiring an actor based upon the colour of their skin (Henry). I will speak on Henry's thoughts regarding the issues of colour-blind casting later in this thesis.

Canadian theatre company mandates that advocate for the hiring practice of colour-blind casting can sometimes be controversial. For example, in 2017, Victoria Theatre Guild and Dramatic School, located in Victoria, B.C, became a named Defendant in a lawsuit, after a complaint was filed against them. The pleadings in the lawsuit were centred around issues of racially motivated casting. According to the tribunal documents, a Black-Canadian actress, Tenyah Indra McKenna, auditioned for a role in Michael Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*, produced by the school in the same year. When McKenna contacted the play's director, Judy Treloar, Treloar indicated that a Black woman would not be a sister, nor a part of the neighbourhood, due to the setting of the play – an all-White neighbourhood in Montreal in 1965. The documents also state that Treloar commented against any accusations of racial bias or stereotyping. In defence, Treloar described the play's characters as White, xenophobic, working-class Quebecoise women. The lawsuit was settled, but

the issues surrounding the practice of colour-blind casting remain, as this incident left a stain on the school's reputation (Smart). I find this to case to be ironic, as racially motivated casting considers a certain race to be represented on stage, in opposition to colour-blind casting, a practice which essentially doesn't recognize the colour of one's skin to be an issue, with regards to hiring a non-White actor to play a specified character.

As an example of attitudes towards colour-blind casting practices from the actor's perspective, Alberta-based stage actress Karen Robinson, who is of Jamaican descent, supports colour-blind casting practices. In a journal article about the evolution of Canadian theatre, Robinson addresses the issue of fair representation of colour on stage. Cited within the article is an interview conducted in July 2016 with Robinson. She shares her memories of African Canadian playwright Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet*, showcased at the Stratford Festival in Ontario in 2006. Robinson also highlights the cultural significance of acting, particularly emphasizing the power of Black women's theatre. Robinson indicates that Black, White, Asian, and First Nations people who live on this earth are invariably connected, because we are all human beings, notwithstanding the colour of one's skin. Although Robinson supports the practice of colour-blind casting, hiring White actors has historically been the norm, and she has a problem with that (Rapetti 319). Imagine if Robinson were denied the opportunity to play a Black woman in a play about Black culture in Harlem. But could a White actress play the same role?

In alignment with Robinson, Perry Schneiderman, former Artistic Director of the National Theatre School of Canada⁷ addresses the issue of non-representation of visible minorities on stage. In an online resource regarding actor training institutions and the theatre community, Schneiderman admits he believes in colour-blind casting. He thinks norms are changing, but these

⁷ Schneiderman served as the Artistic Director of the English Section at the National School of Canada from June 1990 – June 2000 (Schneiderman).

changes will occur over generations, and cannot be forced (Fallis 13).

Other actors, including Martha Henry, have mixed feelings on colour-blind casting practices. Henry wrote an online article about colour-blind casting practices entitled ‘All My Sons: Casting - Colour-Blind?’ In her article, Henry states that the meaning behind the term ‘colour-blind’ has always been “inconsistent in practice” (Henry). This article by Henry is a testimonial of her service as a director of the Arthur Miller play, *All My Sons*, which featured an all-Black cast at the Stratford Festival in 2016. It was presumed in 1947, when this play was first produced, that the cast would consist of all White actors. Henry has also performed at the Stratford Festival. Henry employed Black Canadian actress Sarah Afful to play the principal female role, Ann Deever, in *All My Sons*. Henry states in the article that Miller would have been “proud of Afful’s performance.” Afful is quoted shortly, under the heading of ‘Tokenism,’ regarding her experiences under Henry’s tutelage.

Clearly, there are differing opinions with regards to colour-blind casting practices. Some actors are in support of the practice, some are not. In a recent podcast, African Canadian theatre actor Omari Newton says:

“Colour-blind casting” is rooted in systemic racism. It is a form of erasure. It is the theatrical equivalent of ignorantly telling your Black friend “I don’t see colour” when they try to engage you in a conversation about race. It is passively dehumanizing in the way that it dismisses the racism that is embedded in the very fabric of how colonized countries were founded. “Colour-blind casting” is insulting. It is confusing. It is a form of erasure rooted in White guilt and systemic racism. I encourage directors and producers to cast roles non-traditionally, but not “blindly.” What we need is “colour conscious casting.” If you want to introduce characters of colour into your story as a writer, director, or producer, please do so in ways that encompass our complex history and our lived experiences (Newton).

I will go into further detail on these concepts later in this thesis, in the chapter entitled *Yisstsiyi*.

In my research, I found a connection between Newton's opinions on the subject of colour-blind casting, with a succinct, yet powerful comment made by Canadian playwright, Sharon Pollock. In an online journal article from 2017 called *Critical Stages*, Martin Morrow (the President of the Canadian Theatre Critics Association), recalls a statement made by Pollock in a previous conversation, shared between them. Morrow re-states Pollock's prior comment: "The faces on the stage aren't the faces on the street" (Pollock qtd. in Morrow). I opine that Pollock states (on behalf of Morrow), what Newton expresses in his podcast, just in fewer words.

In the same article, Morrow also voices concerns about a woeful lack of cultural diversity in Canadian theatres. He laments a dearth of ethnic performers in contrast to the nation's multicultural population. Morrow also showcases the viewpoint from live theatre supporters in Toronto, who publicly address a substantial oversight relating to colour-blind casting practices. Morrow speaks about how hiring practices of actors, by a prominent Toronto-based theatre company, came into question on social media in 2016. Morrow addresses discussions being held by actors on social media platforms, with regards to their desires to see more diverse hiring practices in the film industry. Additionally, Morrow makes a point to highlight how several theatre companies (specifically in Toronto) responded with initiatives to hire more actors representing racialized minorities. Morrow discloses that theatre supporters claimed that it is not enough to adopt a practice or policy of colour-blind casting. Directors and creators of theatre must also be (racially and culturally) diverse as well, in order to effectively support this cause (Morrow). However, Morrow also indicates in the article that Pollock's statement is becoming outdated, as he highlights a plethora of initiatives to make Canadian theatre more representative of the communities in which we live. I relate to Morrow's positive outlook on these matters and will integrate his commentary on issues of fair and equitable representation in theatre into the

conclusive findings from each of my interviews.

And so, it is apparent that there are contrasting opinions regarding representation in theatre. Some state that fair and equitable representation on stage is improving, e.g., colour-blind casting practices, while others disagree. These points of contention intersect with ‘tokenism,’ a direct result of misrepresentation of minority groups in theatre.

1.3.3 Tokenism

At this stage, I uncover the relationship between representation on stage and tokenism. Conveniently, the talking points on representation segue nicely into a discussion on tokenism because who the audiences see on stage matter, as does how the actors arrived at the role. Tokenism is the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort to desegregate (“Tokenism”). One aspect of tokenism is a practice known in the theatre industry as “typecasting.” Typecasting involves the assignment, usually led by a director, of repeatedly employing actors to occupy stereotypical roles, as a result of their appearance, or previous success in such roles (Charney).

A seemingly well-known (yet unfortunate) example of “tokenism” is the recognition by an audience of the “one and only” Black character in a show. The function of this role is to create an illusion of adequate racial representation (Chan). This controversial topic has, over the years, increasingly become fair game for discussion amongst actors in the theatre industry. My interview with a Lethbridge-based Black actor exposes his truth, as experienced by him in his own words.

My main objective is to expose the challenging experiences which many actors continue to face, with respects to issues of the diversification of roles in theatre in Southern Alberta. For example, a media interview with Calgary based Asian actor Mike Tan, exposes issues of ongoing racism in the performing arts. Tan states: “When there are roles, they’re just a shell of a person, or a stereotype, that oftentimes perpetuates racism because even though there is representation,

it's a shallow representation" (Tan qtd. in Shummoogum).

In congruency with Tan's statement, White-Canadian actor Rachel Jones admits the following in an interview: "As an actor, I know I've benefited from White privilege because actors of colour have not had the same opportunities. This is changing but it's still a factor. I'm probably not aware of how I've benefited from White privilege" (Jones qtd. in Hobson). I find this to be a brave and powerful admission from a female actor, who represents a demographic of actors who continue to experience long-standing gender stereotypes in theatre.

Now juxtapose Jones' admission with that of African Canadian actor Sarah Afful. In a 2016 interview, Afful recounts her experience acting under Martha Henry's direction of the Stratford Festival's production of Miller's *All My Sons*.

Afful says that she enjoyed acting in the Canadian production, which featured an all-Black cast. Afful states: "I've been able to do it with my own perspective and come at it with my own voice and not have to adhere to any sort of stereotype [...] I saw an all-black cast and I saw people who looked like me and I thought, oh my gosh. This is so empowering" (Afful qtd. in Larose).

Actors of racialized minorities are not the only participants who wish to engage in conversation about the importance of diversity in the performing arts. Cree Canadian make-up artist, Chase Cardinal comments: "I think there is a lot of tokenization that still goes on and it's tricky. The motivation behind hiring and bringing people on has to be coming from a good place of actually wanting Indigenous peoples' input" (Cardinal qtd. in Trembath). Cardinal did the make up for Cree Canadian actor Michelle Thrush on the set of the recently released Indigenous feature film, *Bones of Crows*. I had the pleasure of working under the tutelage of Thrush in a drama class, held in the spring of 2023 for the production of *Yisstsiyi*.

Yisstsiiyi is a creative collective/collaboration between the faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge, and Calgary based Indigenous theatre company, Making Treaty 7 (MT7). Thrush currently serves as the artistic director for MT7. I learned a great deal from Thrush and her colleagues during this unique process of creating theatre, especially with respects to Indigenous culture, traditions, gathering of knowledge and artistic creation. My research will track this project as it develops throughout the fall of 2023 and will document my experiences and observations in this thesis accordingly.

I had hoped to narrow my research even further to include any academic or scholarly work conducted on this matter in Lethbridge. Alas, after an extensive search, I found no relevant literature. So, I expanded my search for related thesis work in Calgary. I located a relevant thesis project, written by a Master of Fine Arts graduate from the University of Calgary, Lai Ngo Chan.

In September of 2020, Chan set out to cast a show that she was directing. It was a Vietnamese play entitled *We the Same*. Chan's thesis is relevant to the topic of tokenism, because she addresses this issue in relation to her experiences with casting difficulties. Chan found it difficult to cast in the beginning phases, as no one was signing up. She had faith in the production process but was wondering why actors weren't stepping forward to participate in the show. Chan hypothesised that actors were hesitant, due to the issue of tokenism. She feared people of a differing race (other than Asian), felt that they were not welcome to audition for the play. She also feared that Asian performers were reluctant to express their concerns over casting stereotypical roles.

Chan learned Asian actors were not coming forward to audition, because they did not want to be seen as "Asian." She eased the actors' concerns by stressing that the invitations to audition were open to everyone, not solely Asian performers. Chan was able to cast the show with more

than adequate and fair representation of Asian actors on stage, as well as a good mix of other ethnically diverse actors (Chan 21 -23). I find this to be particularly interesting, because I observed this same response to the casting of *Yisstsiiyi*.

Like Chan, I am curious as to why actors did not fill up the audition notice for *Yisstsiiyi*, advertised in early September of 2023. I cannot deduce an explanation for this, but I can offer testimonies from a few of the students who were enrolled in the Drama class, which facilitated content for the upcoming production. The directors of *Yisstsiiyi*, from the Making Treaty 7 (MT7) theatre company from Calgary, designed the class to function as creative collective/collaboration process. The collaboration was between the University of Lethbridge and MT7. The drama class was offered to the student body, across faculties, as well as the community. The production featured a diverse cast of Indigenous and non-Indigenous performers. *Yisstsiiyi* was featured in the fall of 2023, on the University of Lethbridge's mainstage.

One of the primary missions, in relation to the casting of *Yisstsiiyi*, discussed by the ambassadors of MT7 on the first day of class, was to create a safe space for anyone to come to the University and contribute to the production, in whatever way they can. Despite the openness of this invitation, many were hesitant to audition upon call to do so. Some of the concerns expressed amongst the students in the class include not knowing how to perform as a dancer in a traditional Indigenous fashion, being unfamiliar with how to tell traditional Indigenous stories on stage, and fears of racial discrimination towards the Indigenous community in Lethbridge. I find these admissions to be profound and will speak to these concerns in chronicling of the production of *Yisstsiiyi*, later in this thesis.

In closing, the relationship between representation on stage and tokenism is important to understand because it ultimately affects how audiences perceive diversity on stage. While the

presence of diverse actors on stage is crucial, it is just as important to ensure that actors are not hired solely to fill a designated quota or to merely appear diverse. The key point is that the actors' opinions and perspectives are actively offered and included in the rehearsal process.

The imperative of fair, adequate, and equitable representation, juxtaposed with the ongoing issue of tokenism in casting diminishes the value of diversity and reinforces stereotypes. My hope is that by researching the connection between representation and tokenism, anyone who is affiliated with creating holistic theatrical practices and procedures can effectively work towards creating a more equitable and authentic portrayal of diverse groups on stage. A deeper dive into how actors perceive the issue of tokenism will be provided in chapters two through five.

1.4 KEY FINDINGS

The results of my dive into the current literature on diversity in theatre have enriched my research. I have discovered two gaps, contextually and methodologically speaking. Firstly, there is a deficit of (current) resources available which examine diversity in contemporary theatre in Lethbridge. I found sufficient literature to support this thesis in Calgary. Secondly, there is a limited amount of research from the viewpoint of the actor. Actors voicing their lived experiences in their field in Southern Alberta, particularly Lethbridge, have been largely underrepresented. Actors from racialized and/or 2SLGBTQI+ communities have not been sufficiently questioned about their personal experiences pertaining to the lack of diversity in theatre.

By comparison, my inspection of available resources from other cities in Canada that highlight the ongoing issue of a lack of diversity in contemporary theatre, are in abundance. In particular, I found the issue of 'tokenism' or 'typecasting' to be a prevalent issue in theatre casting practices in Vancouver and Toronto. Perhaps this is because both cities are central hubs to diverse ethnic and cultural populations and house countless theatre companies. The abundance of available resources from these two cities, with respect to diversity in theatre, could possibly create

an interesting cross comparative analysis for future academic study.

Hence, there is a disconnect between the diversification of content in theatre, and the availability of roles that would accommodate adequate representation of actors from racialized and or/2SLGBTQI+ communities. Research regarding diversity in theatre, which includes the qualitative method of interviewing actors working in Southern Alberta, is in short supply. I endeavour to remediate these gaps in this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO:

HOW CAN I HELP?

In chapters two through five, the interview questions between myself and each of the actors are laid out in a very specific way. My question is presented, along with the actor's responses, followed by three corresponding sections: Personal Analysis, Source Analysis, and Summary. I formatted each of the interviews in this manner because I wanted to highlight my question with each actor's response first, as they provide the information and context for investigation. The purpose behind the Personal Analysis section was to integrate my own thoughts and perspectives into what each actor has contributed to the conversation. The purpose behind the Source Analysis section was to incorporate existing data, to make connections with each actor's viewpoints. The Summary section was designed to tie everything together, contextually.

This first interview is with Actor 1, who is a White, late-forties, female, heterosexual, professional actor. She has been working in theatre for over three decades, all over Canada. She is a member of the Canadian Actor's Equity Association. She is an actor, singer, dancer, musical director, performance teacher, and ambassador of theatre. I chose to include Actor 1's interview first, because I relate to her the most. I am also an actor and teacher of the performing arts, I am in my mid-forties, and I have identified as White for the majority of my life and career.

She adds a unique perspective to the conversation about diversity and inclusion in theatre because she has been an observer of how the lack of hiring actors of differing race, ethnicity and culture has been problematic over the years. She also speaks about how hiring practices are changing in Canadian theatre. She then addresses how collective creation can be a valuable alternative to telling stories on stage.

I refer to Actor 1 as ‘A1’ for the purposes of this interview. I interviewed A1 in early June of 2023, via Zoom. I call the following excerpts from our interview ‘How Can I Help?’ because it was the main theme that emerged from our conversation. It is as follows:

AR: What are your thoughts on diversity and inclusion in Canadian theatre?

A1: *I've been in those conversations. It's a really fine line, and I don't think that any director has bad intentions. But there is this sort of argument to hire ‘the right person for the job.’ It would be great to have every casting director in the country hire with diversity and inclusion in mind. That would, in some way, hopefully reflect in the stories told on stage.*

Personal Analysis

What does it mean to create equitable hiring practices in the live theatre industry? “Hiring the right person for the job,” as stated by Actor 1, can take on a multitude of meanings. For instance, it could highlight the importance of hiring the right actor to fit the role of the character, hiring the right actor to market the production (such as a well-known performer or celebrity name), or it could signify hiring actors to fit socially conscious mandates, such as EDI. It could also signify a (casting) director’s choice to keep synchronicity with how audience’s expectations inform character portrayal.

Source Analysis

In an online article titled “Play Equity and the Blind Spots,” written by Black Canadian playwright and actor Djanet Sears, she discusses the concept of “blind spots” in accordance with hiring practices in Canadian theatre. She proffers that an artistic director of a theatre company selects the plays for the season, and a director responds by hiring actors to play the characters

which will bring the play to life on stage. If an artistic director chooses a Eurocentric play, and the creative team (inclusive of the director) is predominantly made up of White males, the hiring of actors will inevitably reflect that. Though perhaps not intentional, it is the safe choice, and often made unconsciously. The issue with this is that this systemic hiring practice is not only outdated but does not reflect paradigms of inclusivity and diversity in Canadian theatre. The stories told on stage are still reflective of the 'White man' and fail to represent differentiation and variety in cultural storytelling. She suggests that a way to combat this is to adopt a four-pillar hiring model: awareness, advocacy, activism and action, and artistic audacity (Sears).

Summary

Contemporary audiences want more. Ensuring diversity and inclusion in the casting process is crucial. Adopting EDI mandates in Canadian theatre companies allows for a broader range of experiences for creative contributors, actors, and audiences. While it is important to hire the best actor for a particular role, actively considering diversity in artistic and casting decisions can contribute to a more inclusive storytelling landscape. Encouraging artistic and casting directors to prioritize diversity and representation can lead to a greater variety of narratives being performed on stage. Although I cannot fully state who would be ultimately responsible for the promotion of EDI mandates in Canadian theatre, I do note the importance of at least starting the conversation about the relevance of the topic. This paradigm shift can also be reflected in a theatre company's choice of plays in their season. To "fit" an actor into a role is tricky, regardless of hiring racialized actors, so I asked A1 for her opinions on how to diversify theatre, both in principle and practice.

AR: What are your thoughts on diversity and inclusion in theatre in Southern Alberta?

A1: *I think there is work being done in terms of diversity in Southern Alberta. Hopefully, we can do more to diversify the voices on stage. As an actor, I am continuously finding ways to reach out*

to people, to develop new ideas. I have encountered more racism than I've ever seen in my whole life in Southern Alberta. When I was a kid, watching theatre, people in the audience made a really big deal about seeing non-White actors on stage. They would make comments about their cultural heritage. Now, as a White actor, I need to acknowledge that this is how the demographic in Southern Alberta sees the world. If we are going to get anywhere positive, we have to have the murky conversations. I'm not sure where that can go for me, in terms of how much I can contribute, but I would love to be able to contribute.

Personal Analysis

Are we telling stories in live theatre about subjects such as racism in Southern Alberta? I refer to a play I attended in 2019, produced by Alberta Theatre Projects (ATP), in Calgary. The play *Disgraced*, written by Pakistani American Ayad Akhtar, follows the story of Amir, a (Muslim) New York Lawyer who continually encounters racist and prejudicial situations, following the tragedies of 9/11. I remember thinking how powerful the interweaving storylines were, and how ATP took an intrepid risk in bringing this Pulitzer-Prize winning play to the stage in a city with an increasing Muslim population. In an interview with Global News Calgary, director Nigel Shawn Williams speaks about the themes of racial discrimination and the negative impacts of prejudicial attitudes experienced by the diverse set of characters in the play. Williams states: “the play starts to ask questions about ruptures and tribalism, and why we are in such tribes that we mistrust and have fears and hate [...] once we admit our prejudices, we can move past them [...] the play is topical because it tackles issues of immigration and diversity” (Williams qtd. in Small).

Source Analysis

In my follow-up research on the topic of racism in Southern Alberta, I sourced out a video on You Tube which features Dr. Jennifer Leason, an assistant professor of Indigenous Health and Wellness from the University of Calgary. In this video, Dr. Leason speaks about her experience with systemic racism, as a member of the Pine Creek First Nations. In her exposé, Dr. Leason indicates that racism occurs in society, especially at the institutional level. Though not always intentional, institutions often work to the benefit of White people, sometimes at the expense of Black, Indigenous, or people of color (Leason). I argue that theatre companies are acutely aware of their hiring practices, and it is my hope that Canadian theatre companies are making every effort to eliminate racial prejudices or biases in casting.

Summary

Racist paradigms and attitudes establish boundaries. Naturally, the corrective response would be to expose those boundaries, and adopt EDI mandates in all hiring practices in order to combat racism. Hiring a diverse range of actors to play diverse characters in theatre pushes boundaries back. Actors aren't looking for special exceptions; they're looking for opportunities.

AR: What are your thoughts on collectively creating stories for live audiences in Southern Alberta?

AI: I always ask who are you telling the story to? Who is your audience? In 'traditional' plays, there is a director, and they have a vision. I, as an actor, can then facilitate how the audience will engage with that play. In collective creation, it makes us more accountable as actors, in order to collectively create what is happening in the story. At the more independent level, meaning the bigger scale of theatre, we need to do better. Bigger Canadian theatre companies' model for the smaller theatre companies. Not just in the storytelling, but also in who is doing the storytelling on

stage.

Personal Analysis

It is important to elaborate on A1's use of the word "traditional," in connection with how plays are structured in the background, and how plays are composed in the rehearsal process. Directors are usually in charge of how actors interact with each other on stage, in dialogue and blocking within each scene. Ultimately, audiences interpret what they see on stage. Often times, audiences will relate what they see on stage back to their own lived experiences, in order to connect with the characters and the narrative. As A1 indicates, the director holds the primary, targeted vision for a theatre show. She juxtaposes conventional theatrical production practices with those of collective creation. She suggests that the actor becomes a more prominent agent in how the narrative unfolds in collective creation and devised theatre. So, who is devising an audience's experience in contemporary Canadian theatre?

Source Analysis

In 1999, Canadian theatre academic, Professor Robert Wallace, writes about a distinctive shift in Canadian theatre practices and productions in an academic essay: "Theatre and Transformation in Contemporary Canada." Wallace contextualizes the colonial ideology of producing Canadian plays, built from a British imperialistic standpoint, and the need for separation from traditional British theatre practices. He suggests that plays, like the theatres that produce them, can function proactively in Canadian theatre, creating and connecting us to our cultural identity. He states: "Indeed, their power lies less with reflection than revelation-the process by which they articulate the issues and images that circulate in the "diasporic consciousness" of identity communities to the cultural conditions that delimit and determine their existence" (Wallace 51). The power that major theatre production companies in Canada hold to produce

culturally diverse and relevant plays, *reflective* of their audiences, is lacking. Wallace's interpretation of contemporary Canadian theatre indicates that themes of cultural diversity in narrative are instead revealed to an audience. A1 suggests that this is an issue. Building culturally relevant stories from scratch can bring change to Canadian and Southern Alberta theatre, which positively impacts actors, and audiences.

Summary

Larger scale theatre companies in Canada, and more specifically, Southern Alberta, should approach storytelling in a more inclusive manner. With regards to narrative and character development, there is a myriad of possibilities in contemporary theatre. Collective creation is just one example. Additionally, demographics should be more of a consideration, as theatre companies should not assume that ticket holders will be predominantly White.

Representation of characters on stage should reflect audience demographics, so should the content of the stories told on stage. This shift will allow for larger theatre companies to lead by example, in order to achieve diversity in casting decisions. Positive outcomes include diverse opportunities for working actors, especially for those who desire more agency in how theatrical narratives, and corresponding characters are developed. Audience connection and relation to theatrical performances, and how characters are portrayed, enhance the overall theatrical experience. This ultimately benefits the theatre production company, as well as the community where the play is produced.

CHAPTER THREE:

I'VE BEEN COLONIZED!

Actor 2 is an Asian, mid-fifties, heterosexual, male professional actor. He is a member of the Canadian Actor's Equity Association and ACTRA⁸. He lives and works in Calgary as a part-time theatre, television, movie, and commercial actor. He has worked as an actor for over three decades, in Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary.

He contributes knowledge from the perspective of a Canadian-born Chinese actor. I named this interview 'I've Been Colonized' because of the fact that he is a second-generation Chinese man. He also stated it verbatim in our interview. I refer to Actor 2 as 'A2' for the purposes of this interview. I interviewed A2, in mid-June of 2023, via Zoom.

I notice that I utilize the words 'colonization' and 'decolonization' in this series of interviews with A2 and the preceding actors on a general level, in relation to commonplace theatre practices. The purpose of this nomenclature is to showcase how systems in Canada have generally been set up over time, with influences from British culture, and how the dismantling of these systems can create a Canadian cultural identity. Historically, Canada has been pervaded by internal polarities which continue to prevent a formation of a Canadian narrative and national distinction, separate from Great Britain (Lodoen 35). The interview with A2 is as follows:

⁸ ACTRA is the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television, Radio Artists. It is the national union of professional performers who work in Canadian media (ACTRA 2023).

AR: What are your thoughts on the colonization of storytelling in Canadian theatre?

A2: *I think that it's a very serious issue, and I think that it's important to address it. Colonialism has spilled over from influences from the United States, in addition to Great Britain. We as Canadians have become much more aggressive in our nationalist appearances, in competition with the States. Colonization of theatre is homogenous. It comes from one singular viewpoint.*

Personal Analysis

Historically, there is no doubt that Canada has been heavily influenced by Great Britain and the United States in all facets of life, including live theatre. With our country's main theatre outpost being Toronto, there continues to be a diaspora of live theatre talent, including south of the border. Toronto often runs as a monolithic model of Canadian theatre. But is theatre in Toronto authentic to Canada? Major Toronto-based touring production companies, such as Broadway Across Canada (which delivers Broadway content across Canada), essentially operate as a franchise. It is the colonized version of what theatre should look like. To many, Broadway is often held up as the standard of success.

Source Analysis

In his book *Broadway North: The Dream of a Canadian Musical Theatre*, Author Mel Atkey validates that Toronto is the mecca for English Canadian theatre. Atkey questions the functionality of Canadian (musical) theatre, and whether or not it is distinctive enough from theatre in the States, namely Broadway. He speaks about plays such as Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and Peterson and Gray's *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, with attention to Canadian identity and culture in theatre. In confluence with A2's statements about Canadians becoming increasingly aggressive

in how we are perceived in theatre, Atkey indicates that the financial weight of any given (musical theatre) production overshadows a celebration of cultural identity in Canadian theatre, inclusive of Indigeneity (25 – 26). I agree with A2's perspective on our Americanized ways of producing and touring live theatre in Canada, as Broadway is held up to the highest of live performance standards. Atkey notes that Canadians do need to study British and American theatre, but with a "discerning eye" (26).

Summary

If we do not take the opportunity as Canadian theatre artists to distinguish ourselves from the influences of British and American colonization, we run the risk of perpetuating this homogenizing effect, as A2 suggests. Canada is recognized as a multicultural country. Canadians are encouraged to recognize our ethnic and cultural distinctions, so why are we not intuitively fostering this principle, in an attempt to assert ourselves on an international scale?

AR: What are your thoughts on the decolonization of storytelling in Canadian theatre?

A2: Is it possible to decolonize Canada? We would know that we have successfully decolonized theatre when there is a production that is predominantly White, and we would consider that ethnic. We've had the term ethnic theatre for a while, but it's never been applied to White people. It would just be another voice in the theatre community. It's ridiculous to think of it that way, but it stems from our colonized viewpoint.

Personal Analysis

Whitewashed plays and actors have become the benchmark of comparison in theatre. For example, the Shakespearean model has been born out of the Caucasian perspective. It is still classified as a Eurocentric theatre model (Hoenselaars 141). But what if we flipped the script, and plays written by White playwrights, and acted by White performers, became part of the ethnic model? After all, not every White actor comes from Great Britain.

Source Analysis

Ethnic theatre was ignited by World War I and made its way to Canada in the late 1920s. An influx of immigrants to Canada during (and after) the war years motivated the practice of ethnic theatre. Ukrainian plays gained popularity in the early 1930s in Manitoba and Ontario. Asian theatre also gained momentum in theatre in the 1930s in the form of Chinese Opera. But ethnic theatre was still built on a Eurocentric model (Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia).

I empathize with A2's perspectives as an Asian actor, on the basis of being a combination of Anglocentric and Cree identities. In my experiences of theatre, I attest that I have always played the "white" card to gain advantage and access to roles. I now identify myself as a Métis actor, as the swift rise of Indigeneity has become a relatively new movement, especially since the global pandemic. George Mann talks about a "theatrical awakening" in his book *Theatre Lethbridge: A History of Theatrical Production in Lethbridge, Alberta*. Mann indicates that diversity became an important topic of conversation amongst theatre artists in Southern Alberta in the 1950s, post-Korean war, with a particular interest in highlighting concerns brought by Indigenous performing artists (133).

Summary

Even though the insertion of Indigeneity and Canadian cultural identity has been happening since the 1950s in live theatre, playwrights, producers, directors, designers, and actors have since been introduced to a new line of thinking and doing, post-pandemic. Lethbridge in particular took a few extra decades to catch up with the rest of Canada, notwithstanding its close proximity to several Blood tribe, Blackfoot, and Cree reservations. As theatre artists, we had to get really creative about how theatre is staged and performed. As a result, I admittedly now present myself as a Métis actor, instead of a White actor, and have found much more success in the theatre industry. Therefore, I query A2's assertion - will "White" ever be considered "ethnic?"

AR: What are your thoughts on the decolonization of storytelling in theatre that is produced in Southern Alberta?

A2: I think that decolonization in theatre is happening, but not until very recently. I performed in a play in Calgary in 2016 called 'Ching Chong Chinaman,' written by Asian American playwright, Lauren Yee. A friend of mine in Toronto, the creator of 'Kim's Convenience,' reached out to me afterward, and he pointed out all of the Asian American/Canadian plays that were being produced across Canada in 2016/2017. We celebrated that we were no longer considered "ethnic theatre," and that we were now considered "mainstream."

Personal Analysis

I have seen clips from several social media interviews, and pictures from news articles which showcased A2's Whitewashed, pantomimed face during the run of the production of *Ching Chong Chinaman*. I will not reference them here, as to keep A2's identity respectfully anonymous.

As an otherwise distinctly looking Asian man, he transformed into a satirical Asian character, by design of the director. Again, to keep A2's identity anonymized, I will not reveal the name of the director nor the venue. But I will state that the director's choices of painting all of the Asian actors' faces white, along with the entirety of the set, is in keeping with Yee's portrayal of the stereotypical, assimilated, and Americanized Asian family (Jaworowski). A2 disclosed in our discussion that he related to this character as a second generation, Asian Canadian man. He satirically utilized the word "colonized" to refer to himself in that manner in our interview.

Source Analysis

A2's recollection of his famous playwright friend reaching out to him after his appearance in *Ching Chong Chinaman* reinforces the importance of producing plays which include the voices and stories of racialized actors in Canada. Alberta Theatre Projects (ATP) in Calgary produced *Kim's Convenience* in the spring of 2022. In an interview with the Calgary Herald, Director Rohit Chokhani discusses how playwright Ins Choi's depiction of Korean comedy on stage has become a national phenomenon. Choi's play was the inspiration behind CBC's sitcom, *Kim's Convenience*. As a result, Asian Canadian actors became more in demand and mainstream, too. Chokhani states: "There are lots of conversations, both in our company and globally, about telling stories that represent our community demographics [...] *Kim's Convenience* right now in Calgary represents a shift in the kinds of projects and artists you will see on our stages" (Chokhani qtd. in Renne).

Summary

Theatre in Canada and Southern Alberta is evolving. A2's thoughts on the colonization and decolonization in Canadian theatre are a testament to the diverse voices being showcased on stage. The visual representation of racialized actors in theatre provides a deeper connection between actors and the characters that they play. In turn, this fosters a more authentic and inclusive theatrical experience for the actors and the audience, reflective of where we come from, where we

live, and who we are. A2's experiences of playing Asian-Canadian characters on stages in Calgary, Vancouver and Toronto have allowed him a sense of relatability to the roles that he has played, which has successively helped broaden the minds of Canadian audiences and inspired other racialized artists.

CHAPTER FOUR:

KNOWING

Actor 3 is an Indigenous professional actor, late twenties, who identifies as non-binary. They are not a member of the Canadian Actor's Equity Association, but they do work on a fulltime basis as a professional actor, drag artist, playwright, producer, and director. They are from the Kanai (Blood) reservation, located 40 kilometres west of Lethbridge. They now live and work in Calgary, but they frequently travel to Lethbridge, and other Canadian cities for work.

I invited Actor 3 to participate in this interview to provide insight from the perspective of an Indigenous (Blackfoot) actor. I refer to Actor 3 as 'A3' for the purposes of this interview. I interviewed A3 in late June of 2023, via Zoom. I call the following excerpts from our interview 'Knowing' because they used this word to describe how they feel about their contributions as a Blackfoot actor in theatre. A3's contributions are as follows:

AR: Can you give me some background on how you got into acting?

A3: When I was in school, I didn't have a lot of access to acting opportunities. I grew up near Cardston, AB. They have the Carriage House Theatre, which has been operating for years. They would put on plays like 'Mary Poppins' and 'Peter Pan' – plays that a lot of folks like to see. But because the theatre was run by settlers in the town, it was just a place that I never saw myself being able to go to. The thought of being in theatre seemed unattainable. I would look at all the posters that they had up of different shows, like 'Seussical,' and I would just think to myself: "I really wish I could be up on this wall." But I just felt like I could never see myself in those photos, because I didn't see people who looked like me.

Personal Analysis

I understand A3's reflections to their past hopes and dreams, which have ultimately connected to their present. I can also, with ambivalence, acknowledge the societal climate as to which A3 experienced those longings to see themselves on the stage of the prominent theatre house in a small town in rural Southern Alberta. A3 was experiencing the matrix of a world of imagination which lived in their mind but was disconnected from reality. They didn't see themselves living out their soul contract with creator (a manifest destiny) as we lean on in Indigenous beliefs. That is concerning to me, as I worry for present generations of young actors and theatre artists who currently find themselves in the same position.

Source Analysis

Audiences and theatre artists long for the diversification of plays being staged in theatre. However, associated financial pressures faced by theatre companies to stage shows that aren't necessarily big box office draws can be challenging. Author Anton Wagner discusses these challenges in Canadian theatre in an essay about Canadian theatre criticism. Wagner remarks on public demand for shows, and how seductive marketable productions, like *Phantom of the Opera* for example, can be. He criticizes how Canadian theatres tend to lean on British or American content, because of the bankability of a pop cultural experience. However, he observes that this is not sustainable, because there is a lack of authenticity to who we are as Canadians. The reliance on an import model of stories being told on Canadian stages will inevitably wither in its purpose, due to the lack of spiritual energy and the presence of artificiality (4 -5).

Summary

It is evident that A3 was impacted by live theatre in their community in their formative years. Theatre, and the thought of being an actor, inspired and imprinted upon their imagination. But in reality, they felt it was unachievable for them to participate in, due to their Indigenous appearance. This disconnect still resides within A3, as they ponder the current state of how live theatre is evolving, discussed in the following questions.

AR: What are your thoughts on the colonization of Canadian theatre in the past century?

A3: When I think of how stories have been told on stage from a Canadian point of view, they were always told from a place of settlers coming to discover, to take control, and to insert themselves into a land – a nation, that they haven't been a part of. People who were on these lands before colonization, their perspectives just weren't told. And even in contemporary theatre, there are still a lot of perspectives and stories that aren't being told. I go back to my comments about the Carriage House Theatre, and how there weren't any Indigenous people on stage, or even a part of the tech or the design teams. There was an absence of Indigenous representation in theatre.

Personal Analysis

I think that control is the key factor here, the common denominator. By control, I mean to question who holds the most authority when it comes to staging plays in theatre. Is it the playwright? The director? As I mentioned in Chapter One, theatre is built from a set of systems. The genesis of most theatrical pieces coming to “life” on the stage begins with the text. The text is the matrix and the foundation of a story. If the story doesn't make room for diverse characters in cultural contexts, any director would have a challenge to open up possibilities, and to be mindful of inclusivity.

Source Analysis

In a chapter titled 'Performing Imagined Communities' within her book, "*Mouths on Fire with Songs*": *Negotiating Multi-Ethnic Identities on the Contemporary North American Stage*, Caroline De Wagter highlights and reflects on works by Canadian playwrights. She discusses the discourses between White Canadian writers who attempt to incorporate their colonized interpretations of Indigenous voices and the need to acknowledge the actual lived experiences of Indigenous Canadians. She explores the use of Indigenous culture as a standardized measurement of diversifying plays written by White playwrights. She argues that this is an ongoing debate in Canadian theatre and urges audiences to be mindful of who is writing the narrative and for what purpose. She questions if only Indigenous actors have the right to play Indigenous roles (256 – 257). In response to De Wagter's question about Indigenous persons playing Indigenous characters, can an actor who does not identify as Indigenous play an Indigenous character? To me, that is the definition of cultural appropriation. I personally deem that as an antiquated theatre practice, and unacceptable by today's standards. The correlation between A3's comments, De Wagter's research and associated criticisms allow for a deeper understanding of how authorship relates to representation in theatre. If an Indigenous story is going to be told on stage, shouldn't it be told by an Indigenous person? Or is there room for both perspectives in contemporary Canadian theatre?

Summary

It is imperative that Indigenous playwrights, directors, and actors take risks in theatre. If the roles are combined, even better, as that leads to more authenticity in storytelling and character formation. What I appreciate about A3's attitude towards theatre is that they are willing to take risks, and to work hard (especially as an Indigenous actor), in order to achieve a goal. A3 has a clear vision of how they wish to be perceived by audiences. They embrace their Indigenous

heritage, and their non-binary identity, as a theatre practitioner. They recognize the limitations, but work beyond societal parameters, which have been adopted into antiquated theatre practices.

AR: In what ways do you think actors can connect with other creative contributors to produce meaningful stories for audiences in Lethbridge and Calgary?

A3: *I think that actors hold a superpower. We are able to see things from a different lens or a different perspective that can demonstrate that “what if” factor. This could be a new way of doing things. It’s a power that all creators have, and that’s why I’m drawn to this work, because it really is about helping people see things in a different way.*

Personal Analysis

This response resonates with me, as did A2’s commentary on the recognition of White actors having a place in ethnic theatre. I offer that there is room in theatre for *all* perspectives; White, Indigenous, Asian, Black, and so on. I gain a deeper understanding of what A3 means by “seeing things in a different way,” because I am of mixed heritage. I do understand and appreciate the importance of the British and American influences in theatre. However, Indigeneity is becoming more prevalent in Canada, inclusive of Lethbridge and Calgary. I am also drawn to the notion of existing in a world without limits. As an actor, I want to be in control of my craft, as it exists within the depths of my imagination. I embrace the unknown, as does A3, and I can only hope that my contributions help people to live out their dreams and fulfill their purpose, in whatever capacity that exists for them.

Source Analysis

Latina American actor America Ferrara shares how she felt about the relationship between her identity as a person, with her identity as a racialized actor, from her TED Talk in 2019. She states: “I, like everyone around me, believed that it wasn’t possible for me to exist in my dream as I was” (“Your Identity is Your Superpower”: America Ferrara). Ferrera’s sentiments further enforces a core belief, shared by A3, and all of the actors I have interviewed. Much like the actors’ personal experiences and perspectives shared in this thesis, I proffer that this societal boundary that has been forced upon racialized or historically marginalized actors, is no longer of service in the theatre industry. Ferrara echoes the sentiments held by A3 in her presentation, as she positions her ethnic identity, not just as a powerful tool but a “superpower” rather than an obstacle, in casting for roles. The core belief is the belief in oneself as an actor, capable of doing anything that we put our minds to.

Summary

My intention is not to discount any of the work that has been done in the past, but to instead think about how it affects our future in theatre as actors. In my mind, everything has value, even if I do not agree with something. This paradigm is at the centrality of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Acting as if diversity and inclusivity in theatre does not matter is detrimental to the acting profession. Holding this sentiment as an actor is a disservice to audiences who crave authenticity. I believe that this is what A3 is saying, and I support their vision of a new way of producing meaningful and connective stories for audiences – and ourselves as performers.

CHAPTER FIVE:

IN THE GREY

Actor 4 is a Black, mid-thirties, homosexual, male professional actor. He is a member of the Canadian Actor's Equity Association. He is of African descent, and lives and works as a professional and community theatre actor in Lethbridge. He also works as a wedding decorator and party planner. He has been in a variety of musical theatre productions for New West Theatre in Lethbridge. Musical theatre is his main acting genre, and his favorite, as he loves to sing and express himself. It is also one of the only genres in theatre that allows him to express and sing, to represent his African culture.

I invited Actor 4 to participate in this interview to provide insight from the perspective of a Black actor. I refer to Actor 4 as 'A4' for the purposes of this interview. I interviewed A4 via Zoom, in late June of 2023. I call the following excerpts from our interview 'In the Grey' because he used this idiom in our interview, in reference to how diversity in theatre in Southern Alberta is evolving. Here are some highlights of our conversation:

AR: What are your thoughts on the colonization of storytelling in Canadian theatre over the past century?

A4: *The majority of stories being told on the stage definitely don't come from us (the Black community). Producers and directors pick me to play the "token Black/tenor singer male" roles in musical theatre productions. It gets very tiring. It takes a lot of time, energy, heart, spirit, and soul to play roles. I wish that directors wouldn't take the path of least resistance, and instead cast a "wider net" for finding suitable actors to fit roles. There have been many moments in my theatre*

career where I had to adjust and fit into a mold, in order to fulfill an expectation.

Personal Analysis

As he is a Black performer, I cannot fully identify with A4. However, as a Métis performer, I am able to understand and appreciate why he would feel that way. Given the current landscape in theatre, I am curious as to how directors and producers in Southern Alberta are going to cast a “wider net” in hiring practices? This is a difficult challenge, because casting directors have minimal control over who auditions as a result of a casting call.

Source Analysis

In an interview with Indigenous Canadian director Yvette Nolan, Edmonton-based independent scholar, Charlie Peters, reflects upon Nolan’s approach to guiding actors, instead of directing them. He indicates that Nolan’s approach in guiding actors through a scene creates more authenticity and sincerity in the processes of staging a play. He states: “surely then, we must consider the collaborator in relation to other artists, to the process one wishes to undertake, and not only to some purportedly objective idea of talent.” Peters reiterates Nolan’s values as a director, namely his belief in how theatre must evolve following world-changing movements, such as Black Lives Matter, a response to centuries-long violent oppression of Black human beings (Peters 19).

Summary

It is crucial for directors to advocate for equal and fair representation of actors’ lived experiences, representative of *their* world in theatrical narrative, rather than purportedly pigeonholing racialized actors into playing certain roles that fit their vision, to which A4 alludes. Members of the Black community are not always called upon to be active participants, involved in the consideration of plays produced in a season by the wide range of Canadian theatre

companies. Canadian theatre needs more directors who are willing to take risks, such as Djanet Sears, who continuously advocates for the decolonization of theatre practices, and cultivates new and innovative ways of providing opportunities for Black characters to be showcased on stage.

AR: What are your thoughts on the decolonization of storytelling in Canadian theatre over the past century?

A4: *Freedom and equal opportunity. Opportunities to learn about other people's cultures and lived experiences.*

Personal Analysis

As a proponent of A4's response to this question, I wanted to revisit Djanet Sears' contributions to Canadian theatre, as she serves as a prime example of A4's points concerning opportunities for Black actors. Sears took a social, financial, and creative risk when she directed *Harlem Duet* at the Stratford Festival in 2006. I briefly write about Sears' intentions with regards to this production in Chapter One. In the stages of my literary review, I was captivated by Sears' commentary, how she reflected on the hiring of White actors being "the norm." Sears took a classical British play, *Othello*, written by Shakespeare, and redefined the parameters of the story, by casting Black actors to play characters who have historically been portrayed by White actors. Additionally, she infused *Othello* with Rap, R & B and Blues music, genres that were historically created by Black artists, in order to decolonize and re structure how the play has been traditionally brought to life on stage (Dickinson 191 - 192). While staging a reimagined production such as this one in Southern Alberta could provide actors, inclusive of A4, the *opportunity* to play a character in a Shakespearean play as a Black performer (especially as a musical theatre artist), one creative aspect would be missing. My interpretation of A4's testimony suggests that decolonizing how

stories are told on the stages of Canadian theatres should be more flexible. For example, in the case of *Harlem Duet*, Sears tailored it to represent Black history and influence in modern culture. A4 spoke of this in a thoughtful manner throughout our interview, with careful consideration of words such as “freedom,” and sentiments such as providing “opportunities to learn about other people’s culture and lived experiences.”

Source Analysis

Will there be an opportunity (either produced by or provided to) the community of Black actors who live and work in Southern Alberta, to stage a play which has been created solely by them? Further research into my inquiry indicates that there is currently nothing on the horizon for theatre companies nor Black artists in Lethbridge. However, Ghost River Theatre, a Calgary based theatre production company, produced a devised movement piece in 2022 called *The Anthropology of Blackness, a Response in Movements*. The production featured an all-Black cast, inclusive of one Latino male performer. According to Ghost River Theatre’s website, the production was an “intergenerational exploration through the intersectionality of Blackness. The Black experience is a polyolith-ever-changing, ever-shifting, ever-flexing - and we are the griots, harbingers, keepers, tellers of *our* stories” (“The Anthropology of Blackness”). The words “tellers of *our* stories” run in the same vein as A4’s words regarding opportunities for Black actors to share their lived experiences with audiences. Another example is a touring devised piece that came to Calgary in 2016, *Black Boys*, produced by Toronto-based theatre company Buddies in Bad Times, featured a cast of all Black, homosexual males (“Black Boys”).

Summary

A Black/2SLGBTQI+ positive production such as *Black Boys* would surely be a perfect fit for A4 to be a part of, but he lives and works full time as an event planner in Lethbridge. He is incredibly passionate about acting but finds it difficult to find suitable and *sustainable* employment as a Black actor living in Southern Alberta. The experience of playing a character in live theatre should not feel systematically oppressive to any actor, especially to one who has been experiencing oppression for the majority of their life.

AR: How do you feel about the stories that are currently being produced on stages in Southern Alberta?

A4: I feel hopeful, but there is a lot more work to do. We as actors need to support theatre. I want to be of service and connect with local audiences. Theatre is an industry, and industries require money. We have a responsibility to keep the ecosystem alive. I know that we [Black actors] are few and far between here, but opportunities are coming. I want a plethora of choices, a buffet of options, for Black actors.

Personal Analysis

A4 referred to theatre as an “ecosystem” in our conversation. In further comments made by A4 in our discussion, he made mention (via use of this clever metaphor), that theatre is an ecosystem because it feeds itself in order to stay alive, relevant, and sustainable. He spoke about how theatre is motivated and fed by money rather than cultural diversity. It is my understanding that in order for theatre companies to stay in business, artistic directors typically favour producing shows that will draw in audiences in order to fill seats and make money. Afterall, theatres, like working actors, also have bills to pay. What A4 states is important, because he suggests taking a

closer look at how theatre can be more culturally supportive and financially sustainable. In other words, these two paradigms do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Source Analysis

In an article published in a *Journal of Contemporary Drama*, Martin Middeke and Martin Riedelsheimer imply (in a methodological context), that theatre is self-reflexive. Self-reflection as a creator, actor and audience member of theatre is critical because it allows for all contributors of the “ecosystem” to determine what needs to change in order to get better. Relating to A4’s comments about creating a sustainable system for theatre, the authors proffer that “theatre and its components of text and performance practice constitute, like literature or art in general, an ecological and, at the same time, ecocritical lens and medium of reflection on contradictions which lay bare the utter complexity and heterogeneity of our (cultural) environment. In a symbolic way, theatre articulates in text and performance what is *marginalized, neglected, or excluded in its wider civilizational frames*” (Middeke et al. 4).

Summary

Theatre provides a platform which calls attention to the interconnectedness and diversity present in society. Theatre continues to evolve in Canada, and Southern Alberta. What is staged at a local level ultimately reveals a deeper understanding of our world. A4 advocates for Black actors to be a stronger voice in our local theatre scene, so that actors’ performances can connect with audiences on a deeper level. To me, performances can become a reflection of what is important to actors as people, not just as actors playing characters in a play. A4 also presents the notion that local theatre companies should support this by providing Black actors with more opportunities to play culturally significant characters, as opposed to filling a spot-on stage with a token Black actor.

CHAPTER SIX: KEY FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS

The interviews with the actors offered insight into the current climate of live theatre in Canada, and more specifically, Lethbridge and Calgary. Each of the actors spoke of their experiences regarding diversity and inclusion in Canadian theatre, and how it has affected them as professional theatre practitioners in Southern Alberta. I examined each of their responses thoroughly, related it to source material, and attempted to make a connection with their perspectives from my own lived experiences.

A1's views regarding diversity and inclusion for actors in theatre aim to address issues of actor agency, and alternative theatrical storytelling options. She contributes to how theatre is evolving in Canada. As a White female actor, she adds to the conversation by opening up about her experiences with racism in theatre in Southern Alberta. This is significant because it is unfair to judge an actor's abilities to portray a character, based upon the colour of their skin or their cultural heritage. It is important that actors be recognized for their talents and skills, rather than subscribing to a reduction of what roles and opportunities should be available to every actor, regardless of their race or ethnicity. As a feminist female actor who mostly presents as White, I established a link with A2's understanding of how live theatre currently operates in Canada and Southern Alberta specifically. We have had an arduous time establishing ourselves in the industry as females.

A2's thoughts on creating more diversity in live theatre were complex. A2 spoke of a relationship that Canadians have built up over time, based on a set of systems with our American and British counterparts. I appreciate his self-reflective commentary of becoming a part

of those systems, inclusive of his words “I’ve been colonized.” His opinions on working our way out of those systems as actors, initiated by the formation of his intriguing question “is it even possible?” is of great interest to me moving forward. I intend to discover if it is, indeed, possible.

A3’s reflections to their past, their continuing journey, and their position moving forward is inspiring to me as a performer, teacher, and researcher of the fine arts. I honoured our time together with a prayer on a candle before and after our interview and had a continuous smudge smoking until completion of our stream of consciousness conversation. The cleansing of beliefs and hardships which no longer serve us, in synchronicity with our combined Indigenous ancestry and energies, allowed us to have fruitful and meaningful dialogue. We discovered things together in conversation, and I was enlightened and encouraged by our collective voices, working together to unpack what theatre means to them, and to me. I learned that they were not hesitant to take risks. Ultimately, A3’s intrepidity will hopefully benefit racialized actors who have found themselves in the same positions in the pursuit of a career in acting, like they have.

A4’s consciousness of where he positions himself as an actor, with a desire to represent his community – the *Black* community, is the crux of my research. To me, being equal and recognizing the need for equality are two different things. They both come at costs, one larger than the other. A4 wants to be recognized as an equal voice in the theatre community, housed within the city of which he lives and works in as a Black, homosexual man. Although we did not converse much about his sexual identity, he did relate it to his adoration for musical theatre. To him, music is a fundamental part of being a Black human. A4 wants to have equality in roles available to him, as to avoid being tokenized in relationship to his sexual identity, or to being a Black man. A4 desires a change in casting opportunities for Black actors in theatre.

Although humans will never be equal (many stories have been told on stage about supremely unethical, real-life pursuits of this aim, that have resulted in genocide), we can and should recognize and celebrate our differences. That is an achievable goal in life, and in live theatre. How can we as artistic creators manifest this concept in theatre? Having now concluded with the interviews, I will move on to a case study, which may help to reveal a possibility.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

YISSTSIYI (YIH-tsee) – A Case Study

Yisstsiyi is the Blackfoot word for listen.

7.1 The Making of *Yisstsiyi*

The production process of *Yisstsiyi* started in May of 2023 with a university class, which was also open to residents of Lethbridge, and surrounding areas. The class was designed and facilitated by Drama Professor and Interim Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts (University of Lethbridge), Dr. Shelley Scott, in collaboration with Indigenous theatre actors and directors: Caleigh Crow, Marshall Vielle, along with Neil Fleming (who is non-Indigenous), the Executive Director of Calgary based theatre company, MT7. It included a series of guest speakers from various Blackfoot and Cree communities in Southern Alberta, as well as visiting artists (singers, dancers, museum, and art curators). Some of the visiting Indigenous artists included Cree Canadian actress Michelle Thrush, the current Artistic director from MT7, and Blackfoot singer, songwriter and actress, Stephanie Brave Rock. Brave Rock played the role of Sky Woman in *Yisstsiyi*, from the Indigenous Canadian creation story of ‘Turtle Island,’ also known as North America. Elders such as Joyce Healy, Harley Bastien and Amethyst First Rider also frequented the class. The Elders shared stories, knowledge, and traditional values of the Blackfoot people.

Acting workshops were held by the directors of MT7, Caleigh Crow and Marshall Vielle. A standout class for me was with Michelle Thrush, who shared her experiences and knowledge of portraying Indigenous characters, as a Juno-award winning actress. On a personal note, she resembles my late Grandma, who was a Cree woman.

There were also several field trips, including one to Writing on Stone Provincial Park (along the Milk River), Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (near Fort MacLeod), and Fort Whoop-Up in Lethbridge. Students were encouraged to submit daily journal entries, share personal stories of identity, and offer a contribution to the production.

On the last day of the class, students shared poems, dances, art pieces, scripts and songs with their fellow classmates, University of Lethbridge Faculty, Elders, and directors from MT7. The cross-collaborative class, between the University of Lethbridge and Making Treaty 7, was a beneficial learning experience for students because it allowed for an opportunity to learn about Indigenous culture. It also created a safe space for students, guest speakers and artists to share their unique perspectives on how to share stories. Vielle spoke of stories as gifts to share, the storyteller gifts the story, and the audiences' reception of such comes with a responsibility to express gratitude, and to continue sharing the stories with others. The performance displays from the students, whether in the artistic form of dance, music, or storytelling, would inevitably inform how the script would be shaped and edited. The journal entries, submitted by the students after every class and field trip, would also be included as theatrical vignettes⁹. This collective approach to story creation continued into the rehearsal process of *Yisstsiiyi* in September of 2023.

Casting for the show commenced in early September of 2023. The casting call was coordinated by the playwrights¹⁰ and directors, Caleigh Crow, and Marshall Vielle, and the University of Lethbridge. Although the casting call was adequately attended, several students from the Department of Drama were hesitant to audition for the show. Nonetheless, the show was cast with a wide range of actors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, first-year students and non-drama majors. Expectations for the production were laid out during the first rehearsal of the show. The

⁹ A vignette is a short scene in a play (“Vignette in Performance”).

¹⁰ Neil Fleming is also a noted playwright of *Yisstsiiyi*.

main expectation for the actors and crew was that *Yisstsiyi* was to be a respectful, tasteful, and holistic piece, inclusive of many voices and perspectives. The term “devised” was utilised by the directors, in order to frame how *Yisstsiyi* was to be created.

The directors facilitated a safe space for the actors to authentically express themselves, and to make offerings of alternate lines, ideas for blocking and character portrayal throughout the rehearsal process. Although the cast was inclusive of differing race, ethnicities, and cultures, fostering of relationships amongst the actors was encouraged through Indigenous rituals, such as smudging and sharing circles.

Smudging is a ceremonial practice that involves burning substances with medicinal properties, such as sage or sweetgrass, in order to clear the body, mind, spirit, and the space the bodies inhabit (Smith 21). For the cast, directors, and crew of *Yisstsiyi*, this was an essential part of the rehearsal and production process. The intent of smudging was to clear negative energy and emotions which did not positively serve the people involved in the production, and their highest good. The spiritual essence of the smudging ceremony in the production was in honor of deeply entrenched Indigenous ways of knowing. The directors, designers and cast smudged in *Ikaisskini*, a designated space in the University of Lethbridge before every rehearsal. *Ikaisskini* is the Blackfoot word for gathering place. On one occasion, before the very first rehearsal in the David Spinks Theatre in the University of Lethbridge, the directors received special permissions to smudge in the rehearsal space, to signify a cleansing of all the energies that have encompassed the space over the years.

There was a scene in the first draft of the play, which was a contribution from one of the Blackfoot students in the class, in which a baby is born in a tipi, and the actors on stage smudge the tipi, each other, and the “baby.” The aesthetics of the scene were incredibly powerful, and

audience members surely would have felt the spiritualism and intent behind this scene, from the initial draft of the play. There was an understanding that this scene carried the intention to respect and honour Indigenous traditions. I personally wish that this scene had made the final cut, as it would have brought the story line back full circle, combining themes of birth and creation from the story of Turtle Island.

Post smudge, the directors encouraged a sharing circle for the actors and crew. Sharing circles in Canadian history were opportunities for Indigenous peoples to get together with their communities to make public statements, mostly about national commissions brought on by the government (Smith 121). In the rehearsals for *Yisstsiiyi*, the directors prompted actors and crew to share stories about their day, lives, and how they were feeling. Although labelled as a “check-in/check-out” in theatre practice, the facilitation of conversation was in honour of traditional Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge. Furthermore, it allowed actors to set up routines and parameters for the day, and to find common ground and connect with themselves and each other.

The directors were explicit in their mandate for the rehearsals, with support from the cast. *Yisstsiiyi* was to be about the following concepts: Showcasing unique identities, making connections, and highlighting Indigenous culture and storytelling. I will utilise these three concepts to explain the process of creating and staging *Yisstsiiyi* in this chapter.

7.2 Showcasing Unique Identities

There is a line from the script for *Yisstsiiyi* that reads: “I see no colour,” even from or non-Indigenous allies puts extreme strain on pathways towards reconciliation. This is because we are colour [...] being different [...] to be celebrated” (Crow, et al.). This line connects to the practice of colour-blind casting, as discussed in Chapter One. As previously highlighted, colour-blind casting processes in Canadian theatre can be problematic, for a variety of reasons. Colour-blind

casting can create a façade of diversity, which can inevitably hide covert discrimination. The practice can also act as a defence mechanism against any accusation of prejudice or discrimination. This can be a result of the assertion of not seeing colour (Day 344). If we don't see colour, we don't see the humanity of the actor. If we are to reconcile in society, we should also reconcile on stage. Furthermore, theatre practitioners and audiences should celebrate diversity in race, ethnicity, and culture on stage. *Yisstsiiyi* featured a diverse cast. The actors varied in age, gender identification and race. For example, there were actors which identified as Blackfoot, Métis, Cree, White, and East Indian.

The showcasing of unique and individual identities of the actors onstage allowed for the actors, directors, designers, and stage crew to make diverse connections with one another. For example, the Indigenous actresses in *Yisstsiiyi* wore ribbon skirts on stage. The ribbon skirts were designed by Blackfoot costume designer and University of Lethbridge alumni Jolane Houle. Houle took the time and consideration to design the traditional ribbon skirts to comfortably fit the bodies of each of the actresses. In Indigenous culture, ribbon skirts represent womanhood. They are important to the matriarchal representations that exist within Indigenous communities because they express strength (Caron). In turn, this collaborative process allowed for each of the creative contributors to make a connection to audiences, via the muse of the courageous actresses on stage. I use the term courageous, because a couple of the Blackfoot actresses had never performed in a play on stage before.

7.3 Making Connections

Yisstsiiyi is a philosophical and didactic play. Indigenous traditions, ways of knowing, spirituality, language preservation, race relations, connections to the land, familial relations, connections to animals, and themes of homosexuality are at the heart of the play. The word

“connection” came up several times in conversation and direction throughout the rehearsal process. Making connections to each actor’s identity, to the other actors, and to the script were expressed as important components of creating and staging the play. This was understood and agreed upon by the cast, as the actors all saw themselves as the connectors of the devised stories of *Yisstsiiyi* to the audience.

Relating to *Yisstsiiyi*, a production company located in Toronto, Native Earth Performing Arts, is led by Indigenous theatre artists, much like Making Treaty 7 in Calgary. I briefly touched on Native Earth in my Literature Review. Founded in 1982, Native Earth is Canada's oldest professional Indigenous theatre company (“History”). In 2022, Native Earth Performing Arts produced playwright Kevin Loring’s *Where the Blood Mixes*. In the process of staging Loring’s play, the cast and the crew held several communication circles to guide the collective vision of the play. Their mandates for equity and inclusivity led them to decolonize westernized theatre departments, and instead implement perpetual creative collective conversations. This process allowed for actors to become an integral part of the production on a technical level, as well as facilitating an artistic vision for the play. The actors were not constrained to divisions in collaborative conversations amongst designers, and this allowed for a more unified creation process (Shore 144).

In rehearsals, the directors of *Yisstsiiyi* communicated the importance of building empathy, an important tool in theatre. The actors engaged in conversations with one another as human beings, not just actors. As a result, the characters in the play became more authentic. The authenticity of the writing, combined with the diverse perspectives of the actors, came together in synchronicity with creating connections to the text.

7.4 Highlighting Indigenous Culture and Storytelling

In rehearsal for *Yisstsiiyi*, some of the non-Indigenous actors voiced their concerns about not wanting to take away from any Indigenous actors, and how stories are shared in Blackfoot culture. Although an honest admission, this is problematic because in order to embrace diversity on stage, cultural stories should be explored, seen, and heard by all participants. It also implies that a non-Indigenous actors' perspective on storytelling *could* be perceived to be more valuable than an Indigenous actors' perspective. It also suggests a hesitancy to recount a story from the Blackfoot culture, presented by a non-Indigenous actor. Indigenous actor, director, author, and playwright Yvette Nolan indicates the following in her book, *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture*:

One of the obstacles to inclusion is the fear of doing something wrong or offending.... these fears are valid, but if we are going to go forward together in a good way, then we must take the first steps, and that involves risk. Artists must risk giving over work to producers who may ask questions over and over again. We as Indigenous artists must be willing to teach, to share, and to guide. Non-Indigenous artists must be willing to ask, to listen, and to learn (Nolan 1437).

There was a responsibility in the rehearsal room, known and felt by all, to tell the stories of *Yisstsiiyi* in a respectful manner. There was no right or wrong, even for non-Indigenous actors, and all creative offers were considered by the directors (one is Métis, the other Blackfoot). *Yisstsiiyi* means to listen. So, Nolan's perspectives on contributions from non-Indigenous actors can be conveyed through the title of the play.

A White actor in the cast of *Yisstsiiyi* stated that they were worried about not being equipped with the skills to tell Indigenous stories appropriately. They were worried about offending people of Indigenous (specifically Blackfoot) culture. This admission is understandable, because the reality is that the majority of non-Indigenous Canadians are exposed to cultural stories of Indigenous peoples via books, television, film, and theatre, historically created by White people. In an open letter to politicians in 2017, Canadian Indigenous artist Aylan Couchie states: “The appropriation of Indigenous stories, ways of being and artworks is simply an extension of colonialism and settlers' assertion of rights over the property of Indigenous people. The history of colonizing Indigenous identity through images, film and narratives has played its part in placing Indigenous perspectives at a subordinate level” (Couchie qtd. in Yakabuski).

Relating to Couchie’s comments on the colonial/settler perspective, Lethbridge is located on Blackfoot territory, Treaty 7. This land contains rich Indigenous history, filled with stories, artifacts, and a growing Indigenous population. Indigenous culture is progressively highlighted in art exhibitions, cultural events such as pow wows, and theatre productions in and around the city. There is a developing expectation in the arts and culture industry in Lethbridge and Calgary to spotlight art, culture, stories, and the history of Canadian Indigenous peoples, in a sensitive manner. I use the word industry, because at the end of the day, theatre is a business, and actors need to work. If opportunities of Indigenous theatre creations are not put forth for the public, then how can actors learn how to tell Indigenous stories on stage?

In the fall of 2023, running simultaneously with rehearsals for *Yisstsiiyi*, was New West Theatre of Lethbridge’s rendition of Canadian Indigenous playwright Tara Beagan’s *Honour Beat*. Cree Canadian actor Sandra Lamouche states the following in a review article: “I live in Fort Macleod, and I wanted to perform somewhere local rather than travelling. There needs to be more

opportunities for Indigenous theatre” (Lamouche qtd. in Amery). We are on the precipice of revolutionizing how theatre is created in Lethbridge and Calgary. Opportunities for Indigenous theatre are increasing, and *Yisstsiiyi* is setting a new precedence, especially at the University of Lethbridge.

In a pre-show marketing drop, an article was published by the University of Lethbridge, written by Communications Specialist Monica Lockett. Lockett states that the production of *Yisstsiiyi* is a historic first for the University of Lethbridge. Lockett interviewed both directors, Caleigh Crow, and Marshall Vielle. Crow comments that “*Yisstsiiyi* is a collectively devised theatre piece that incorporates a variety of storytelling techniques and theatre disciplines.” She continues: “It’s really special to create work that is so local and so specific to the place that we’re in...we wanted to hear what it means for Blackfoot people to talk about what they want to see depicted on the stage” (Crow qtd. in Lockett). This supports the emergence of new forms of theatre, which allows for the creation of stories to be told via actors serving as playwrights, in whichever capacity suits the needs of the show. In the case of *Yisstsiiyi*, the directors and collaborators from MT7 recognized that without the contributions from the actors, the show would not have reflected the Indigenous community with the amount of depth needed to put on a show of this magnitude. By magnitude, I am highlighting the show as being the first Indigenous-led theatrical play to have ever been produced and staged by the University of Lethbridge, which holds significant social weight in this community – Blackfoot territory. *Yisstsiiyi* opened on November 6th to a cheerful and receptive audience. Overall, the run of the play was well attended, with attendee numbers running over half capacity on most nights, as evidenced in table 3, below:

Table 3University of Lethbridge Box Office Samples: 2022/2023 Season¹¹

Event Name	Date/Time	Available	Reservations	Sell Rate %
Seussified Christmas Carol	10/11/23/7:30	450	115	25.55
Seussified Christmas Carol	10/12/23/7:30	450	143	31.78
Seussified Christmas Carol	10/13/23/7:30	450	175	38.89
Seussified Christmas Carol	10/14/23/1:30	450	268	59.56
Yisstsiiyi (Making Treaty 7)	11/6/23/7:30	450	302	67.11
Yisstsiiyi (Making Treaty 7)	11/7/23/7:30	450	127	28.22
Yisstsiiyi (Making Treaty 7)	11/8/23/10:30	450	450	100
Yisstsiiyi (Making Treaty 7)	11/9/23/7:30	450	212	47.12
Yisstsiiyi (Making Treaty 7)	11/10/23/7:30	450	203	45.1
Dr. Faustus	11/1/22/7:30	94	93	98.94
Dr. Faustus	11/2/22/7:30	94	92	97.88
Dr. Faustus	11/3/22/7:30	94	94	100
Dr. Faustus	11/4/22/7:30	94	94	100
Dr. Faustus	11/5/22/7:30	94	94	100
Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors	10/5/21/7:30	450	190	42.22
Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors	10/6/21/7:30	450	116	25.77
Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors	10/7/21/7:30	450	95	25.11
Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors	10/8/21/7:30	450	122	27.11
Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors	10/9/21/7:30	450	190	42.22
The Dumb Waiter	10/04/22/7:30	56	56	100
The Dumb Waiter	10/5/22/7:30	56	56	100
The Dumb Waiter	10/6/22/7:30	56	56	100
The Dumb Waiter	10/7/22/7:30	56	56	100
The Dumb Waiter	10/8/22/7:30	56	56	100
The Little Prince	2/10/23/6:30	450	220	48.9
The Little Prince	2/11/23/11:00	450	116	25.78
The Little Prince	2/11/23/4:00	450	188	41.78
The Little Prince	2/16/23/6:30	450	210	46.66
The Little Prince	2/17/23/6:30	450	213	46.9
The Little Prince	2/18/23/11:00	450	181	40.23
The Little Prince	2/18/23/4:00	450	250	55.55

Source: University of Lethbridge Box Office (Skinner, 2023).

¹¹ *Dr. Faustus* and *The Dumb Waiter* were staged in the University of Lethbridge's David Spinks Theatre, which has less seating capacity than the University of Lethbridge's main stage, where *Yisstsiiyi* was staged.

All of the theatrical elements came together, from pre-production to rehearsals to staging, in a manner that drew attention to the collaborative efforts of all involved. One of the directors, Marshall Vielle, requested that a member from the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lethbridge speak the Land before each show. Vielle offered that this was a more personalized recognition of the importance of where the University of Lethbridge is situated (on Blackfoot territory), rather than a digital recording. On opening night, the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts Heather Davis-Fisch, spoke the Land Acknowledgement to the audience. The audience on opening night included a few senators from the University of Lethbridge.

Although I was humbled to serve as the Music Consultant for *Yisstsiyi*, I was even more honoured to see the play with my family. On the night that my family and I attended, the lighting, set designer, and Instructor from the Department of Drama, Dave Smith, spoke the Land Acknowledgement on stage, with his young son in arm. Smith designed the main set platform piece to resemble a turtle, in reference to the creation story of 'Turtle Island.' This was something that he expressed pride in designing during his opening speech, prior to the Land Acknowledgement. Additionally, various Indigenous Elders were present to speak a prayer in Blackfoot before each performance. The list of Elders who said prayers include Ramona Big Head, Cathy Hunt, Shirlee Crow Shoe, Dr. Leroy Little Bear, and Francis First Charger. The actors, specifically those of Indigenous heritage, voiced to Dr. Scott that hearing the Land Acknowledgements and prayers before each show meant a great deal to them.

In summation, *Yisstsiyi* was truly a collective creation. All voices were heard and respected. All offers were considered, with gratitude. There were two directors, but the actors' interpretations of the script played a critical part in the process of staging the story. In a final group email post-production, one of the Blackfoot actors, Tracy Weasel Moccasin, offered her

knowledge of how to say good-bye to a production that has ended. According to Weasel Moccasin, spirits must be called back to the actors' bodies, with pure intention from the actor, acknowledging that they performed well, and recognizing that it is time to move on to the next experience in their journey (Weasel Moccasin). *Yisstsiiyi* (to listen), set a new precedent for actors, directors, and creative contributors in Southern Alberta. The spirit of the show lives on within the hearts and minds of all who took part in such a unique collaboration.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

CONCLUSION

Actors in the Southern Alberta region are actively seeking out opportunities to diversify theatre. Moreover, they are looking to cultivate unique and personalized artistic experiences as theatre professionals. Specifically, racialized, and historically marginalized actors are focused on diversifying their portfolio, inclusive of even embodying characters that have been traditionally casted by White actors. They are also forging new experiences in theatre, such as collective creation or devised theatre, which allows them to build characters and narrative, that showcase their cultural and ethnic identities.

My research process has led me to the conclusion that actors are looking to culturally identify with themselves and each other as distinctive individuals, in order to create a more inclusive environment. Through the live theatre performance medium, actors are wanting to express themselves in a more authentic manner, as to be of service to their audiences by making more meaningful connections via theatrical narrative. A1, for instance, articulates this point through a question of “who is your audience?” in her interview. I am a firm believer of knowing who your audience is as an actor. I suggest that if a (casting) director chooses not to cast ethnically diverse actors for a show in a city or town with a diverse population, there is a missed opportunity for audiences to see people who they could potentially relate to on stage. A3 speaks about this in their experiences at the Carriage House Theatre in Cardston, AB, a town (and surrounding area) that is home to one of the largest Blackfoot populations in all of Canada. The interviews that I have conducted with actors from Lethbridge and Calgary, AB support this theory. The information and knowledge shared by these four actors is further reinforced by evidence derived from a variety

of written works, interviews, and media from across Canada and beyond.

Chapter One outlines my research methods and processes. Chapter Two highlights information provided by A1, from her perspective as a female working actor, and with whom I identify. Chapter Three offers insight from A2, an Asian male, professional actor. Chapter Four gives bearing to my theory, through the lens of an Indigenous actor (A3), whom I also identify with. Chapter five provides testimony from A4, a Black actor, who struggles to find sustainable employment as an actor in Lethbridge, AB. I conclude the interview section with my findings from each of these interviews in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven gives a behind the scenes case study of the production of *Yisstsiiyi* at the University of Lethbridge, which was an integral production for the University of Lethbridge and the Southern Alberta region. For the first time, audiences were able to see a didactic and cultural play about Indigenous heritage and traditions, inclusive of Indigenous and other racialized actors on the main stage at the University of Lethbridge. Chapter Eight concludes my research regarding diversity and inclusion in theatre in Southern Alberta.

In my research, I have searched for the actor's truth and purpose within the theatre industry in Canada. I have sought to make a valuable contribution in my discipline, the performing arts, and I maintain a lifelong advocacy in support of live theatre in the city in which I currently reside, Lethbridge, and the city I was born and raised in, Calgary. Throughout my time of researching and writing this thesis, I have discovered that it is the first of its kind at the University of Lethbridge. My hope is that this thesis perpetuates further conversation regarding diversity and inclusivity in Canadian theatre.

Given the scope of a master's Thesis, my research necessarily has its limitations. Firstly, I chose a relatively small sample of candidates to interview. However, I selected each of the four candidates because of their diverse backgrounds, particularly as actors of a recognizable race, as

a whole sample. To that point, the second limitation to note would be that the interview candidates were not of mixed race. To clarify, A1 is visibly, a White person. A2 is visibly, an Asian person, and so on. This leads to the third limitation, which is the recognition of an actor who identifies as non-binary. For example, it would be difficult (and perhaps presumptuous) for an audience to be able to identify A3 as non-binary, unless it was revealed in the playbill, or showcased on stage somehow. How non-binary actors identify with their bodies and their sexuality on stage, in relationship to the character that they are playing, would be an interesting research project and case study for future scholarly work. Lastly, my research focuses on Southern Alberta, particularly Lethbridge and Calgary. While the interviews may not be entirely reflective of the current beliefs and opinions held by *all* Canadian actors, I have augmented these interviews with perspectives from a wide variety of North American scholars and performers, which I have incorporated into this thesis.

Further investigation into these limitations can be made in future research. Whether I plan to extrapolate more information by expanding my sample of interview candidates, in pursuit of a doctorate degree, or another interested party becomes invested in furthering my research, is up for future discovery. In either case, I recommend expanding the search for actors of other visibly racialized minorities, to participate in interviews or a case study. I also suggest the inclusion of sexual orientation and self-identification and researching how those qualifiers become relatable on stage. Issues for actors with physical disabilities is also an interesting field of study. Finally, I encourage opening up this research further to include other parts of Canada. For example, what does the current landscape of professional or community theatre look like in rural Saskatchewan?

In principle, advocacy for increased opportunities for racialized or historically marginalized actors in theatre is apparent in Southern Alberta. Production companies in Lethbridge in Calgary, whether small or large scale, are having active conversations about diversifying theatre. In Lethbridge, these conversations include putting forth ideas for production seasons which showcase non-traditional theatre practices. Examples of this include cross collaborations, (such as the University of Lethbridge combining creative forces with Calgary's MT7), curating innovative collective creation or devised theatre pieces, and bringing in guests to teach and direct actors about cultural storytelling and performance.

In practice, theatre in Lethbridge has been transitioning towards inclusivity for nearly a decade. Although slow to change, theatre companies such as Theatre Outré encouraged audiences to think outside the proverbial box, and garnered favor towards alternative means of producing theatre. In addition, the Department of Drama at the University of Lethbridge is currently in the process of a transition. With the favorable reception of *Yisstsiyi*, the principles of diversity and inclusion in theatre, combined with the recent shift towards Indigeneity, are gaining acceptance and moving towards implementation. For example, the Department of Drama recently announced shows for their upcoming season, (which commences in the fall of 2024), which will include yet another Indigenous-led production. *alterNatives*, written by Drew Hayden Taylor, will once again feature a cast of primarily Blackfoot and Métis performers. It is set to be directed by *Yisstsiyi*'s Marshall Vielle and will feature costumes designed and manufactured by Blackfoot costume designer Jolane Houle. Moving forward it is my hope that the Department of Drama will continue to advocate for one Indigenous theatre piece to be included in each season. As I have attended several department meetings throughout my tenure at the University of Lethbridge as a graduate student, I attest that this has been communicated about at great lengths. Although I appreciate the

advocacy for such, perhaps the Department of Drama might consider the facilitation of theatre programs which focus on Indigenization as part of its foundation for learning about theatre practices and creating theatre. For example, the Department of Drama could consider offering specific courses about Indigenous theatre. I proffer, having served as a music consultant on *Yisstsiiy*, that a course in music and sound design in Indigenous theatre would be of great value to the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge. As of right now, there is no formal training for actors or designers to diversify their craft in areas such as Indigenous theatre, beyond what is currently being offered on the course calendar. While Indigenization is becoming a more active pursuit for the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge, I offer that actors in Southern Alberta want to expand their portfolios by participating in more culturally diverse productions, such as *Yisstsiiy*. After all, the expansion of an actor's portfolio can only be advantageous, because it enhances their experience and knowledge within theatre, resulting in more casting opportunities. The vast majority of actors, as evidenced by the interviews in this thesis, find themselves having to relocate to larger centres such as Calgary, Vancouver, or Toronto, in order to be gainfully employed as professional theatre practitioners.

While principles and practices are starting to align in theatre in Lethbridge, one important issue remains: a production company can only cast based upon those who audition. So, if there is an expectation amongst actors to diversify theatre in Southern Alberta, moving forward, people of racialized minorities who dream of becoming actors should feel confident that they have opportunities to partake in cultural theatre. A2 speaks of this with respects to ethnic theatre in Chapter Two. Actors should embrace the opportunities that are now being provided by theatre training institutions, such as the University of Lethbridge. In essence, we currently have a supply and demand issue on our hands. The issue being paradoxically twofold: there simply aren't enough

minority actors to fill roles for casting calls in Southern Alberta (specifically in Lethbridge), and the ongoing systemic racism (within and beyond the theatre), discourages racialized actors from auditioning. This topic deserves more attention and investigation, as more information is needed to discuss how it impacts live theatre in our region, both at the community and professional level.

The other issue that exists within the faculty of Fine Arts; Department of Drama at the University of Lethbridge, is the lack of Indigenous Instructors or Professors. Currently, there are no Instructors or Professors in the Department of Drama which identify as Indigenous or Métis, nor any other racialized identity for that matter. This *could* be one of the reasons as to why there is a lack of Indigenous or racialized student actors auditioning for plays. This theory deserves more attention and investigation, and I encourage the exploration of this matter, both in an academic and *political* manner.

The process of writing this thesis has been an enlightening and affirming experience for me. It has been enlightening because actors have a lot to say, and they want to actively contribute to current conditions in Canadian theatre. Live theatre performers are the purveyors of their craft but are sometimes limited in what they can create. This is because actors often adhere to the vision of the director, usually by the director's interpretations of the playwright's text. But when actors become the playwright and/or the director of the story as well, possibilities for including culturally relevant narratives, which can authentically connect to audiences via their lived experiences, can be born out of this practice. *Yisstsiiyi* serves as a perfect example of this method of diversifying theatre. Of course, there are many other ways of diversifying theatre in Canada, such as providing opportunities for racialized minorities in *all* areas of theatre to explore their creativity and contribute to more culturally engaging experiences.

To that end, as a Métis actor, I conclude that this research confirms that actors in Southern Alberta currently want more diversity and inclusion in theatre. Specifically, actors want more diversity in character roles made available to them. Ultimately, actors want more creative liberties and opportunities in theatre, inclusive of creating character roles which are more representative to who they are as people. I am personally creating opportunities for myself as the lead singer in a Lethbridge based rock band, to wear Indigenous apparel on stage when I perform in and around the city, so that future Indigenous musicians can hopefully be inspired to live out their dreams as proud Indigenous performers, too.

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APPENDIX 1: Photographs from *Yisstsiiyi*

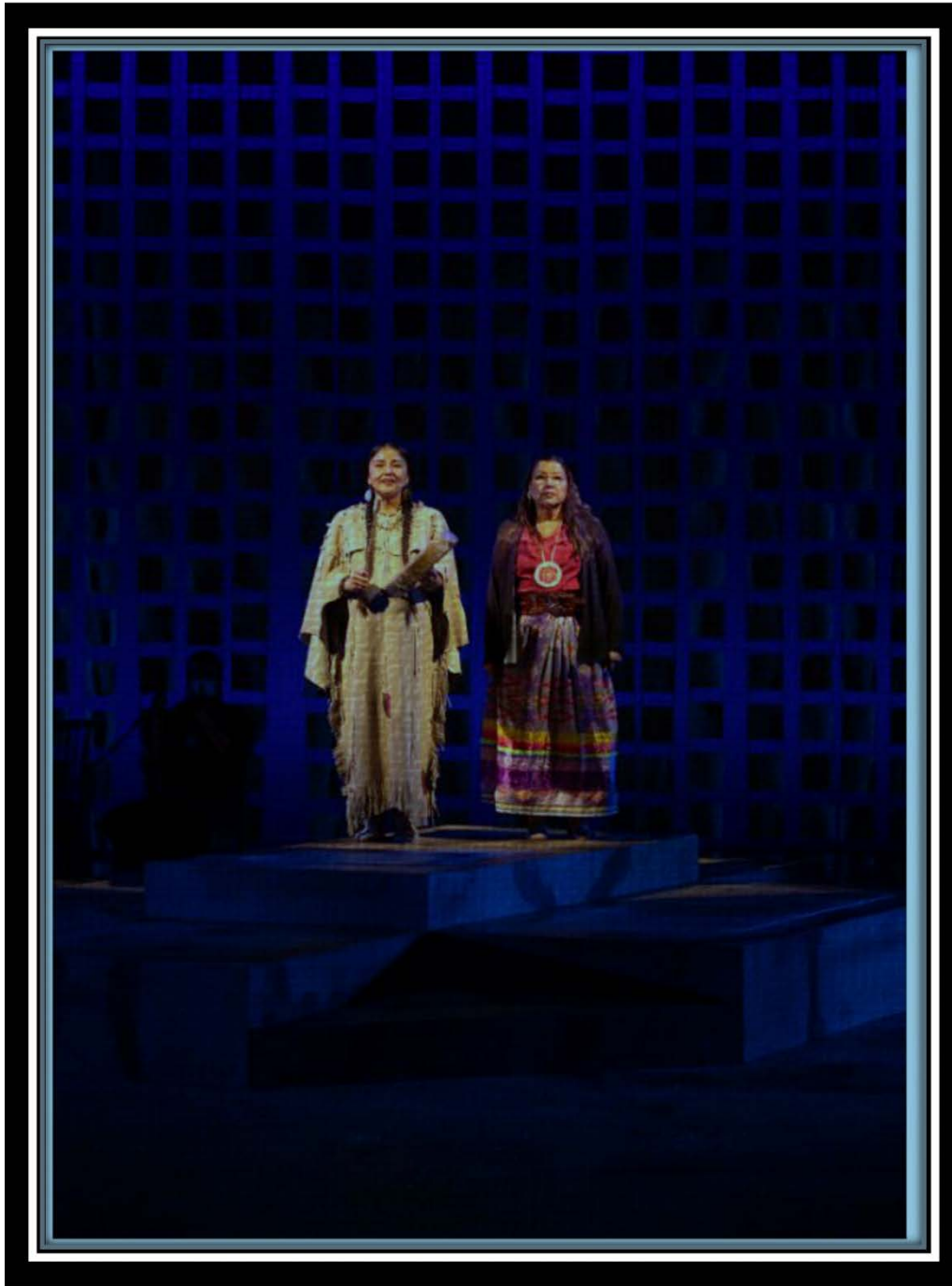


Figure 1: *Yisstsiiyi* – Sky Woman and the Narrator (Angeline Simon Photography©, Angeline Simon, 2023).

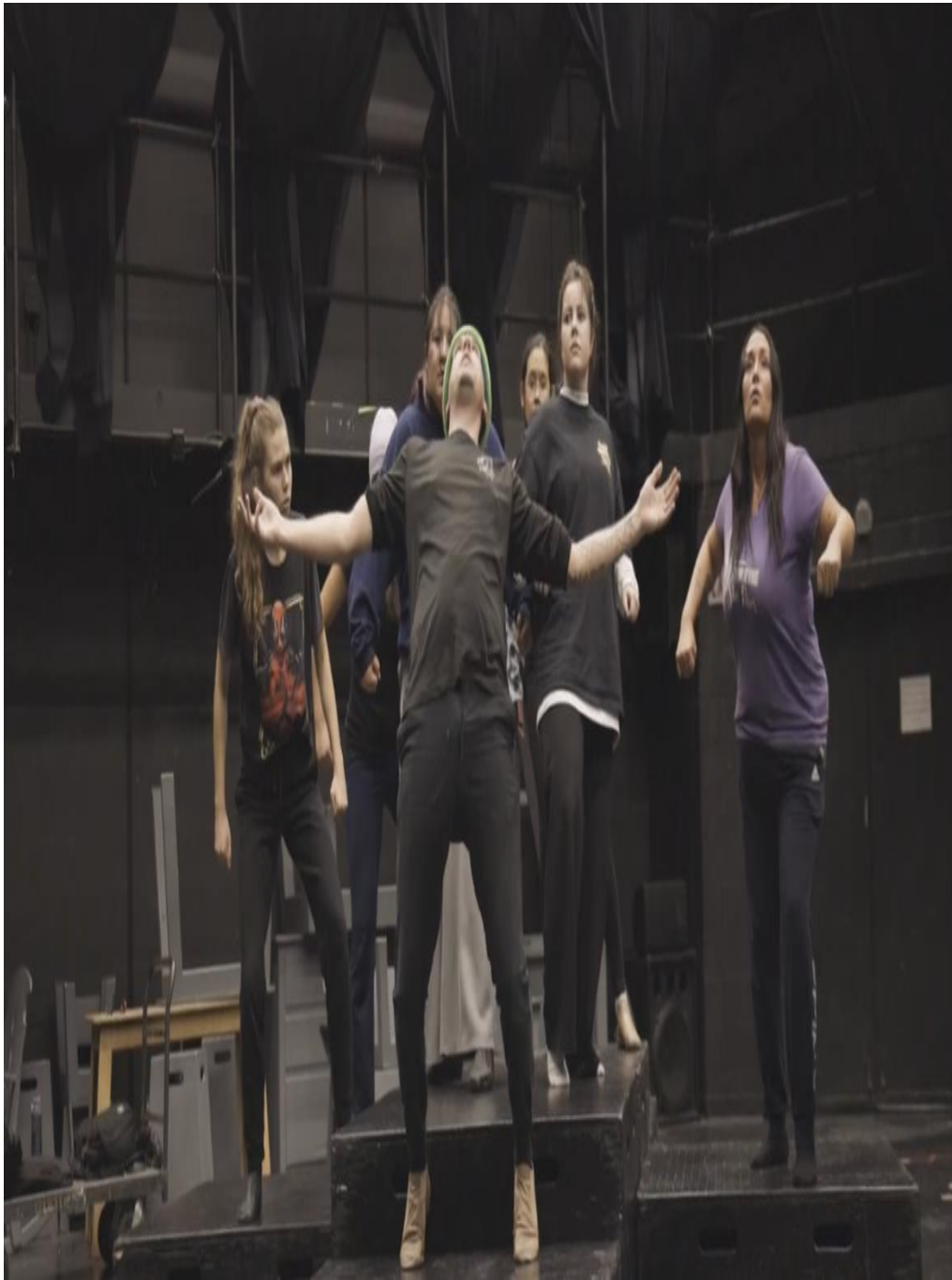


Figure 2: *Yisstsiyi* – A behind the scenes look at the cast in rehearsal (University of Lethbridge, Monica Lockett, 2023).