

Affinity or Extraction? The Institutionalization of Queer Arts Spaces

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J. Paul Halferty's article, "'There is no such thing as a gay play': *Canadian Theatre Review* and Gay Politics in the 1970s" (this issue), chronicling *CTR*'s first volume to address sexuality is a useful and fascinating examination of how mainstream Canadian theatre in the mid-1970s engaged with queerness: not a lot; with some contempt; and, predictably, only paying attention to the white cisgender gay male experience. Writing here from my desk in 2026, the optical difference is stark: Performance journals regularly chronicle the work of queer and trans artists, even racialized and Indigenous ones, sometimes even written by queer and trans writers. Queer artists are visible in the sector, there are several small and mid-sized companies across Canada mandated to program queer and trans work, and occasionally, queer arts workers are even represented in institutional leadership (though rarely are trans artists or queer BIPOC artists). Especially in major Canadian cities, queer artists are visible and staple parts of the scene.

Further, many affinity-based creative spaces, or barrier-reducing initiatives that prioritize marginalized groups, help to correct the imbalances in representation that are borne of overt and subconscious discrimination, create opportunities, and empower artists who might otherwise be relegated to the margins. Such initiatives have helped my own career. I have believed in, designed, and helmed many such spaces.

But so easily, that by-us-for-us, equity-seeking impulse can be distorted and appropriated by institutions that aren't actually trying to transform. Like the wider tides of industry, the theatre sector periodically purports to take up progressive change (as in the summer of 2020 after George Floyd's murder by the Minneapolis police when theatre companies en masse issued

solidarity statements with Black Lives Matter) but always returns to its neoliberal resting place, where austerity, competition over community, capital over creativity, and cult of personality all prevail. Indeed, rather than facilitating foundational change, the neoliberal co-opting of identity politics means that institutions now teach us that the same lived experiences that have unfairly provoked exclusion, isolation, and disenfranchisement (including within these institutions) are also the identities that can be commodified for professional advancement.

From theatre school, to emerging artist programs, to awards and prizes, to appealing to the tokenizing checkboxes of programmers, what does it do to the queer artist psyche to come of age in an environment that teaches artists to mine themselves for trauma to then turn into artistic material? What happens when you internalize the understanding that the parts of yourself that have been forged through interpersonal and intergenerational violence are the parts that will most easily endow you with professional success and notoriety? We forget to wonder if we list our social identities in our artist bios to honour our ancestors and communities or to elbow our way to the front.

How can we keep putting ourselves out there when it becomes impossible to tell if your good, hard, skilled work has earned you a spot in a given “room” or if you are there to check a box? In the process of being commissioned to write this very piece, while I sought to clarify the curatorial intention of engaging “responder” pieces to the ten feature articles in order to best conceive of an approach to the task, I was told that the responder pieces would help diversify the issue vis-à-vis the mostly white roster of feature writers. My ticket into this room: a brown-faced headshot and Muslim surname; a queer who is also a woman and of-colour; the correct casting choice to respond to a piece by a white male scholar’s historiographical critique of a too-white and too-male queer history. But, would I not have—have I not—made similar considerations when in curatorial roles? As Olúfemi O. Táíwò says in his book *Elite Capture*, “The first rules we learn to follow are the ones that apply to the room we are in” (Táíwò 137)—and not the ones from elsewhere that could transform “the room.” I suppose I have lasted as long as I have in this sector by playing the same game.

Arts institutions are particularly expert in practising what Táíwò calls the “politics of deference”: “Centering the most marginalized in my experience has usually meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to whoever is already in the room and appears to fit a social category associated with some form of oppression—regardless of what they have or have not experienced, or what they do or do not know about the matter at hand” (Táíwò 140). This masks real inequity and perpetuates the status quo, because certainly, the more we “cosmetically elevate the perspectives *in* the room, the harder it becomes to change the world *outside* of the room” (140). What this costs us is significant. When arts institutions privilege visibility and the semblance of change above all else, it weakens, if not dismantles, the possibility for real community-based political organizing, for actual transformative shifts toward inclusion and liberation. In Maurice Mitchell’s article “Building Resilient Organizations,” he puts it thusly:

Genuflecting to individuals solely based on their socialized identities or personal stories deprives them of the conditions that sharpen arguments, develop skills, and win debates. We infantilize members of historically marginalized or oppressed groups by seeking to placate or pander instead of being in a right relationship, which requires struggle, debate, disagreement, and hard work. This type of false solidarity is a form of charity that weakens the individual and the collective. Finding authentic alignment and solidarity among diverse voices is serious labor.

Perhaps my problem here, as it often is, is that I am applying thinking about organizing and social change to the performing arts sector. It is my own insistence on believing that the arts are fundamentally a site for practicing social change that keeps me disappointed in the sector’s immutability. My vision for a better world is grounded in abolition, a framework I’ve come to know thanks to the stewardship of many organizers, artists, and facilitators, especially Black feminist thinkers and doers, whom I have had the good fortune to share space with and read the work of. As adrienne maree brown writes, “We must work hard at getting abolitionist practice functional at a small scale so that large-scale abolition and transformative justice are more visible, rootable, possible” (brown 3). I know that theatre can be the perfect site for building these muscles. The rehearsal room can be a laboratory for generating and navigating conflict, practising the interpersonal skills that will enable us to make prisons obsolete and grow an abolitionist society: making

mistakes, owning them without shame, hearing and integrating other perspectives, collaborating on repair and ways forward. The stage can be a space for imagining alternate realities. The real-world, real-time venue of a theatre brings audiences and artists breathing the same air together like no other art form. Public arts institutions at their best could truly serve the public's interest.

When we push past the trap of visibility and the co-opting of identity-based spaces by neoliberal institutions, we can experiment with what queer theatre really can be. Indeed, the most nourishing moments of my career have been when rooms of people come together to explore the transformative impulses of theatre. This is what queer theatre in 2026 can look like: the youth theatre project where Black and Brown young women and trans youth use their voices in public for the first time; the community arts project where working artists and queers from other, more storied walks of life strip themselves of rank and credentials and create together; the national retreat of QTBIPOC artists where we workshop abolitionist approaches to creation and rigorously rest; the co-created queer spaces to exist in, to be seen or unseen, to be unspecial; the arts-based organizing project, where shared interests drive collective action. Queer theatre can be a space to wrestle with ideas and how we share them and why, to strengthen our ability to do that wrestling elsewhere, and, certainly, to hold each other's humanity as we do so.

References

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