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Manifesting the Future

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Article abstract

This series of first-person reflections by emerging artists meditates on the future of theatre and performance. Written collectively by a past artistic director and recent participants of the AMY (Artist Mentoring Youth) Project, a Toronto-based arts organization providing free and accessible mentorship and creative opportunities to youth, the article offers specific visions from each contributor: how marginalized artists will disrupt systems of oppression to become part of the mainstream; that any possible future will need to draw from our past, pre-capitalism relationships to performance; and how community-centred approaches to performance will enable the professional sector to become meaningfully equitable.

Manifesting the Future

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Cette série de réflexions sur l'avenir du théâtre et de la performance est constituée de textes à la première personne écrits par une ancienne directrice artistique du projet AMY (Artist Mentoring Youth), un organisme artistique basé à Toronto qui offre gratuitement aux jeunes des services de mentorat et des activités créatives, et par trois artistes émergentes ayant participé au programme récemment. Chacune s'exprime sur une série de sujets : comment les artistes marginalisés réussissent à perturber les systèmes d'oppression pour se joindre au courant dominant; le fait qu'il faudra revenir sur notre rapport à la performance d'avant l'ère du capitalisme pour aller de l'avant; et comment une approche de la performance centrée sur la communauté permettra au secteur professionnel de devenir réellement équitable.

Mots clés : théâtre jeunesse, le projet AMY, futurisme, arts queer, handicap, arts communautaires

This series of first-person reflections by emerging artists meditates on the future of theatre and performance. Written collectively by a past artistic director and recent participants of the AMY (Artist Mentoring Youth) Project, a Toronto-based arts organization providing free and accessible mentorship and creative opportunities to youth, the article offers specific visions from each contributor: how marginalized artists will disrupt systems of oppression to become part of the mainstream; that any possible future will need to draw from our past, pre-capitalism relationships to performance; and how community-centred approaches to performance will enable the professional sector to become meaningfully equitable.

Keywords: youth theatre, the AMY Project, futurism, queer arts, disability arts, community arts



In my work as a theatre artist and builder of creative spaces, I strive to make microcosmic manifestations of the world I want to live in. I believe that through these small meditations we can shift culture and build meaningful and sustainable change. This approach was particularly

salient during my five years (2015–2019) as Artistic Director of Tkaronto’s AMY Project. At AMY, we built artistic creation and training spaces where young artists from equity-seeking communities—who are often made to feel marginalized by institutions—were not just included, but in fact centred, valued, and celebrated like the brilliant contributors to our cultural ecosystem that they are.

The artist mentors/staff and youth participants at AMY tend to share lived experiences and a desire to change the future by making art now, on our own terms, with our own tools, and platforming our own stories. They too want to manifest an arts sector and world that serves all—including (especially!) those of us without the usual characteristics of someone who “gets” to have a career in the arts—you know, generational wealth, white skin, heterosexuality, things like that.

Here are three young artists from our community whose critical minds are ruminating on not only the art they are making or want to make, but the structures that contain and shape art-making. They are dreaming of the future and our paths towards it, of how we can shift the systems around us for our collective liberation, artistic, and otherwise.

—Nikki Shaffeeullah

* * *

future? you must be mistaken...

the future of theatre, if we are to have one, must draw from its past. theatre has abandoned its roots in community and ritual in service of capitalism. we put on shows about working-class people and charge seventy-five dollars apiece; this amounts to nothing more than a conduit for middle-class guilt, which then gets turned into pity. theatre artists bemoan ticket sales and how most people don’t care about theatre, but the facts are this: most people don’t care about most theatre because most theatre has a disdain for most people but gets off on pretending it cares about working-class people, racialized people, or queer people (unless they’re middle class or above), or god forbid if they’re all three. it can’t care because if it did the class structure that holds it in place would begin to devour itself in contradiction. theatre made by working-class people, racialized people, and queer people exists (in basements and alleys and places like the AMY Project), and it creates the contradictions necessary but not at the same pace as the financial institutions. we risk assimilation if we remain compliant to the continuation of finance.

what about the financial institutions that support theatre? toronto dominion and rbc are two patrons for theatres, both with arts awards bearing their names, and incidentally the eighth and fifth largest investors in fossil fuels in the world. what will we do with the blood? it will not stay out of the sight of canadian artists, relegated to the southern hemisphere, or communities in the north only accessible by plane. it will come to these towns and cities; it will soak your scripts and flood your stages. where will you all wash off the blood? where will i wash off the blood? should theatre exist if it’s funded with money that kills people?

now back to the future...

the financial institutions cannot last forever. this tower is already falling and the ontario arts council and the canada council for the arts cannot and will not save you, or me, or anyone else.

i believe the future of performance will be in crowded kitchens and basements, in people who want to be together and make something together. i got into performance because i believed in the power of ritual and story—i still do.

here are some tenets of a future i want.

1. we are here together: we don't have to do all the same thing (i.e., act, write, whatever), but do not forget our witnesses, lest we just watch a film instead.
2. theatre began as a link to the sacred, whatever that might be; we remember that in our performance, in the ways of how we fund it, what we do before and after, and how we choose to interpret the "point" of doing it in the first place.
3. this is a refuge for all people to hide, to scream, to grieve, to connect with the sacred (whatever that is), even just to witness.

heed this, or risk turning off the light forever.

—nevada jane arlow

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In the future, marginalized artists will be part of the mainstream.

Being a shy, adopted, disabled girl of colour, I never believed that I would accomplish my dreams, let alone be a theatre artist. If you told me in high school that my aspirations of being a theatre artist would come true, I would have shyly giggled. Now, as a disabled woman of colour, I realize that the disbelief in my aspirations was from never feeling represented by or identifying with the performers I saw on stage. I did not have access to mentors who had similar experiences as me. However, this changed when I participated in the Artists Mentoring Youth (AMY) Project, connecting with several mentors who are successful marginalized theatre artists. The most important lesson that I learned from all of my mentors is that I should be nothing but myself within my artistic work, and to tell the stories that I want to tell—not what others want me to tell.

As I continue my relationship with my brilliant mentors from the AMY Project, I believe that in the future performance will be for everyone. The work of Canada's most marginalized theatre artists will be part of mainstream theatre. Marginalized theatre artists will be the leaders in the theatre community and will inspire generations of young, aspiring theatre artists to come. In the future of Canadian theatre, aspiring and emerging theatre artists won't have to tirelessly search for mentors they identify with or wonder if they will be accepted in mainstream theatre because of the colour of their skin, their gender, sexuality, ability, culture, etc. They will have mentors who can tell them that their contributions/stories/voices are important to building a theatre for everyone—similar to what my mentors have taught me.

I dream that one day creating theatre and performance will be an enjoyable experience for all artists, especially multiply marginalized, disabled artists. As a disabled theatre artist, it is hard to find a safe, accessible space in which to create innovative work. Throughout my experience with the AMY Project, I was able to share my stories and create/develop work

that means a lot to me. The interdependent support that our ensemble shared cultivated the kind of community that I want to continue to experience, that I want to be in the future of theatre in Canada. I imagine theatre will be able to offer patience, to offer the time it takes to say *everything is going to be okay* during anxiety breakdowns. Most importantly, theatre will acknowledge that the vulnerable personal narratives held by multiply marginalized, disabled artists are critical to our creative culture. Together, we will cultivate a theatre sector that creates not only wonderful art, but community.

—Jenn Boulay

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The future of performance in Canada is community.

This future asks us in the present to centre performances born in equity-seeking communities, to reach out and get to know what is currently in the margins, and to uplift performances that call attention to the artistic and cultural excellence from these communities. The future asks the powers that be in the present to enable equity-seeking artists to have agency and access in arts practices, to make space for innovation.

As a queer emerging artist of colour, I need the performance sector of the present to actively work towards this future. I do see a growth of projects that centre community in their artistic visions, but this change simply is not coming fast enough. Having an arts practice in three different Ontario cities: Hamilton, Toronto, and recently London, I witness the same handful of companies working tirelessly to provide an infrastructure to queer, trans, and non-binary BIPOC artists. They are working overtime to compensate for the overall lack of support in the performance industry and performance training institutions. The small but mighty infrastructures created by organizations like these provide safer space(s) for queer, trans, and non-binary BIPOC artists, offering artistic training, paid performance and presentation opportunities, and networking with established artists accessible. These spaces promote the alternative and ideal reality where emerging artists are valued, nurtured, resourced, and no longer in danger of being driven out of the arts.

The AMY Project is one of the mightiest of them all in Toronto, holding a prestigious space in the performance industry for having impactful programs that actively support youth and emerging BIPOC artists who are women, queer, trans, and/or non-binary. Importantly, AMY supports these artists long after they have gone through the programs, through strong alumni connections, as a response to the fact that young marginalized artists are always at risk of being pushed out of the arts.

My present professional identity as a queer artist of colour is a direct result of the AMY Project's investment in my arts practice. This is also why I am eager to embody these values in any project I encounter. AMY's involvement in my arts practice has not only shaped my own creative expression, but also affirmed my commitment to advocate for equitable access for all artists.

—Senjuti Aurora Sarker

For more about the AMY Project, please visit theamyproject.com or find AMY at @theamyproject (Instagram and Twitter) or [artistsmentoringyouth](https://www.facebook.com/artistsmentoringyouth) (Facebook).

Contributors

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NEVADA JANE ARLOW got her name from a series of dreams about the mojave desert. she is a writer and performance artist with a “magical ecofeminist” praxis. she lives in toronto and longs for primordial mud.

JENN BOULAY is an emerging interdisciplinary theatre artist, musician, playwright, and scholar. She is currently finishing her B.A. at the University of Toronto, pursuing a specialist in Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies and Critical Studies in Equity and Solidarity. Her current research interests are Canadian disability theatre, metatheatricality within aesthetic sport performance (gymnastics), and the politics of visible and non-visible identities. Jenn will be co-editing the upcoming issue of *Knots: An Undergraduate Journal of Disability Studies* and has a few forthcoming articles. Outside of academics, she writes music, plays, and creates films with her photography and videography.

SENJUTI AURORA SARKER is an arts worker, theatre designer, arts manager, facilitator, and librarian. Her practice stretches from arts programming to librarianship with goals of centring community development and investment. She completed her undergraduate in Theatre and Film Studies at McMaster University and her graduate studies in Library and Information Science (MLIS), where her research focus remained on strategizing a greater investment in marginalized and equity-seeking communities with public services. During her masters she also investigated how arts-based public programs and services impact new and emerging communities. She is currently the public programming coordinator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.